

Saf Shikan Episode
 from *Fasana-e Azad* by Ratan Nath Dar ‘Sarshar’
 Translated by Jennifer Dubrow

... Meanwhile, a *cobdar* came running in, bareheaded and looking upset. “Your Lordship, a terrible thing has happened.” “What? What happened?” “What should I say?” “Tell me. Is everything alright? Speak up.” Everyone went pale, may God save us. The navab’s heart shuddered. “Say something. Give us a clue. What terrible thing has happened? We should know something!”

Cobdar (with folded hands): If my life be spared, may I submit that all the quails have flown off.

Navab (wringing his hands): All of them!!! All of them have flown off? Oh, my Saf Shikan! Whoever brings him back will have a thousand in cash. At this moment I’d be better off dead. Oh! Oh! Now listen, immediately order the camel-riders to search a five *kos* radius. Wherever they find Saf Shikan, they should reason with him and bring him back somehow.

Companion: Your Lordship. What do you mean, reason with him? He’s not a man who’ll listen to reason. An animal’s still an animal, no matter how well-trained.

Navab: Is anyone listening?

Companions: At your service, Master. Yes, your Lordship.

Navab: He should be beaten with shoes. Look, I’m so upset right now, and he interrupts me! Saf Shikan has more manners than idiots like you.

Companions: Absolutely right. You know, my Lord, he even knows Arabic.

A second [companion] said, “Your Lordship, he knows many chapters of the Quran by heart.” A third said, “I swear by the five holy Imams, I’ve seen him doing *namaz*. A fourth, “One day he was laughing.” A fifth, “Sir, I have seen him exercising and doing pushups.”

The navab believed in everything they said. And several slaps fell on that poor companion’s neck.

It was as if not only quails but the navab’s very senses had flown off. Tears stream from the eyes, dripping *tap tap*. The heart is throbbing in pain. The face has lost all color. Oh, my Saf Shikan! My dear Saf Shikan! ‘If I knew the pain of separation

from the day of pre-eternity/I would not have lit the lamp of love in my heart.’ I loved him, you know. I’d give anything for his little coquetries. Friends! That pointy beak. The eager way he’d peck at his millet. Before a fight, he’d have a few nibbles and be ready for combat. I put him in hundreds of battles, but he returned intact. There’d be two pecks, and the opponent would run away with his tail between his legs. He’d face him again, only to turn away in fear. With what style he’d leap out and give such a kick that the whole arena would shake! And it’s not that he was very big. He was a medium-sized animal. But what devastating power! And I swear by Saf Shikan himself, it’s only today that his virtues are revealed to me. Of course I always knew he was a divine creature. He had a quail’s body but a *faqir*’s nature. And a pandit once told me, who knows how this rupture happened, otherwise he was destined for greatness. Now I find out he used to do *namaz* too.

Companion: His Lordship will recall that during the month of holy Ramzan, he didn’t touch a single grain during the day. My lord thought he was ill, but I realized he was observing the religious obligations.

Khoji: God be praised, God be praised. Such is the greatness of God almighty. My lord, now I would reveal to his Grace that I even served him opium 10-15 times. But as God is my witness, I swear to God if he ever got the least bit intoxicated. Only his eyes got a little bloodshot.

Mir sahib: My lord, believe me when I say that from after midnight to dawn, the chant of *haq haq* used to come from the quail-pen. Ghufur, didn’t I wake you many times so you could hear Saf Shikan busy in his prayers?

Ghufur: Yes, Sir, he used to recite *haq haq* from sunset on, and I often saw him prostrating.

Khoji: God be praised, God be praised. Well done, Mr. Saf Shikan Ali Shah.

Navab: And to think, I never knew his true nature. ‘Alas, that my life passed and still there is no awareness/Alas, that there is still no thought of self-restraint.’ Alas. Alas. Someone run the fan.

Companions (making a commotion): Bring the fan! Fast! Stand here and fan him.

Navab: ‘Oh my love, if I knew love would bring only grief/I’d have it decreed, “No one should love.”’

Khoji (coming out of his stupor): A little higher, please. Well done, ustad. Keep on singing. The spirit of Miyan Shori himself must be thrilled.

Navab: Shut up, you idiot. Is anyone listening? Throw him out! He's not worthy of nobles' company. He thinks I'm some kind of singer! Here my heart is on fire, I'm burning up inside, and he thinks qavvali is going on. "A little higher," he says. He's reminded of Miyan Shori. You parasites have no regard for the pain and suffering of others. All you care about is getting some nice tidbits to eat. There should be *firni*, or *kheer* cooking, or *mazafar pulao* to get your hands on. 'Fill your mouth, have a good time, and go home when the fun is over.'

Khoji: My lord, your servant is not himself at the moment. Oh woe is me! How could I be in my right mind when Saf Shikan's pen is empty? How could I think straight when my eyes are deprived of my beloved's sight? This time, his Lordship was too cruel to me. Oh, it's terrible! Terrible! Oh friends! Someone find Saf Shikan and bring him back, someone track him down! And may God punish thieves and cowards!

Navab: Well done, Khoji, well done. You've made me very happy. You are no doubt a loyal servant, as were your father and grandfather. Tell me, have the camel-riders been sent off or not?

Companion: Tell Shuja'at Ali to prepare the camel immediately and search a five *kos* radius. When he finds Saf Shikan, he is to reason with him and bring him back by whatever means necessary.

Shuja'at: Fine, I'm leaving, but he is educated in logic! Why will he listen to me? Send some *maulavi* along who will debate with him. This humble servant only knows how to ride a camel. Who can argue with him?

Khoji: My lord, I offer my life to your service. If the debate's to be about opium, *candu*, *madak*, or hash, then by all means, send this humble servant of your abode into battle. But with him there's sure to be discussion of spiritual matters, and in this regard, on my side there is only as much involvement as absolutely necessary. Why should I needlessly make a fool of myself by trespassing on the doorway of the logical sciences?

Miyan Azad: His Lordship, if it's a question of fencing, club-fighting or cudgels, this humble servant would have planted himself at the battlefield with sword unsheathed and

struck blow after blow and dealt gash after gash. But debates over logic are not such a piece of cake. You should have a very clever *maulana* summoned.

The companions suggested a *maulana*. That poor *maulana* was in dire straits. He thought, whatever I receive is a godsend. But those cronies didn't tell him the whole story. The gatekeeper just went to his house and said, "The navab has summoned you." He thought, alright, there will be a debate with some great scholar.

Maulana: Assalaam alaikum. His Lordship graciously summoned me today? It is my good fortune.

Navab: Valaikum assalaam. The reason I troubled you is that the apple of my eye, the darling of my heart, the light of my life has become angry and run off. But he's a man of logic, privy to the divine secrets, unmatched in the art of debate, and observant of all the religious obligations. You are to debate him, make him see reason, and bring him back.

Maulana: God willing. Parents have a great right over their children. How foolish is the man who gets angry with his father! How surprising.

Khoji: Maulana sahib, he may be a quail, but he's well-mannered, wise, pious, virtuous, devout, a follower of religious law, versed in logic, philosophy and astronomy, and fluent in Arabic.

Mir sahib: You mean the Maulana sahib hasn't heard the name of Saf Shikan? But he is renowned from Turkey to Egypt! Sir, the truth of the matter is that his Lordship's quail, Saf Shikan, flew off from his pen yesterday. First it was suggested that a camel-rider be sent to reason with him and bring him back. But a camel-rider is still a camel-rider, no matter how illustrious his company. Therefore you were called, so that you could take a camel and bring him back using all your eloquent ploys.

Maulana: Very good! Tell me this—you're not all inebriated, are you? Talk some sense! Either you're fools yourselves or trying to make me one. A quail who knows logic? *Lahaul vula quvvat*. You've made me into a tasty treat for the gathering as well! And listen to this. A quail flew off, go reason with him and bring him back. As if he's a maulavi or a human being! And Saf Shikan, 'breaker of ranks'? Tell me, what army ranks did he conquer? *Astaghfirullah. Astaghfirullah*. What a gathering of idiots. I take my leave.

Navab: What a thick-headed fool you brought! A real moron.

Azad: Never mind. What would your Lordship think, that in such exalted company, not a single logician is present? Look, now this humble servant has taken up the task. I will go and bring him back. Just grant me a quick-footed camel and enough food for two days. And write me a letter signed by your own auspicious hand. If by the third day, your slave along with Saf Shikan isn't standing on your doorstep, you can have my moustache shaved off.

Navab: Very good, go get ready and come back equipped. I will make all the arrangements here. But come immediately, let there be no delay. Keep that in mind.

When Miyan Azad went home, the other companions started plotting. Friends, he's up and won the bet! He got this round. And if he somehow manages to bring Saf Shikan back, he'll rule us all. Then you'll see nothing but Azad wherever you look. No one will care about you and me. You must think about this.

Khoji: My Lordship, if you'll forgive me, may I submit something?

Navab: Go ahead, speak up. Is this anything to forgive? Give some good counsel, think of some sensible solution.

Khoji: My lord, it's only been two days since Mr. Azad arrived in your court. How can he be trusted? God knows if he's a crook, a pickpocket, a thief, who knows anything about him? And if he takes the camel and disappears, who's going to roam around looking for him? Let's be honest, what can the intentions of such an aimless, wandering nomad be? And what's to make him come back?

Companion: Yes, my lord, he's right.

Rafiq: Lord and master. Despite being crazy, he's on to something here.

Mir sahib: This Khoji certainly seemed that way, but what he said is on the mark.

Indeed, what are the intentions of such a free man? Why doesn't he whip the camel and be on his way?

Masita Beg: I certainly wouldn't advise his Lordship to give Mr. Azad a camel and leave him on God's path. That is not without risk.

Navab: Fine, you've jabbered on long enough. Aren't you pickpockets and freeloaders yourselves? You think everyone else is like you. Azad's appearance tells me he's trustworthy. Not a single one of you is worth the creak of his shoes. And let's say I've lost my camel—so what? Am I a starving beggar that losing a camel will leave me begging for

alms? And to make a long story short, Saf Shikan is worth a thousand sacrifices. Who cares about a camel?

Notes

* *cobdār* is a kind of servant who announces visitors and carries a staff, or *cob* (pg 1, top)

* “Ṣaf Shikan”: literally “who breaks the ranks [of enemies]” (first appears pg 1, top)

* Pg 2, top: “And a pandit once told me, who knows how this rupture [*khandit*] happened...”: The implication here is that the cycle of rebirths was disturbed.

* Pg 2, bottom: ““Alas, that my life passed and still there is no awareness/Alas, that there is still no thought of self-restraint.”” The first print edition reads: “Alas, that there is still no doctor of self-restraint”, but this was later changed to the version translated here.