

### 3. Preliminary Arrangements

They graced the Majlis with eloquence and poetry;  
They sat down, they discoursed and dispersed with joy.<sup>1</sup>

I became so heavily tied up with the translation of Abul-Fida's history<sup>2</sup> that for seven or eight days I did not stir out of my residence. But Navvab Zain-ul-'Abidin 'Arif's zeal for the musha'irah was so great that despite his poor health and weakness he would leave his house early in the morning and would show up again only at eight or nine o'clock at night. So it was not possible to see him and ask how things were proceeding. However, the eight days slipped by in the twinkling of an eye and the date fixed for the musha'irah actually arrived. On the fourteenth of Rajab at about seven thirty in the evening, I got ready to go to the Musha'irah. On enquiring about Navvab Sahib 'Arif I learnt that he had gone out in the morning and had not returned until then. So I left the house and found great excitement in the *Bazaar*. Everyone was talking about the musha'irah. I heard one man ask: 'Who is this Miyan Karim-ud-Din?' and another replied, 'What does it matter who he is; the arrangements of the musha'irah are superb and they gladden the heart? Overhearing these remarks and feeling elated in spirit I arrived at Hauz Qazi.

What do I see here? On both sides of the street are set up tattis with so many lights fixed in them that the night is turned into day. The streets are sprinkled with water. The water-vendor is beating his brass goblet to attract customers. The spacious entrance to the Haveli of Mubarak-un-Nissa Begum, decorated with lanterns and globes of light and lamps, creates the impression of a flaming garden. From the main gate to the threshold of the inner chamber, the accumulated brilliance of lights dazzles the eye. When I stepped into the house I was so overpowered by the sight that it took my breath away. I murmured to myself, 'O Lord, is this really my house or have I strayed into some royal palace?' Every few minutes I would stand in utter amazement and stare wide-eyed in every direction saying to myself, 'Well done! Miyan 'Arif, well done! You have wrought a wonder. How could one reconcile the idea of poor Karim-ud-Din's house with this kingly splendour? Truly, you were right

<sup>1</sup>These lines are from Firdausi, the Persian poet.

<sup>2</sup>Abul-Fida Ismail (1273-1331) was born in Damascus. Farhatullah Baig is probably referring to Abul-Fida's historical work called *Mukhtasar T'arikh-al-Bashar*.

in saying that if the expenses of the musha'irah could be defrayed within two thousand rupees, the cost would be negligible.'

The entire house had been whitewashed with a mixture of lime and mica which caused the walls to glimmer. The low-lying courtyard had been so filled up as to raise it to the level of the plinth of the house. The platform was then laid out with wooden planks on which were spread cotton rugs. These in turn were covered with chandni. On all four sides of this platform was a border of expensive woollen carpets and rows of long upholstered cushions for seating the guests. There was such a profusion of chandeliers, candelabra, wall lamps, hanging lamps, chinese lanterns and other lights that the house was converted into a veritable dome of light. Everything was elegant, in good taste and in its appointed place. In the dead centre of the middle row stood a small embroidered canopy of green velvet<sup>3</sup>, supported on gold- and silver-coloured posts fastened with green silk tent-cords. In this pavilion was placed the green velvet embroidered seat with embroidered green cushions. On each of the four tent-posts were hung eight small silver lanterns. These lotus-shaped lights with glass globes were poised on the golden crests of green poles from which streamed garlands of *motiya*, which resembled a *sehra*. The middle strands of these flower curtains were gathered up and tied with gold cord tipped with brocaded gold tassels, in such a way as to form archways of flowers round the pavilion. Flower wreaths were hung on the walls on pegs and nails driven into the wall for the purpose. A white cloth, with embroidered green borders on all sides, was stretched across from one end to the other to make a white and green awning. From the centre of the roof were hung rows upon rows of jasmine garlands and streamers and these were fastened all round the walls of the canopy and created an umbrella of flowers. In one of the small courtyards there was provision for drinking water in new earthenware vessels and in pewter goblets cooled in saltpeter or rock salt. In another courtyard people were preparing paan. Neatly laid out in the kitchen were huqqahs and accessories. Everywhere servants in clean smart livery were standing respectfully and expectantly with folded hands, ready to serve the guests. The whole house was fragrant with musk, amber and aloes. Arranged in a row, at short intervals along the carpet, were huqqahs. The huqqahs were so burnished and brightly polished that it seemed they had just been bought from the market. In the space between the huqqahs were placed small tripods on which stood *khasdans*, containing rows of seasoned and folded paans wrapped in napkins made of *lalqand*, with alternating layers of flowers in between. Placed against each khasdan was a small boat-shaped dish with the traditional cardamom, betel-nut and roasted coriander seeds. In front of the chief throne-like seat (for the presiding poet) were set two silver candle-holders with camphor-scented candles and pale green shades made in the form of the

<sup>3</sup>Green was the official royal colour.

lotus flower. Each candle-holder was placed in a small water basin perfumed with *kiyora*. In short, the whole scene was like a strange, rare spectacle. I moved like the enchanted Abul-Hassan, a character in *Alf Laila*,<sup>4</sup> and wherever my eyes roved there they stayed! While I stood still, entranced and fascinated by the scene, the guests began to arrive.

Mirza Karim-ud-Din Rasa<sup>5</sup> was the first to arrive. Mirza Karim-ud-Din Rasa is of the royalty. He is in his seventies. Though he has a rather modest standing in learning, as a poet he does not consider anyone his superior or even his equal! He is kind hearted, noble, of simple habits and of quiet temperament. The proverbial complaint of the ferryman against those who are the first to board the boat and the last to disembark applied to Rasa Sahib at a *musha'irah*. Rasa is the first to arrive and shows not the least intention of budging from his place until every single guest has left. Once, while a *musha'irah* was in session, it began to rain. The *musha'irah* was brought to a close in all haste and everyone returned home. But Rasa, faithful to his custom, remained rooted to the spot and did not move until everyone had gone. Every few minutes he bent low and peered at the sky. In the meantime, it began to rain very heavily. It rained so heavily that the whole place was covered with pools of water. After about two hours the rain stopped and he got up to go. But by that time it was pitch-dark. You could not distinguish one hand from another. The master of the house asked a servant to accompany Rasa Sahib with a lantern. There was ankle-deep water in the lanes. Poor Rasa had on a pair of expensive gold-embroidered shoes. How was he going to wade through the slush? Eventually Rasa picked up courage to ask the servant, in a small weak whisper, to lend him his shoes, and what a shabby and dilapidated pair that turned out to be! The poor gentleman dragged on in these and put his own shoes under his arm. On arrival at the Fort he bought a new pair of shoes for the servant and said: 'Young man, today you have done me such a tremendous favour that I shall not forget it as long as I live. If you are ever in need, do come along.'

Afterwards this rascal caused Mirza Rasa Sahib a lot of embarrassment and trouble. In the first place, he publicly narrated the incident of the shoes. Secondly, he would turn up every third or fourth day at the Fort and extract a couple of rupees each time from Rasa Sahib. The good Rasa never denied the request and treated him generously whenever the servant called on him.

Navvab Zain-ul-'Abidin Khan Sahib advanced to the edge of the platform to meet Rasa Sahib and inquired, 'How is it, Your Honour, that Miyan Haya has not come with you?'

<sup>4</sup>The full title is *Alf Laila-va-Laila*. English versions use 'A Thousand and One Nights' or 'The Arabian Nights' as the title.

<sup>5</sup>He is not to be confused with Maulvi Karim-ud-Din Maghfoor, the initiator of the *musha'irah*,