TUGHLAQ

Girish Karnad was born in Matheran, near Bombay, in 1938. A Rhodes Scholar at Oxford (1960-63) and a Bhabha Fellow (1970-72), he is one of the foremost playwrights in contemporary India. He writes in Kannada. His first play, **Yayati** (1961), a retelling of the Hindu myth on the theme of responsibility, was a major success. Later, **Hayavadana** (1970) won the Natya Sangh award for Best Play of 1971.

Tughlaq (1964), Karnad's second play, has also won popular acclaim, exploring the paradox of the idealistic Sultan Muhammad Tughlaq, whose reign is considered one of the more spectacular failures in India's history. This edition of the play is introduced by U.R. Anantha Murthy.

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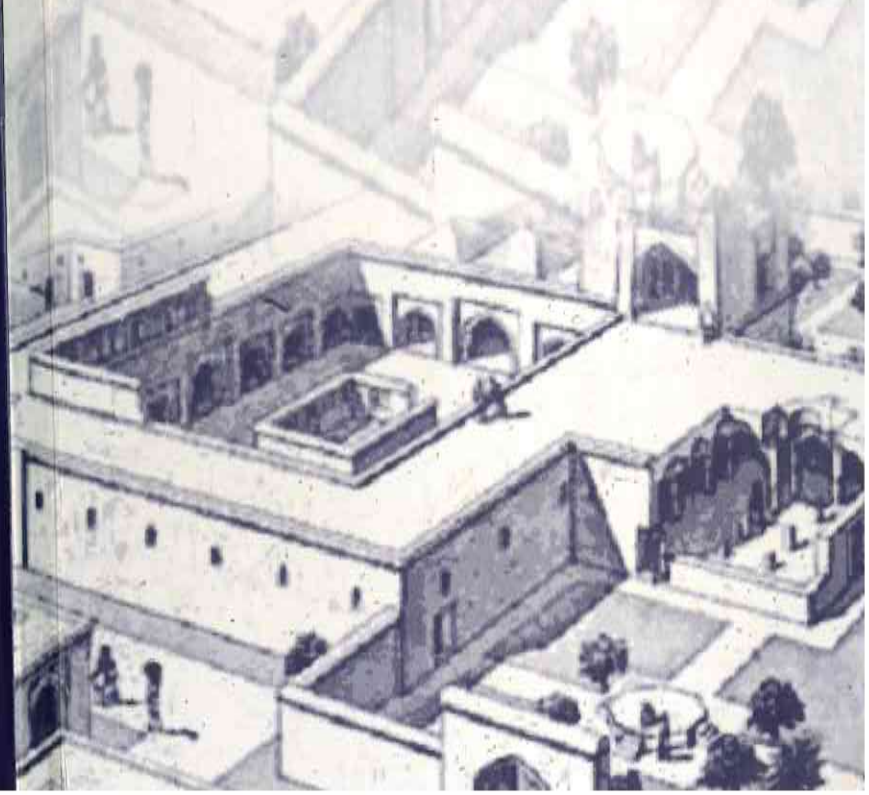
GIRISH KARNAD



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Girish Karnad

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A play in thirteen scenes

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for

KRISHNA BASRUR

with affection and admiration

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This play was originally written in Kannada in 1964. I was persuaded to translate it into English by Alyque Padamsee, who later produced it for the Theatre Group, Bombay. This translation was first staged at the Bhulabhai Desai Auditorium, Bombay, in August 1970.

I should like to express here my thanks to Alyque Padamsee and the Theatre Group for the care and imagination with which they produced the play. My special thanks are also due to S. Gopalie, Madras, for his invaluable help with the translation.

Dharwad, 1971 Girish Karnad

INTRODUCTION

Tughlaq, which was published in Kannada in 1964, is Girish Karnad's second play. His first play, *Yayati*, was a self-consciously existentialist drama on the theme of responsibility. And those of us writing in the Kannada *Navya* movement of the time can still remember the excitement when we first read it in 1961. His interpretation of the familiar old myth on the exchange of ages between father and son baffled and angered many conventional critic but, for others, who were trying to root their contemporary concerns in old myths, Karnad's unheroic hero, Puru, was a great experience.

Tughlaq was an immediate success on the stage. It was first produced in Kannada in 1965 and was also done, about the same time, in Hindi by the National School of Drama. Bengali and Marathi productions followed, and in 1970 there was an English production in Bombay which was a major success.

It is not hard to account for the immediate response the play has received from Kannada as well as other audiences. One can enjoy the play on the stage without paying much attention to its rich and complex symbolism and the subtle weaving of its different motifs. The play has an interesting story, an intricate plot, scope for spectacle, and uses dramatic conventions like the cronic pair, Aziz and Aazam (the *Akara* and *Makara* of *Natak* performances), to which theatre audiences respond readily.

Another reason for *Tughlaq's* appeal to Indian audiences is that it is a play of the 1960s, and reflects as no other play perhaps does the political mood of disillusionment which followed the Nehru era of idealism in the country. Karnad himself has commented (*Enact*, June 1971) on this:

> What struck me absolutely about Tughlaq's history was that it was contemporary. The fact that here was the most idealistic, the most intelligent king ever to come on the throne of Delhi ... and one of the greatest failures also. And within a span of twenty years this tremendously capable man had gone to pieces. This seemed to be both due to his idealism as well as the shortcomings within him, such as his impatiences, his cruelty, his feeling that he had the only correct answer. And I felt in the early sixities India had also come very far in the same direction—the twenty-year period seemed to me very much a striking parallel.

But the play is more than a political allegory. It has an irreducible, puzzling quality which comes from the ambiguities of Tughlaq's character, the dominating figure in the play. All the other characters are dramatized aspects of his complex personality, yet they also exist in their own right. Kannada critics have made detailed analyses of the play, paying special attention to the symbolism of the game of chess, the theme of disguise, the ironic success of Aziz whose amazing story runs parallel to Tughlaq's, and the dualism of the man and the hero in Tughlaq, which is the source of the entire tragedy. Yet no critical examination of the play can easily exhaust its total meaning for the reader, because the play has, finally, an elusive and haunting quality which it gets from the character of Tughlaq who has been realized in great psychological depth. But it would be unjust to say that the play is about an 'interesting' character, for the play relates the character of Tughlaq to philosophical questions on the nature of man and the destiny of a whole kingdom which a dreamer like him controls.

Although the theme of the play is from history—there are many such plays in Kannada—Karnad's treatment of the theme is not historical. Take, for instance, the use Karnad makes of the leitmotif of the play, 'prayer', in the scene where the Muslim chieftains along with Sheik Shams-ud-din, a pacifist priest, conspire to murder Tughlaq while at prayer. The use of

prayer for murder is reminiscent of what Tughlaq himself did to kill his father. That prayer, which is most dear to Tughlaq, is vitiated by him as well as his enemies, is symbolic of the fact that his life is corrupted at its very source. The whole episode is ironic. It involves Shihab-ud-din, an idealist who has put great trust in Tughlaq's rule, and is himself ultimately betrayed by Ratansingh who masterminds the entire plan of murder for his own ends. The intrigue here not only enhances the theatrical interest of the play, but is a dramatized projection of Tughlaq's tortured, divided self. Thus, the external action throughout enacts the inner drama of Tughlaq. Both Tughlaq and his enemies initially appear to be idealists; yet, in the pursuit of the ideal, they perpetrate its opposite. The whole play is structured on these opposities: the ideal and the real; the divine aspiration and the deft intrigue. Tughlaq is what he is in spite of his self-knowledge and an intense desire for divine grace. He is aware of the irony of his life when Aziz, the only character in the play who has skilfully used all the scheme of Tughlaq for his own designs, kills Ghiyas-ud-din and comes in his guise as a holy messenger of peace to purify the land and revive the banned prayer. The irony is deeply tragic. In the end Tughlaq and his kingdom are one in their chaos, and he knows it.

There are some good single plays in Kannada like Masti's *Kakana Kote* and the plays of Adya Rangacharya who has kept the tradition of serious play-writing in Kannada alive; yet there is, perhaps, no play in Kannada comparable to *Tughlaq* in its depth and range. It is likely to become a classic in Kannada literature. The present translation, which has been ably done by Karnad himself, will be warmly welcomed by readers eager to know what is happening in the Indian languages.

It may not be out of place to mention here that many teachers of English in India have felt and still feel the need for English translations of literature in the Indian languages. Teachers like myself have often wished that along with Indian

writing in English which we prescribe to our students, we should also be able to teach English translations of classics in the Indian languages which will engage our students' attention fully and meaningfully. Karnad's *Tughlaq* should be as rewarding an experience to teach and to study, as it has been to see on the stage all over India.

Mysore U.R. Ananthamurthy
September, 1971

CHARACTERS

[*In order of appearance*]

ANNOUNCER
SULTAN MUHAMMAD TUGHLAQ
AAZAM
AZIZ
STEP-MOTHER
VIZIER MUHAMMAD NAJIB
ZIA-UD-DIN BARANI
SHEIKH IMAM-UD-DIN
SHIHAB-UD-DIN
SARDAR RATANSINGH
SHEIKH SHAMS-UD-DIN TAJUDDARFIM
GHIYAS-UD-DIN ABBASID

CROWD OF CITIZENS KAZI-I-MUMALIK AND RETINUE GUARD
DOOR-KEEPER SERVANT AMIRS SAYYID MUZZIN
SOLDIERS HINDU WOMAN REFUGEE FAMILY WATCHMEN KARIM

The action of the play takes place first of all in Delhi in the year 1327, then on the road from Delhi to Daulatabad, and lastly in and around the fort in Daulatabad five years later.

SCENE ONE

AD 1327

THE YARD IN front of the Chief Court of Justice in Delhi. A crowd of citizens—mostly Muslims, with a few Hindus here and there.

OLD MAN: God, what's this country coming to!

YOUNG MAN: What are you worried about, grandfather? The country's in perfectly safe hands—safer than any you've seen before.

OLD MAN: I don't know. I've been alive a long time, seen many Sultans, but I never thought I would live to see a thing like this.

YOUNG MAN: Your days are over, old man. What's the use of Sultans who didn't allow a subject within a mile's distance? This King now, he isn't afraid to be human—

THIRD MAN: But does he have to make such a fuss about being human? Announce his mistakes to the whole world—invite the entire capital?

OLD MAN: And get kicked by an infidel too. It's an insult to Islam.

YOUNG MAN: That's good that! Insult to Islam! So you want to teach him Islam, do you? Tell me, how often did you pray before he came to the throne?

THIRD MAN: That isn't the point.

YOUNG MAN: That's precisely the point. Not even once a week, I bet. Now you pray five times a day because that's the law and if you break it, you'll have the officers on your neck. Can you mention one earlier Sultan in whose time people read the Koran in the streets like now? Just one?

OLD MAN: What's the use? One must act according to it…

THIRD MAN: All this about the Hindus not paying the *jiziya* tax. That's against the Koran, you know. A maulvi told me that—

HINDU: Now, now, don't look at *me* when you say that. We didn't want an exemption! Look, when a Sultan kicks me in the teeth and says, 'Pay up, you Hindu dog', I'm happy. I know I'm safe. But the moment a man comes along and says, 'I know you are a Hindu, but you are also a human being'—well, that makes me nervous.

YOUNG MAN: Ungrateful wretch!

OLD MAN: But this wretch is our best friend, Jamal. Beware of the Hindu who embraces you. Before you know what, he'll turn Islam into another caste and call the Prophet an incarnation of his god…

(*The Public Announcer comes out and beats his drum. Silence.*)

ANNOUNCER: Attention! Attention! In the name of the Allah it is hereby announced that Vishnu Prasad, a Brahmin of Shiknar, had filed a suit against His Merciful Majesty, that his land had been seized illegally by the officers of the State and that he should be given just compensation for the loss of the land and the privation resulting therefrom. The Kazi-i-Mumalik having considered this matter carefully and in full detail has declared…

(*He pauses for effect. The audience is tense and the Announcer looks pleased.*)

… has declared that the Brahmin's claim is just…

(*Commotion in the crowd. The Announcer silences them with a couple of drum beats and continues.*)

… that the Brahmin's claim is just and that His Merciful Majesty is guilty of illegal appropriation of land. The Kazi-i-Mumalik has further declared that in return for the

land and in compensation of the privation resulting from its loss the said Vishnu Prasad should receive a grant of five hundred silver dinars from the State Treasury.

(*Renewed commotion. But the Announcer isn't finished yet.*)

His Merciful Majesty has accepted the decision of the Kazi-i-Mumalik as just and in addition to the grant of five hundred silver dinars has offered the said Vishnu Prasad a post in the Civil Service to ensure him a regular and adequate income.

(*Beats the drums again and retires.*)

OLD MAN: What folly is this! May Heaven guide our Sultan.

HINDU: I don't believe a word of it. There's something more to this, that much is obvious—

(*The Announcer comes out followed by Muhammad, the Kazi and the retinue.*)

ANNOUNCER: Attention! Attention! The Warrior in the Path of God, the Defender of the Word of the Prophet—May peace be upon him—the Friend of the Khalif, the Just, His Merciful Majesty, Sultan Muhammad Tughlaq.

CROWD: Victory—to the King.

MUHAMMAD: My beloved people, you have heard the judgement of the Kazi and seen for yourselves how justice works in my kingdom—without any consideration of might or weakness, religion or creed. May this moment burn bright and light up our path towards greater justice, equality, progress and peace—not just peace but a more purposeful life.

And to achieve this end I am taking a new step in which I hope I shall have your support and cooperation. Later this year the capital of my empire will be moved from Delhi to Daulatabad.

(*The crowd reacts in bewilderment. Muhammad smiles.*)

Your surprise is natural. But I beg you to realize that this is no mad whim of a tyrant. My ministers and I took this decision after careful thought and discussion. My empire is large now and embraces the South and I need a capital which is at its heart. Delhi is too near the border and, as you well know, its peace is never free from the fear of invaders. But for me the most important factor is that Daulatabad is a city of the Hindus and as the capital, it will symbolize the bond between Muslims and Hindus which I wish to develop and strengthen in my kingdom. I invite you all to accompany me to Daulatabad. This is only an invitation and not an order. Only those who have faith in me may come with me. With their help I shall build an empire which will be the envy of the world.

(*Exits with the retinue.*)

OLD MAN: You can go to the Kazi-i-Mumalik for small offences. But who do you appeal to against such madness?

THIRD MAN: This is tyranny! Sheer tyranny! Move the capital to Daulatabad! Such things never happened in his father's days—may his soul rest in peace. Now he has got his father's throne. He isn't happy with that and—

YOUNG MAN: What do you mean?

THIRD MAN: What?

YOUNG MAN: What did you mean by that—when you said he had got his father's throne?

THIRD MAN: Don't try to threaten me, boy. The whole capital saw it.

YOUNG MAN: Saw what?

THIRD MAN: You know what.

YOUNG MAN: Were you there?

THIRD MAN: There were others—my friends—

YOUNG MAN: Hang your friends! Were you there?

THIRD MAN: No!

YOUNG MAN: Well, I was. And I tell you it was an accident.

THIRD MAN: I see.

YOUNG MAN: It was. The elephant suddenly went wild. The crowds must have frightened it. It just ran and dashed against the wooden pandal. And the pandal collapsed.

OLD MAN: Very convenient.

THIRD MAN: And to think the procession had been arranged by the father in his honour!

YOUNG MAN: But the Sultan had gone to the mosque to pray! The old Sultan should never have had the procession at prayer time—You all know it was prayer time and the Sultan never misses a prayer!

HINDU MAN: Yes, yes, we know that. But tell me. How did the elephant know it was time for prayer?

(*Laughter.*)

THIRD MAN: All right, don't trust my word. But do you think a man like Sheikh Imam-ud-din would lie? Well, he said in clear loud words that it was murder. And he said it publicly—I was there!

OLD MAN (*eagerly*): You've seen the Sheikh?

THIRD MAN: Why, of course. Only a week ago. In Kanpur. What a man! What a voice! The audience was spellbound. And he said the Sultan's guilty of killing his father and brother, he said. He said so many other things too—about Islam and what's happening to it. It was the most inspiring speech I've ever heard. The audience went wild and burnt down half of Kanpur. You think he would talk like that if he wasn't sure?

OLD MAN: They say he looks like the Sultan.

THIRD MAN: No—not very much. People exaggerate, you know. But he has a certain resemblance—some gestures, you know, some mannerisms—

HINDU MAN: Perhaps that's where he gets his habit of making speeches.

THIRD MAN: Watch your words, infidel. Don't you dare mock a saint like him.

(*The Guard comes out of the Court.*)

GUARD: All right, all right. Go home! What are you waiting for? The show's over! Go home—

(*The crowd disperses. Only Aazam remains, hanging around.*)

Well, what do you want?

AAZAM: Nothing, I just wanted to see the Brahmin. He hasn't come out yet, has he?

GUARD: Oh, get away. Wants to see the Brahmin, if you please. Be off—

(*Aazam retreats. The Guard looks into the Court and shouts.*)

Come out—come out. Don't be scared, Your Highness.

(*The Brahmin comes out.*)

Perhaps Your Highness will want an escort to see you safely home! Complaining against the Sultan! Bloody Infidel! Get going, I'm already late.

BRAHMIN: Yes, yes. Certainly. Good-bye.

GUARD: Good-bye.

(*Goes in and shuts the door. The Brahmin starts to go. Aazam follows him and then slowly taps him on the shoulder.*)

AAZAM: Ho... ooo...

(*The Brahmin whirls round and pulls out a dagger as he turns. Aazam jumps back.*)

AAZAM: Oops...

(*They watch each other. Aazam's jaw falls in surprise.*)

AAZAM: Who? Not... not...

BRAHMIN: Aazam?

AAZAM: Aziz? What on earth...

(*Gives a shout of joy, lifts Aziz up and whirls him round and round ecstatically.*)

AZIZ: Let me down—let me down—

(*Aazam lets him down.*)

And hold your tongue. If they find out, I'm finished, man.

AAZAM: But—I don't see you for years and then—this—this?

AZIZ: Shut up!

(*They move off and sit under a tree.*)

AAZAM: I thought something was funny. I mean, a man wins a case against the King himself—you would expect him to come out triumphantly—I mean, holding his head high? Not hide inside! Listen, Brahmins don't carry daggers around like that.

(*Aziz quickly hides the dagger.*)

AZIZ: What are you doing here?

AAZAM: I am where there is a crowd. Look, today's earnings. And you won't believe me if I tell you where they hide their money—

AZIZ: So your bad habits continue, do they?

AAZAM: Not habit. Occupation. Anyway, I'm just a common pickpocket. But you are up to no good either, I can see that. A Muslim *dhobi* can't become a Brahmin that easily.

AZIZ: For God's sake, keep your voice down. Now look, if I tell you the truth, will you keep it to yourself?

AAZAM: Depends on what I get out of it—All right, you're an old friend. I'll keep quiet for nothing. So?

AZIZ: Did you hear the royal proclamation the other day?

AAZAM: Which one? There are so many.

AZIZ: You know, the one on the second anniversary of his coronation. (*Mimicking a public announcer.*) 'Henceforth people may file a suit against the Sultan himself for the misbehaviour of his officers... No one need have any fear... Justice will be done...' Et cetera. Well, I was at the end of my tether then. There's no future in being a dhobi these days. So I did a bit of thinking. There's

a Brahmin called Vishnu Prasad whose land had been confiscated recently. I shaved my head and went to him. I said I would buy the land.

AAZAM: Please, a little slowly. I—you know I'm not very bright. But what's the point? I mean the land was confiscated, wasn't it?

AZIZ: Exactly, that's what he said too. But I said, 'Never mind about that.' So he sold me the land—backdating the contract. And I filed my suit. Well, here I am. Five hundred silver dinars for nothing, and a job in His Merciful Majesty's own Civil Service.

AAZAM: But what if he had cut off your head instead?

(*Aziz laughs.*)

Anyway, why did you have to dress up in these ungodly clothes? Couldn't you have come like a proper Muslim?

AZIZ: (*scandalized*) But then what would happen to the King's impartial justice? A Muslim plaintiff against a Muslim king? I mean, where's the question of justice there? Where's the equality between Hindus and Muslims? If, on the other hand, the plaintiff's a Hindu ... well, you saw the crowds.

AAZAM: Complicated!

AZIZ: It's a bit too subtle for you. Anyway here's my offer. From tomorrow I join the Civil Service. Why don't you come along too? I'll get you a job under me. You know, a Brahmin with a Muslim friend—the Sultan will like that.

AAZAM: No thanks, I'm quite happy—

AZIZ: Come along. It won't be for long. I didn't intend to be a Brahmin all my life! There's money here and we'll make a pile by the time we reach Daulatabad.

AAZAM: And then?

AZIZ: How should I know?

SCENE TWO

A ROOM IN the palace. Muhammad is bent over a chess-board, smiling with suppressed excitement. The Step-Mother enters.

STEP-MOTHER: Muhammad—

MUHAMMAD: Ah, there you are! Absolutely at the right moment. If you had come a minute earlier, the world would have been so much poorer.

STEP-MOTHER: Really? That sounds very important.

MUHAMMAD: But it is. I have just solved the most famous problem in chess. Even al-Adli and as-Sarakhi said it was insoluble. And it's so simple—

STEP-MOTHER: Who were they?

MUHAMMAD: Mother! How can you ask? They were the greatest chess players the world's ever seen.

STEP-MOTHER: What do I know about your chess? You'd better write to Ain-ul-Mulk about it. He'll love it!

MUHAMMAD: Funny you should mention him. I was just thinking of him—but not with reference to chess. You see, my dear friend Ain-ul-Mulk, the companion of my childhood, my fellow champion in chess, is at this very moment marching on Delhi.

STEP-MOTHER: What? What do you mean?

MUHAMMAD: Exactly what I said. He is marching on Delhi with an army of thirty thousand.

STEP-MOTHER: But why, Muhammad?

MUHAMMAD: I don't know. The last letter I wrote to him asked him to be the Governor of the Deccan. I need a strong man there and I thought he would like it.

STEP-MOTHER: But there must be some other reason! (*No reply.*) What are you going to do now?

MUHAMMAD: Do the best I can. But I don't even have six thousand soldiers—Look, I was so happy about this problem and now you've ruined it all. Anyway, you came for something?

STEP-MOTHER: It doesn't matter any more.

MUHAMMAD: But it does, certainly.

STEP-MOTHER: I was worried about your late nights. These days you never seem to go to bed at all. I just wanted to know why.

MUHAMMAD (*smiles*): And you think you've found the answer? Look, if I was that worried about Ain-ul-Mulk why would I waste my time on this?

(*Points to the chess-board.*)

STEP-MOTHER: Then what do you do all night?

MUHAMMAD (*theatrical*): I pray to the Almighty to save me from sleep. All day long I have to worry about tomorrow but it's only when the night falls that I can step beyond all that. I look at the Pleiades and I think of Ibn-ul-Mottazz who thought it was an ostrich egg and Dur-rumma who thought it was a swallow. And then I want to go back to their poetry and sink myself in their words. Then again I want to climb up, up to the top of the tallest tree in the world, and call out to my people: 'Come, my people, I am waiting for you. Confide in me your worries. Let me share your joys. Let's laugh and cry together and then, let's pray. Let's pray till our bodies melt and flow and our blood turns into air. History is ours to play with—ours now! Let's be the light and cover the earth with greenery. Let's be darkness and cover up the boundaries of nations. Come! I am waiting to embrace you all!'
But then how can I spread my branches in the stars while the roots have yet to find their hold in the earth? I wish I could believe in recurring births like the Hindu; but I have only one life, one body, and my hopes, my people,

my God are all fighting for it. Tell me, how dare I waste my time sleeping? And don't tell me to go and get married and breed a family because I won't sleep.

STEP-MOTHER (*bursts into laughter*): I don't know what to do with you. I can't ask a simple question without your giving a royal performance. Even Ain-ul-Mulk doesn't seem to stop you—

MUHAMMAD: Mother, suppose I die fighting Ain-ul-Mulk—

STEP-MOTHER: Stop it!

MUHAMMAD: No, really. Suppose I die in the battle. What of it? Why should I waste my last few days worrying? I am not worried about my enemies. I'm only worried about my people.

STEP-MOTHER: Pompous ass! As though other kings didn't do that.

MUHAMMAD: No, they didn't. Look at the past Sultans of Delhi. They couldn't bear the weight of their crown. They couldn't leave it aside. So they died senile in their youth or were murdered.

STEP-MOTHER (*sharply*): Please, Muhammad—

MUHAMMAD: What?

STEP-MOTHER: Nothing—I can't bear to see you joking about murder.

MUHAMMAD: Why not?

STEP-MOTHER: I can't. That's all.

(*Silence. They are both tense now.*)

MUHAMMAD: So you too believe that piece of gossip!

STEP-MOTHER: What gossip?

MUHAMMAD (*mocking*): What gossip? What scandal? You know perfectly well what I mean.

STEP-MOTHER: Don't be silly. I didn't mean anything of that kind.

MUHAMMAD: But you do believe it? And why shouldn't you? After all my own mother believes it. The whole Court

believes it. My Amirs believe it. Why shouldn't my step-mother believe it?

STEP-MOTHER (*flaring up*): Shut up, fool! I've told you I won't have you calling me that?

MUHAMMAD (*suddenly calm, but with deliberate viciousness*): I know. But you are my step-mother!

(*Silence. Enter the Door-Keeper.*)

DOOR-KEEPER: In the name of Allah. Vizier Muhammad Najib and Zia-ud-din Barani to see you, Your Majesty.

MUHAMMAD: Send them in.

(*The Door-Keeper goes out. The Step-Mother lowers the veil on her face. Najib and Barani enter.*)

NAJIB, BARANI: In the name of Allah.

MUHAMMAD: Come in, come in. I was just saying to Mother...

STEP-MOTHER: Muhammad, why don't you tell them about your chess?

MUHAMMAD: Because they aren't interested. Barani is a historian—he's only interested in playing chess with the shadows of the dead. And Najib's a politician—he wants pawns of flesh and blood. He doesn't have the patience to breathe life into these bones. One needs Ain-ul-Mulk for that. So Najib, how far have we reached?

NAJIB: I'm doing my best, Your Majesty. But I don't think we'll get more than six thousand. The odds against us are very heavy...

BARANI: May I know what odds, Your Majesty?

NAJIB: ... but another equally important problem has cropped up, Your Majesty. Sheikh Imam-ud-din is in Delhi.

MUHAMMAD: Aha! Then we should take his blessings before we leave.

NAJIB: Yes, Your Majesty, and get rid of him.

BARANI: What a terrible thing to say about a holy man like that!

MUHAMMAD (*smiles to the Step-Mother, explaining*): Najib is upset because the Sheikh criticizes me publicly—demands that I abdicate. The Sheikh thinks I'm incompetent.

NAJIB: It's worse than that. He has become a backbone of the rebels. As for what else he says, you may ask Barani.

MUHAMMAD: So you've heard him, Barani. What's he like? Is it true he looks like me?

BARANI (*flustered*): A little, Your Majesty. But—how did Najib know I had heard the Sheikh? Forgive me, Your Majesty, but I don't like being spied upon.

NAJIB: It's my job to know. That's why I asked you to come here with me now.

MUHAMMAD: Surely a historian doesn't need an invitation to watch history take shape! Come, what does he say?

BARANI: It's as Your Majesty said ... He says the Sultan is a disgrace to Islam.

MUHAMMAD: That's all? I could find worse faults in me. What else?

(*Silence.*)

NAJIB: He says Your Majesty has forfeited the right to rule, by murdering your father and brother at prayer.

(*The Step-Mother and Barani react sharply, but Muhammad is still. A short pause.*)

MUHAMMAD (*quietly*): Did he say that?

BARANI (*almost in a whisper*): Yes, Your Majesty.

MUHAMMAD: So now they talk about it openly, do they?

BARANI: He said it in the heat of the moment, Your Majesty. I'm sure he didn't mean it. Your Majesty must ignore these little things.

MUHAMMAD: Do you really think parricide is a little thing? And fratricide? And the pollution of prayer? It's not what people say, Barani, it's their crooked minds that horrify me. Look at my own mother—she won't talk to me now—not

because father died but because my brother died in the accident. He was more amenable to her whims and he would have made a better king for her. So she believes I killed them. Do you know, I've just found out that even this step-mother of mine thinks I am a murderer.

(*Silence.*)

NAJIB (*quietly*): What about the Sheikh, Your Majesty?

MUHAMMAD (*in a tired voice*): Let him babble. He is a saint, it's his privilege.

NAJIB: But we must do something. In Kanpur, they're still rioting and he started it. Now he's here—in the capital.

BARANI: But His Majesty is right. The people have been told that they have a right to criticize the Sultan, to voice their grievances openly. Surely this is the time to show that the Sultan means it—that they were not empty words. The people will surely respond to His Majesty's courage, honesty and justice...

NAJIB (*groans*): Courage, honesty and justice! My dear Barani, we are dealing with a political problem!

BARANI: I know and that's where they count most. Because that's where the Kingdom of Islam which the Prophet—may peace be upon him—has gifted us must blossom. Oh! You won't understand it. Your Hindu childhood has twisted your attitudes beyond repair.

NAJIB: Do you know why I gave up Hinduism? Because it didn't speak of the salvation of society. It only talked of the soul—my individual soul—while a poor, frenzied world screamed in agony around. So I became a Muslim. Islam is worried about this world, I said, it'll bring the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. But I know now—it won't work. There's only the present moment and we must grasp it firmly.

MUHAMMAD (*ironic but affectionate*): So what does the present moment demand now?

BARANI: It's obvious, Your Majesty. He wants the Sheikh dead.

NAJIB: Nonsense! That'll make him a martyr. You can't kill the dead. If we kill him now, we're finished. We might as well surrender to Ain-ul-Mulk.

BARANI (*startled*): Surrender to whom?

MUHAMMAD: Ain-ul-Mulk. He is marching on Delhi.

BARANI: I don't believe it! (*Silence.*) But you mustn't act hastily, Your Majesty. There's obviously been some misunderstanding. (*Earnestly.*) You know Ain-ul-Mulk. He is a good man and he worships you. You know he isn't the treacherous type.

MUHAMMAD (*in anguish*): But why now? Can't he see that I've no time for 'misunderstandings' now? He knows how important it is for me to concentrate on moving to Daulatabad.

BARANI: But there must be some way of finding out why he's doing this. Please send an envoy... Send me... I'll go...

NAJIB: What's the point? We can't waste our time on that. A traitor's a traitor, friend or saint, and he must be crushed.

BARANI: But don't you want to know why?

NAJIB: I do know why. It's obvious.

(*The rest look at him in surprise.*)

MUHAMMAD: It is?

NAJIB: Your Majesty, when you came to the throne, there was anarchy in Avadh and you made Ain-ul-Mulk the Governor there. He crushed the rebels, restored law and order, and the people in Avadh adore him. He's happy there, secure. Then suddenly he gets your letter making him the Governor of the Deccan, asking him to leave immediately. Is it surprising he should suspect a knife in his back?

(*Silence.*)

MUHAMMAD: God, why didn't I think of that?

BARANI: But Najib did, Your Majesty, and didn't warn you.
NAJIB: Would His Majesty have listened to me if I'd warned then? His Majesty loved Ain-ul-Mulk—too much.
BARANI: And you hate him?
NAJIB: Dear Barani, not hate, just suspicion. It's my job to be suspicious and I can't exempt anyone from it.
STEP-MOTHER: No one?
NAJIB: No, Your Highness.
STEP-MOTHER: Not even the Sultan?
NAJIB (*senses a trap, but calmly*): No, not even the Sultan, Your Highness.
STEP-MOTHER (*flaring up*): Muhammad—
(*Muhammad silences her with a gesture of impatience.*)
MUHAMMAD: So, Najib, what do you propose?
NAJIB: I can't think of anything right now, Your Majesty—except that the Sheikh has a striking resemblance to you.
(*Muhammad, startled, stares at Najib.*)
BARANI: What has the Sheikh got to do with this?
MUHAMMAD (*slowly*): You are a devil, Najib! (*Pause. Then briskly.*) Good. We'll think about that. In the meantime, the army should be ready to march. We'll start for Kanauj the day after tomorrow in the evening.
STEP-MOTHER: And who'll look after the administration here, Muhammad?
MUHAMMAD: Najib will be here.
(*The Step-Mother obviously doesn't like the answer. Najib smiles ironically but not too openly.*)
Besides I have invited Shihab-ud-din, the Prince of Sampanshahr, to be here in my absence. You see, the Amir there doesn't like me very much, so I thought inviting his son would be a nice friendly gesture.
BARANI: What's all this, Your Majesty? I can't follow a thing. But my heart trembles for you.

MUHAMMAD: Forgive me if I let you down, Barani, but I must play this game my own way. Come, Najib, we must see the Commander-in-Chief. Mother, if you'll excuse us. (*Bows to her.*)
STEP-MOTHER: Can Barani stay for a while? I want to talk to him.
MUHAMMAD: Why, yes, certainly.
(*Muhammad and Najib go out. Silence.*)
STEP-MOTHER: I don't know what to say, Barani. I mustn't complain against my own son—
BARANI: Your Highness may place full trust in me.
STEP-MOTHER: I know. That's why I asked you to stay. I am worried about him. You know what he is like. He is such an intelligent boy and he works so hard for the people. He doesn't even go to bed these days. (*Pause.*) But he is so impulsive—and when he gets into one of his moods I don't know what he'll do next. (*Pause.*) You are a sober man, Barani, level-headed and honest, and he needs friends like you. I just wanted to ask you ... Oh, God! It all sounds so stupid.
BARANI: I fully understand Your Highness's feelings.
STEP-MOTHER: It's not that. It's just that I don't like so many of his advisers and friends. (*Suddenly.*) Please promise me not to leave him—ever—whatever he does.
BARANI (*overwhelmed to the point of tears*): May God help me to retain such confidence untarnished. I won't leave His Majesty, Your Highness, I promise you. I love him too much to do that.
STEP-MOTHER: Look at him now. He won't show it, but Ain-ul-Mulk has hurt him. And this Sheikh Imam-ud-din—I don't know what he's going to do.
BARANI: It's not for me to advise, Your Highness, but I have to mention it. I am not jealous of Najib and I admire his

integrity. But sometimes I am bothered by his influence on the Sultan.

STEP-MOTHER: I know. I am watching. I'll wait for a few days. (*With sudden violence.*) If he goes on like this, I won't wish his fate even on a dog!

(*Barani, driven to tears by her maternal concern, looks up startled by the venom in her voice.*)

ANNOUNCER: Attention! Attention! The Slave of the Lord, the Merciful, the ever-Victorious Sultan Muhammad has declared that this evening after the prayer a meeting will be organized in the yard in front of the Great Mosque. Sheikh Imam-ud-din, who is revered all over India as a saint and as one who stands in the Grace of Allah, will address the meeting. He will analyse His Merciful Majesty's administration and show where His Majesty has inadvertently taken wrong measures—measures harmful to the country and the Faith. His Majesty himself will be present at the meeting to seek direction from the Revered Sheikh, and the citizens of Delhi are requested to attend the meeting in large numbers and do likewise. Attention! Attention!

SCENE THREE

THE YARD IN front of the great mosque. Muhammad and Sheikh Imam-ud-din and a few odd servants of the palace. No one else. There is a long silence.

MUHAMMAD (*suddenly*): I can't bear this any longer!

IMAM-UD-DIN: Why Your Majesty? You should be happy if no one turns up.

MUHAMMAD: Do you think I would have gone to the trouble of arranging this meeting if I didn't want my people to hear you? I don't want my people to be dumb cattle, Sheikhsahib, and I do not claim to be omniscient myself. I am quite willing to learn from you—even eager.

IMAM-UD-DIN: Will you be as eager when you hear me out, I wonder? You know I am not the type to sweeten my words because the Sultan himself is present.

MUHAMMAD: Don't I know it? The whole of Delhi has heard of the courage and integrity of Sheikh Imam-ud-din. I would not have taken so much trouble for anyone else.

(*Claps. A servant enters and bows.*)

Go at once and tell the Vizier I want everyone here—all the Khans, Amirs, Sardars—everyone—at once!

IMAM-UD-DIN: But Your Majesty, I haven't come here to speak to a collection of courtiers—

MUHAMMAD: And I'm afraid I can't go now from door to door asking people to come. I should have issued renewed orders at the Court today. We have been waiting for over half an hour—and not a soul has come yet!

IMAM-UD-DIN: They say we look alike, but we don't think alike, do we? What's the point in my addressing a gang of sycophants? I want to speak to the people who are willing

to act, who are willing to do something for Islam and the country. If no one comes today, well, no matter. I'll go to the market-place tomorrow and speak there.

(*Muhammad signs to the servant to go. He goes out.*)

MUHAMMAD: Would you believe me if I told you I have never consciously tried to go against the tenets of Islam?

IMAM-UD-DIN: Please, Your Majesty, even you can't believe that! I can quote scores of transgressions. If they weren't wilful, they could only be results of ignorance. But I can't believe that in a scholar of your eminence. Perhaps you are sincere. But if one fails to understand what the Koran says, one must ask the Sayyids and the Ulema. Instead you have put the best of them behind bars in the name of justice.

MUHAMMAD: They tried to indulge in politics—I couldn't allow that. I have never denied the word of God, Sheikhsahib, because it's my bread and drink. I need it most when the surrounding void pushes itself into my soul and starts putting out every light burning there. But I am alone in my life. My kingdom has millions—Muslims, Hindus, Jains. Yes, there is dirt and sickness in my kingdom. But why should I call on God to clean up the dirt deposited by men?

IMAM-UD-DIN: Because only the Voice of God, the Holy Word, can do it. Please listen to me, Your Majesty. The Arabs spread Islam round the world and they struggled and fought for it for seven hundred years. They are tired now, limp and exhausted. But their work must continue and we need someone to take the lead. You could do it. You are one of the most powerful kings on earth today and you could spread the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. God has given you everything—power, learning, intelligence, talent. Now you must repay His debt.

MUHAMMAD: No one can go far on his knees. I have a long way to go. I can't afford to crawl—I have to gallop.

IMAM-UD-DIN: And you will do it without the Koran to guide you? Beware, Sultan, you are trying to become another God. It's a sin worse than parricide.

MUHAMMAD (*refusing the bait*): Only an atheist can try to be God. I am God's most humble slave.

IMAM-UD-DIN: Yes. And slaves have often tried to replace their master.

MUHAMMAD: My congratulations, Imam-ud-din Sahib. For a saint you are very good at innuendoes—I know all about slaves. My grandfather was one and he seized power. But that was in mundane politics. The analogy doesn't work here.

IMAM-UD-DIN: Religion! Politics! Take heed, Sultan, one day these verbal distinctions will rip you into two.

MUHAMMAD: Don't I know it? I still remember the days when I read the Greeks—Sukrat who took poison so he could give the world the drink of gods, Aflatoon who condemned poets and wrote incomparably beautiful poetry himself—and I can still feel the thrill with which I found a new world, a world I had not found in the Arabs or even the Koran. They tore me into shreds. And to be whole now, I shall have to kill the part of me which sang to them. And my kingdom too is what I am—torn into pieces by visions whose validity I can't deny. You are asking me to make myself complete by killing the Greek in me and you propose to unify my people by denying the visions which led Zarathustra or the Buddha. (*Smiles.*) I'm sorry. But it can't be done.

IMAM-UD-DIN: You are a learned man. You may be able to manage this delicate balance within yourself. But a kingdom needs not one king but a line of rulers. Will they manage this balance? Where are these brilliant successors of yours? Where are these guarantors of your balanced future?

MUHAMMAD: There is none—yet. But I haven't lost hope. I shall find them and teach them to think like me. They are

only cattle yet, but I shall make men out of a few of them. Look, Sheikhsahib, in Kanpur you found so many honest men that they burnt down the whole of Kanpur. They are still on the rampage there and your words inspire them. Now you've come to Delhi and there isn't even a fly to listen to you. They are staying away—at home, safe and secure. They don't want you here. Do you know why? (*Silence.*)

Because they suspect you now. The moment they heard that I, the Sultan, was organizing a meeting in which you, my severest critic, was going to speak—they became suspicious. Why should the Sultan sponsor his worst critic? They have smelt a trap. And wisely they have stayed away.

IMAM-UD-DIN (*stunned*): Was this a trap?

MUHAMMAD: No, I promise you.

IMAM-UD-DIN: But—you knew this would happen?

MUHAMMAD: I didn't *know*. But I half expected it. I know my people.

IMAM-UD-DIN: So they think I'm your spy—and you knew it when you arranged this meeting!

MUHAMMAD: Believe me, Sheikhsahib, I'm sorry I am not disappointed. Yes, they will now decide you are a spy—they'll greet you as a spy in the market-place tomorrow. But now you do see what I mean, don't you? You are revered as a saint and you have risked your life by speaking out against the Sultan. Yet a trick—and they suspect you. It's futile to think of them as members of the *dar-ul-Islam*. Generations of devout Sultans have twisted their minds and I have to mend their minds before I can think of their souls.

(*There is a long silence. Then Sheikh Imam-ud-din starts to move down slowly.*)

IMAM-UD-DIN: My turn to congratulate you. Your experiment was a brilliant success. Yes, I have learnt my lesson. Thank you—and good-bye.

MUHAMMAD: Good-bye? You are not going?

IMAM-UD-DIN: You have finished my work for me. You don't want me to wait longer, do you? For an audience which won't turn up?

MUHAMMAD: I need your help, Sheikhsahib.

IMAM-UD-DIN: Don't play any more games with me—

MUHAMMAD: There's no time for games. I am desperate. Ain-ul-Mulk of Avadh is marching on Delhi at this very moment.

IMAM-UD-DIN: What? Your intimate friend and confidant? Why? No, I don't wish to know why. That's politics and you know your way there. But why tell me this?

MUHAMMAD: Because I want peace. I am willing to make peace, but how can I do it? I don't even know why he has turned against me. He won't even see my official envoys. (*Pause.*) But he will see you.

(*The Sheikh is about to speak. But Muhammad goes on.*)

He respects you as every Muslim in India does. He will trust your word. That's why I'm asking you—will you please go as my envoy and dissuade him from this folly? Please, Sheikhsahib, I'm not asking you only for my sake, but for all the Muslims who will die at the hands of Muslims if there is a war.

(*Pause.*)

IMAM-UD-DIN: I don't trust your motives.

MUHAMMAD: What do my motives matter? You can't deny that this war will mean a slaughter of Muslims at the hands of fellow-Muslims. Isn't that enough for the great Sheikh Imam-ud-din? You have attacked me for inaction. You can't turn away now when you are offered a chance. You can't!

IMAM-UD-DIN: I know I can't.

MUHAMMAD: So you agree?

IMAM-UD-DIN: Do you leave me an alternative?

MUHAMMAD (*slowly*): I'll never be able to thank you enough for this.

(*Claps his hands. A servant enters and bows.*)

Bring the robes of honour for the royal envoy. At once!

(*The servant departs.*)

IMAM-UD-DIN: You don't mean the robes are ready?

MUHAMMAD: Forgive me, Sheikhsahib, but I knew you wouldn't refuse.

IMAM-UD-DIN: But what about Ain-ul-Mulk? Won't he also think of me as your spy? It won't take long before he comes to know of this. (*Indicates the empty auditorium.*)

MUHAMMAD: He is not a fool. Besides, he won't know. There isn't time. We have to start before nightfall. Ain-ul-Mulk has already started and we must meet him near the plains of Kanauj.

(*The servant brings the robes of honour and the headdress on a golden plate. Muhammad takes the robe and goes near the Sheikh.*)

IMAM-UD-DIN (*stopping him*): If you want peace, what does it matter where we meet him?

MUHAMMAD: I do want peace. But I can't leave anything to chance. If Ain-ul-Mulk refuses or resorts to treachery, I have to have my army in a safe place. I owe it to my soldiers.

(*Pause.*)

IMAM-UD-DIN: You know, Sultan, I'm just beginning to understand why they say you are the cleverest man in the world.

MUHAMMAD: I am an incompetent fool. Will you accept the robes now?

IMAM-UD-DIN: Very well.

(*He puts on the robes. Muhammad places the headdress upon him. They stand facing each other. The dress makes them look even more alike.*)

I wish I could be more sure of you...

SCENE FOUR

THE PALACE. Shihab-ud-din is reading a few letters. There is an announcement.

DOOR-KEEPER (*announcing*): Her Highness the Queen Mother. *(Shihab-ud-din leaps up. The Step-Mother enters and he bows to her.)*

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: Welcome, Your Highness. I am most honoured by the visit, but, had Your Highness sent for me, I would have come myself.

STEP-MOTHER: I suddenly felt frightened, Shihab-ud-din. I couldn't bear the tension any longer. Has there been any further news?

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: I'm afraid not, Your Highness. The last bulletin was received a week ago. Your Highness knows the contents. There has been nothing since then. I'm sorry but—

STEP-MOTHER: No, no, please, don't apologize. I don't know what I should have done without you here. You know when Muhammad said he was inviting you to look after Delhi, I didn't understand him at all. I couldn't see why he had to ask you, rather than a local Amir. I know now—he couldn't have chosen a better man.

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: I am most grateful for Your Highness's trust, but I did very little. The credit should go to Vizier Muhammad Najib.

STEP-MOTHER: Oh! Don't talk to me about him. Thanks to you, I didn't have to deal with him.

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: Your Highness's most humble servant. (*The Door-Keeper enters.*)

DOOR-KEEPER: In the name of Allah. Sardar Ratansingh.

SHIHAB-UD-DIN (*excited*): He is here? Send him in at once.

(The Door-Keeper goes out.)

STEP-MOTHER: Who is that?

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: My adopted brother, Your Highness.

STEP-MOTHER: Him! He'll have news of the front then! (*Ratansingh enters and bows to the Step-Mother. Shihab-ud-din goes to him in great excitement and embraces him.*)

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: Welcome, Ratansingh. What happened?

RATANSINGH: His Majesty is back in Delhi. We arrived a few minutes ago.

STEP-MOTHER: Oh, then I must go.

RATANSINGH: Forgive me, Your Highness, but His Majesty has gone to see the Vizier. He has asked me to inform Your Highness that he will be here any minute.

(*The Step-Mother doesn't like it. But she swallows it.*)

STEP-MOTHER: But I can't understand it. Why didn't he send word he was coming? Why this secrecy?

RATANSINGH (*hesitates*): I don't think it was meant to be secret, Your Highness. It's just that His Majesty seems much affected by the death of Sheikh Imam-ud-din.

STEP-MOTHER: What? Sheikh Imam-ud-din dead?

RATANSINGH: Yes, Your Highness. He was killed in the battle. (*Her face goes white.*)

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: But what was the Sheikh doing in the battle?

DOOR-KEEPER (*off-stage*): The Warrior in the path of God, the Victorious, the Mighty, His Majesty the Sultan. (*Muhammad enters with Najib and Barani.*)

SHIHAB-UD-DIN (*bows*): In the name of Allah. May He shower greater successes on Your Majesty.

MUHAMMAD: That's no way to welcome, Shihab-ud-din. Come—

(*They embrace.*)

I am grateful to you for looking after my people in my absence.

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: Your Majesty's humble slave.

STEP-MOTHER: Muhammad, what's this about Sheikh Imam-ud-din?

(*Muhammad freezes. Then slowly.*)

MUHAMMAD: Did you have to mention it now? It was a terrible sight. They brought his body into my tent and I felt—as though it was I who was lying dead there and that he was standing above me looking at me. I should have been there—in his place.

(*Pause.*)

BARANI: It's a great loss to Islam.

STEP-MOTHER: And what about Ain-ul-Mulk? I hope he's dead too.

MUHAMMAD: I let him go.

(*General surprise.*)

STEP-MOTHER: You didn't! You couldn't have!

NAJIB: I hate to say it on this happy occasion, Your Majesty, but that would be really tossing another torch into the chaos in Avadh.

BARANI: Your Highness must forgive me, but His Majesty deserves congratulations on his courage. He has shown there are things more valuable than vengeance.

NAJIB: Not that again!

MUHAMMAD: I didn't just set him free, Najib. I gave him back the Kingdom of Avadh, *and* I promised not to send him to the Deccan.

NAJIB: We are helpless if Your Majesty insists on... (*Stops.*)

STEP-MOTHER: Why, Muhammad? Why did he deserve such special treatment?

MUHAMMAD: I'll tell you what happened. You remember the chess problem I solved the other day? Well, when they brought Ain-ul-Mulk before me, I said: 'Look, I have solved the famous problem set by al-Adli!' He didn't say

a word. I drew a sketch on the floor and showed him the solution. He said he liked it, then looked harder for a couple of minutes and said: 'No, there's a flaw here.' And he actually showed me where I had gone wrong! Think of that! I had spent days on that wretched problem and he spots a flaw within half a minute. I had to forgive him.

BARANI: You are a great man, Your Majesty...

MUHAMMAD (*laughing*): And you are a good man, Barani, and that's more important. Look at Najib—look at the expression on his face! He can't even believe I can be generous.

NAJIB: I am suspicious by nature, Your Majesty; fortunately my duty also demands it of me.

MUHAMMAD: We must go now. Najib, Delhi will observe a day of mourning tomorrow for Sheikh Imam-ud-din. And there will be no festivities to celebrate the victory. When men like him die, it's a sin to be alive. Come, Mother. Good-bye, Shihab-ud-din and many, many thanks.

(*All except Shihab-ud-din and Ratansingh go. A brief silence.*)

RATANSINGH: I have never seen an honest scoundrel like your Sultan. He murders a man calmly and then flagellates himself in remorse.

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: What are you talking about?

RATANSINGH: I'm silent.

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: I'm sorry. But you have never liked the Sultan, I don't know why. After all that he has done for the Hindus—

RATANSINGH: Yes indeed, who can deny that! He is impartial! Haven't you heard about the Doab? He levied such taxes on the poor farmers that they preferred to starve. Now there's a famine there. And of course Hindus as well as Muslims are dying with absolute impartiality.

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: What's that got to do with Sheikh Imam-ud-din?

RATANSINGH: I don't know. But I tell you I'm glad to survive the Sultan's impartiality.

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: Must you spin riddles?

RATANSINGH: And do you really want to know the truth? All right. Because you insisted, I went to fight alongside the Sultan. I went and saw him in Kanauj. He didn't seem too pleased to see me. He actually scowled. A Sultan's scowl is a terrible thing.

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: So?

RATANSINGH: Next day I see what the scowl is doing. Sheikh Imam-ud-din is to go and propose peace to Ain-ul-Mulk. A platoon of soldiers is to accompany him. And I am placed in the front rank of the platoon. You know what that means. The front rank never survives a battle.

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: Go on.

RATANSINGH: The Sheikh is delighted about being the Sultan's peace emissary. He looks gorgeous—all dressed up in royal robes, a royal turban, even royal slippers, and sitting on the royal elephant. In fact, he looks exactly like the Sultan.

SHIHAB-UD-DIN (*suspicious*): And the Sultan? What was he doing?

RATANSINGH: I didn't know it then, but he was hiding behind some hills with the rest of the army. Laying a trap.

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: A trap?

RATANSINGH: So we marched towards Ain-ul-Mulk's army, led by the gorgeous Sheikh on the royal elephant. The elephant halted about a hundred yards away from the enemy. The Sheikh stood up on it and tried to say something when a trumpeter on our side sounded the charge! The battle was on—Yes, my dear Shihab, Ain-ul-Mulk didn't start the battle. We did!

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: And the Sultan?

RATANSINGH: I couldn't understand what was happening. Neither did the Sheikh, obviously. His face was twisted

with fear but he was shouting at the top of his voice asking us to stop. He didn't stand a chance. Arrows poured into him and within minutes he looked a gory human porcupine.

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: And the Sultan? Didn't he do anything?

RATANSINGH: He did! The Sheikh plunged down from the elephant and over his corpse we fled in confusion. The enemy was convinced the Sultan was dead and they pursued us. They walked right into the trap. It was the bloodiest massacre I've even seen... We won! (*Pause.*) Sheikh Imam-ud-din was murdered, you know. In cold blood.

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: Oh my God!

RATANSINGH: This isn't all. There's a longer history to all this, (*Pause.*) Do you want to hear it? (*Pause.*) Listen, in a few days the nobles of the Court and the prominent citizens of Delhi are going to hold a secret meeting to discuss... (*Stops.*)

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: What?

RATANSINGH: How should I know? I haven't attended the meeting yet.

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: How do you know about it?

RATANSINGH: Ah! That's Delhi for you! They were looking for recruits and the moment they realized the Sultan had tried to kill me off, they discreetly approached me and invited me. They have asked you too, incidentally. They hope you won't be too apathetic toward the attempted disposal of your adopted brother!

(*Silence.*)

I have accepted the invitation, of course. Would you like to come along too?

(*Silence.*)

Why, Shihab, you look pale!

SCENE FIVE

A HOUSE IN DELHI. A collection of Amirs, Sayyids, etc. Shihab-ud-din and Ratansingh.

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: I'll be plain with you. If you don't like the present administration, that's your problem. I'm an outsider in Delhi. I've nothing to do with it.

AMIR I: But that's the whole point, don't you see? You're the only man he won't suspect.

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: I hope that's not a point against him.

AMIR II: Besides, the people in Delhi never trust each other. It's the climate. They have to have an outsider to lead them!

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: Lead them in what?

AMIR I: Just consider this. Why is he taking us to Daulatabad? Have you wondered about that? I'll tell you. He wants to weaken the Amirs. You see, we are strong in Delhi. This is where we belong. But Daulatabad is a Hindu city and we'll be helpless there. We'll have to lick his feet.

AMIR III: And it's no use his saying stay behind if you like. We have to be in the capital!

AMIR II: Look at what's happening in Delhi. Just look at it! You can't take a step without paying some tax or another. There's even a tax on gambling. How are we to live? You can't even cheat without having to pay tax for it. (*Laughter.*)

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: But he has done a lot of good work. Built schools, roads, hospitals. He has made good use of the money.

SAYYID: Then why can't he collect it the right way? The Koran sanctions only four taxes, but ... (*Looks at Ratansingh and stops.*)

I wrong that a Hindu too is against him

RATANSINGH (*smiles*): Carry on, sir. Don't mind me. I'm here because Shihab's here; otherwise I am invisible!

SAYYID: Well...uhm, he could tax the Hindus. The jiziya is sanctioned by the Koran. All infidels should pay it. Instead he says the infidels are our brothers...

SHIHAB-UD-DIN (*getting up in disgust*): Come, Ratansingh, let's go. This is worse than I thought. They don't deserve to kiss the hem of the Sultan's dress.

(*The others are offended and retreat.*)

RATANSINGH: Ah, well...

(*Gets up. At this point an old man who has been sitting in a corner all along steps forward.*)

SHEIKH: Shihab-ud-din—

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: I said I am not going to associate...

SHEIKH: Shihab-ud-din, I have never asked anything of anyone but Allah. Today I implore you. In the name of Allah, help us.

SHIHAB-UD-DIN (*impressed by the old man's age and sincerity*): Who are you?

SAYYID (*contemptuously*): Don't you know? He is Sheikh Shams-ud-din Tajuddarfim?

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: Sheikh Shams-ud-din? Sir, what is a holy man like you doing in this company?

SHEIKH: Yes, you are right. I should shut myself up in a mosque and devote myself to Allah. I shouldn't get mixed up in the treacherous games of politicians. I know and I had hoped my life would be like that. But Allah isn't only for me, Shihab-ud-din; He's for everyone who believes in him. While tyranny crushes the faithful into dust, how can I continue to hide in my hole? Haven't you heard what's happening to the leaders of Islam today? Sheikh Haidari is in prison. Sheikh Hood in exile...

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: I know. But they dabbled in politics.

SHEIKH: Is it so reprehensible to be concerned about people? Is it a crime to speak out for oneself and one's family? What politics did Sheikh Imam-ud-din indulge in? That he was open, frank and honest?

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: I don't know enough about that. But to me it seems clear that if the Sultan is to be blamed for that death, so are all the citizens of Delhi. I sometimes feel the Sheikh must have almost wished for death after what happened in Delhi.

AMIR I: What did happen in Delhi?

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: You know that better than me! He came here to speak to the people and not a soul turned up to hear him. Not one of you had the courage to come to the meeting and now you have the cheek to blame the Sultan for his death.

(*The others whisper and chuckle in derision.*)

SHEIKH: So you don't know what actually happened behind the scenes?

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: Behind the scenes?

(*More derisive laughter.*)

SHEIKH: Yes, behind the scenes. It's true the Sultan invited the whole of Delhi to hear the Sheikh. Yet, on that very afternoon, soldiers went from door to door threatening dire consequences if anyone dared to attend the meeting.

(*Silence.*)

SHIHAB-UD-DIN (*slowly*): Does the Sultan know this?

(*More laughter.*)

SHEIKH: They were his orders! And do you know, while the Sultan stood in front of the Great Mosque with the Sheikh and got more and more agitated at the empty auditorium, his soldiers were hiding in the streets around, stopping those who tried to come? You don't believe it? Look here...

(*Unbuttons his shirt and shows a wound on his shoulder.*)

I tried to force my way to the Great Mosque and this is what I got for it. Who else would do this to an old man?

RATANSINGH: There, you see! That explains why he had to invite you from Sampanshahr to look after Delhi in his absence. There's confidence for you!

SHIHAB-UD-DIN (*doggedly*): Perhaps. But it's done me no harm.

RATANSINGH: Of course not. Had he meant to harm you, you wouldn't be here to talk about it!

SHEIKH: Will you only think about yourself, Shihab-ud-din? You are the strong, the powerful in this country. You have the capacity to set things right. Won't you worry a little about the people? The citizens of Delhi don't wish to go to Daulatabad, but they are weak. Will you do nothing for them? How many people like Sheikh Imam-ud-din have to die before you'll be ready to act?

(*No reply.*)

AMIR I: We have to act now—while the army here is still tired and disorganized. We have to do something while you're here. If you won't join us, will you at least promise not to fight against us?

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: I know too much now to remain neutral.

RATANSINGH (*with a sudden burst of anger*): Then why not join them? Even my infidel blood boils when I think of Sheikh Imam-ud-din and Sheikh Shams-ud-din here. You accuse the people of Delhi of cowardice and yet you won't raise a finger to correct an obvious wrong. (*Gets up.*) Come, let's go to the palace. The problem of justice won't bother us there.

AMIR I: You must help us, Shihab-ud-din.

SHEIKH: Islam needs your help.

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: What do you want me to do? You don't need me. You need my father. He is the strong man and even the Sultan is afraid of him. But you're in a hurry. I can only swell your numbers—little else.

RATANSINGH: Don't be stupid, Shihab. Don't tell me you still think the Amirs want to fight the Sultan in the open.
(*Shihab-ud-din looks up at him sharply. Ratansingh smiles and turns to the rest.*)
You see what it is. Shihab is an intelligent young man but he's just too nice! You see his father...
SHIHAB-UD-DIN: Don't, Ratan...
RATANSINGH: Come on, everyone knows about it! His father is supposed to have killed my father by treachery and usurped the kingdom. Shihab can't forget that. He wants to make up for it. That's why I'm here, as his adopted brother. And that's why he just can't stand the mention of treachery. (*To Shihab-ud-din.*) Don't overdo it. You'll have to face it some day. After all, what did the Sultan do to Sheikh Imam-ud-din?
SAYYID: It's not going to be easy. We can't afford to make mistakes.
AMIR II: I know. I have been trying to think of some way. But it just gives me a headache.
(*A long silence.*)
RATANSINGH: I have a plan. It's perfect.
SHIHAB-UD-DIN: Yes?
RATANSINGH: Yes. The Sultan, as you know, is a fanatic about prayer. He has made it compulsory for every Muslim to pray five times a day.
SAYYID: That's his only saving grace.
RATANSINGH: Quite! Even the soldiers have to pray, and while they pray, they are not allowed to carry arms. Which means that at the time of prayer, the whole palace is unarmed.
(*Long pause.*)
AMIR II: It takes a Hindu to notice that! (*Half terrified by the simplicity of it all.*) So?

RATANSINGH: Next Tuesday the Amirs here will be seeing the Sultan for the Durbar-i-Khas. See that you prolong the meeting till the prayer hour. Pray with him. You'll only need an extra couple of hundred soldiers outside the palace. The muezzin's call to prayer will be the signal for attack!
(*There is an uncomfortable silence.*)
AMIR II (*quietly*): Fantastic!
SAYYID: But kill someone during prayer...
AMIR I: And a Muslim too...
RATANSINGH: Where's your Holy Koran? The tyrant doesn't deserve to be considered among the faithful. And then, he killed his own father during prayer time, after all.
AMIR I: That's true. But...
RATANSINGH: That's my plan. Think of a better one if you can.
AMIR I: But we'll have to smuggle arms into the palace.
AMIR II: That can be arranged.
AMIR I: You are sure?
AMIR II: Of course, I'm sure. I think this is a brilliant plan.
AMIR III: It is simple.
(*They all talk animatedly.*)
SHEIKH: No, we can't have it!
(*Sudden silence as they all turn to Sheikh Shams-ud-din*).
SHIHAB-UD-DIN: Why, pray?
SHEIKH: You can't pollute the time of prayer. It's a sacred time. We can't stain it with the blood of a Mussulman.
AMIR II: O come, we can always make up later. Do penance for it.
SHEIKH: But prayer isn't penance. Remember we are here to save Islam, not to insult it.
AMIR I: Don't get excited. Islam will benefit in the long run.
SHEIKH (*to Shihab-ud-din, pleading*): You can't agree to this, Shihab-ud-din. You are the only sensible person here. You can't agree to this sacrilege. You can't do this to Islam...

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: Does your Islam work only at prayer? You have persuaded me to do what I had sworn never to do—*you*, Your Holiness. I'm sure the Lord will not mind an interrupted prayer. (*To the others.*) All right, let's get down to the details. We have to work everything out carefully. (*Suddenly.*) Must we do this, Ratan? Must we?

SCENE SIX

THE PALACE. Muhammad, Najib and Barani. Silence for a while. Muhammad is restless and paces up and down.

BARANI: Why are you both so quiet?

NAJIB: Oh, shut up!

MUHAMMAD: Please, Najib.

(*Silence again. The Door-Keeper enters.*)

DOOR-KEEPER: In the name of Allah. The Amirs have come for the Durbar-i-Khas.

MUHAMMAD: Send them in.

(*The Door-Keeper goes out. Barani and Najib stand up. The Amirs enter along with Shihab-ud-din. They greet each other.*)

AMIR I: In the name of Allah.

(*Najib smiles to himself.*)

MUHAMMAD (*with obvious warmth*): Come in, come in. Please take your seats. I am glad you have all come on time. I want to finish the Durbar-i-Khas as soon as possible. I have promised the Imam I'll be at the mosque for today's prayer. That doesn't give us much time, I'm afraid. Are there any special problems any of you wish to raise?

(*No reply.*)

Excellent! I have only two topics myself. Not much to discuss there, but naturally I want to inform the Durbar-i-Khas before announcing them to the public. First, I am very happy to inform you that Abbasid Ghiyas-ud-din Muhammad has accepted my invitation to visit our capital.

(*Silence.*)

AMIR I: Who is he, Your Majesty?

AMIR II: I'm afraid I have never heard of that name...

MUHAMMAD: Well, that's nothing to be ashamed of. Abbasid Ghiyas-ud-din Muhammad is not exactly famous. He is a member of the hallowed family of the Abbasid Khalifs.

(*Silence while the Amirs digest this bit of news which obviously makes no sense to them.*)

BARANI: It's good news that a descendant of the last Khalif is visiting us, Your Majesty.

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: May I compliment His Majesty on his wisdom?

MUHAMMAD: Wisdom? What a strange word to use. Why wisdom? A visit by the descendant of the Khalif could show how faithful I am or how religious or even perhaps, how modest. But why do you say 'wisdom'? Do you think I am inviting him to placate the stupid priests?

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: I didn't mean to...

MUHAMMAD: You know, since Sheikh Imam-ud-din died I have been asking myself just one question. I am a king. I wear the royal robes. I have honoured myself with the title of Sultan. But what gives me the right to call myself a King?

(*The Amirs are baffled.*)

Am I a king only because I am the son of a king? Or is it because I can make the people accept my laws and the army move to my commands? Or can self-confidence alone justify it? I ask you—all of you—what would you have me do to become a real king in your eyes?

(*Silence.*)

NAJIB (*disapproving*): Your Majesty—

MUHAMMAD: You are all silent. The others only tell me what I should not do but not what I should. Until I know what else to do, Shihab-ud-din, I have to go on clutching the sceptre in my fist. But I am not happy and I am turning to

tradition and history now and seeking an answer there—in the blessings of the Abbasid Khalif.

AMIR I: The sins of Delhi will be washed clean by the visit of so great a man.

MUHAMMAD: You bring tears to my eyes. But the great man isn't coming to Delhi. We shall be in Daulatabad by then.

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: I implore Your Majesty not to move the capital to Daulatabad. I am not from Delhi myself and have no stake in it. But I know the people of Delhi are very unhappy about the move. I have seen—

MUHAMMAD: What am I to do, Shihab-ud-din? I have explained every reason to them, shown how my empire cannot flourish with Delhi as its capital. But how can I explain tomorrow to those who haven't even opened their eyes to the light of today? Let's not waste more time over that. They'll see the point soon. It's getting late and I must come to the more important news. From next year, we shall have copper currency in our empire along with the silver dinars.

AMIR I: Whatever for? I mean what does one do with a copper coin?

MUHAMMAD: Exchange it for a silver coin! A copper coin will have the same value as a silver dinar.

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: But I don't understand, Your Majesty. How can one expect a copper coin to have the same value as a silver one?

MUHAMMAD: It's a question of confidence, A question of trust! The other day I heard that in China they have paper currency—paper, mind you—and yet it works because the people accept it. They have faith in the Emperor's seal on the pieces of paper.

AMIR I (*whispers to the next man*): I told you he's mad!

MUHAMMAD: What was that?

AMIR I: I was just saying people here won't accept copper currency.

MUHAMMAD: Then why not say it aloud? Because people are afraid, will you mistrust me too? Laugh at me if you like, criticize me, but please don't distrust me. I can order you all to obey me but tell me, how do I gain your full trust? I can only beg for it. (*Pleading.*) I have hopes of building a new future for India and I need your support for that. If you don't understand me, ask me to explain myself and I'll do it. If you don't understand my explanations, bear with me in patience until I can show you the results. But please don't let me down, I beg you. I'll kneel before you if you wish, but please don't let go of my hand.

(*He kneels before them. The Amirs almost recoil at this sudden gesture.*)

SHIHAB-UD-DIN (*embarrassed*): But, Your Majesty, it's not for a king to beg. He must command. We are your ever-willing servants.

MUHAMMAD: Is this your voice alone, Shihab-ud-din, or do the rest of the Amirs agree with you?

AMIRS: Of course we all do—no question of it—Your Majesty should trust us…

MUHAMMAD: Thank you!

(*Gets up, walks up to the throne, picks up a copy of the Koran lying on it.*)

Will you all then take an oath on the Koran to support me in my measures?

(*A long tense silence.*)

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: Does His Majesty distrust me so much that he needs an oath on the Koran from us?

(*Muhammad turns to him in a sudden burst of rage, then controls himself and replaces the Koran on the throne. Silence again. The Door-Keeper enters.*)

DOOR-KEEPER: In the name of Allah. It's the hour of prayer, Your Majesty.

(*Muhammad stands silent for a while. The atmosphere is very charged.*)

MUHAMMAD (*very slowly*): We'll all pray here.

(*The Door-Keeper bows and exits. At the same moment, the Muezzin's voice is heard calling the faithful to the prayer.*)

MUEZZIN (*off-stage*): Alla-Ho-Akbar! Alla-Ho-Akbar!
Alla-Ho-Akbar! Alla-Ho-Akbar
Ashahado La Elaha Illilah
Ashahado La Elaha Illilah
Ashahado Anna Muhammadur Rasool Illah
Ashahado Anna Muhammadur Rasool Illah
Haiyah Alis Salaat—Haiyah Alis Salaat
Haiyah Salil Falaa—Haiyah Salil Falaa
Alla-Ho-Akbar! Alla-Ho-Akbar
La Elaha Illilah…

(*As soon as the Muezzin's call begins, Muhammad unbuckles his sword and places it on the throne. About a dozen servants enter with pots of water, in which those on the stage wash their hands, faces, heads and feet. Another servant brings about a dozen mats on a plank and takes them round. Each person picks up a mat and spreads it facing west. They start praying. Muhammad leads the prayer. Half-way through the prayer a commotion is heard off-stage. Taking that as a cue, Shihab-ud-din and the Amirs get up and pull out their daggers.*)

BARANI (*frightened*): What's this? What's this?

(*The Amirs step towards the throne, near which Muhammad is praying. Suddenly from behind the curtain near the throne about twenty Hindu soldiers rush in with spears and surround the Amirs. One or two Amirs try to run out but the soldiers bar their way. The Amirs stand frozen in fear, then slowly throw down their daggers. The soldiers drag them away—all except Shihab-ud-din. While all this is*

going on, Muhammad goes on praying unconcerned. Only after finishing the prayer does he step down from the throne. Silence for a while.)

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: How did you guess?

MUHAMMAD: Do you really want to know?

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: You aren't worried about hurting my feelings, are you?

MUHAMMAD: There was a letter in my letter-room today. A strange letter—strange because, unlike all the others, it didn't abuse me and it was signed. (*Pause.*) By Ratansingh.

SHIHAB-UD-DIN (*smiles*): Do you really think I'll believe that? It's the oldest trick in the world.

MUHAMMAD: Why should I lie to a dead man?

(*Takes out the letter from his robe and holds it before Shihab-ud-din. Shihab-ud-din looks crushed and frightened.*)

SHIHAB-UD-DIN (*almost to himself*): But does he say why he is doing this to me?

NAJIB: He has disappeared—without a trace!

MUHAMMAD: Let me ask you something. Why did you go against me? What wrong have I done you?

SHIHAB-UD-DIN: What's the point? You won't understand it anyway.

MUHAMMAD: Won't I? Or could it be that you don't know?

SHIHAB-UD-DIN (*suddenly violent*): Get on with your killing, Muhammad. Or does your hand refuse to rise against me? Beware! You won't be able to trap me with your wiles. I am not Ain-ul-Mulk to live crushed under your kindness.

(*Muhammad slowly takes out his dagger. Shihab-ud-din is getting more and more frightened. He is almost screaming now as he speaks.*)

You want to solve all problems in the flash of a dagger, don't you? But you can't stop this uprising now. My

father distrusts you and I've already written to him, about everything here... everything...

NAJIB: Sorry, but Ratansingh has sent those letters to us.

SHIHAB-UD-DIN (*screaming*): Where will you hide my corpse? How will you gag my voice? Kill me—but you won't stop this—this will go on—

MUHAMMAD: I could have killed you with a word. But I like you too much.

(*Stabs him. Then almost frenzied, goes on stabbing him. Hits out at Shihab-ud-din's dead body with a ferocity that makes even the soldiers holding the body turn away in horror.*)

BARANI: Your Majesty—he's dead!

(*Muhammad stops, then flings the dagger away in disgust.*)

MUHAMMAD (*anguished*): Why must this happen, Barani? Are all those I trust condemned to go down in history as traitors? What is happening? Tell me, Barani, will my reign be nothing more than a tortured scream which will stab the night and melt away in the silence?

(*He is trembling. At a sign from Najib, the soldiers lay the body down on a mat and go away. Muhammad stares at the body.*)

Najib, see that every man involved in this is caught and beheaded. Stuff their bodies with straw and hang them up in the palace-yard. Let them hang there for a week. No, send them round my kingdom. Let every one of my subjects see them. Let everyone see what...(*Chokes.*)

BARANI: What will that achieve, Your Majesty? What's the use? (*Pause.*)

NAJIB: We must do something about Shihab-ud-din's father. He is a powerful man and he won't like this.

MUHAMMAD (*regaining control of himself*): Don't worry about him. Make a public announcement that there was a rebellion in the palace and that the nobles of the Court

tried to assassinate the Sultan during prayer. Say that the Sultan was saved by Shihab-ud-din who died a martyr's death defending him. The funeral will be held in Delhi and will be a grand affair. Invite his father to it and see that he is treated with the respect due to the father of a loyal nobleman.

BARANI: Oh God! Aren't even the dead free from your politics?

NAJIB: Your Majesty, if this incident is to be kept a secret, we'll have to hang everyone who was here—even the Hindu guards. They remained loyal to Your Majesty but they have seen it all and are bound to talk. It does mean more corpses. But then, that'll only make the show more impressive.

MUHAMMAD: Najib. I want Delhi vacated immediately. Every living soul in Delhi will leave for Daulatabad within a fortnight. I was too soft, I can see that now. They'll only understand the whip. Everyone must leave. Not a light should be seen in the windows of Delhi. Not a wisp of smoke should rise from its chimneys. Nothing but an empty graveyard of Delhi will satisfy me now.

BARANI: May Heaven protect us!

MUHAMMAD: Call on Heaven while you can, Barani—you may not get another chance. What hopes I had built up when I came to the throne! I had wanted every act in my kingdom to become a prayer, every prayer to become a further step in knowledge, every step to lead us nearer to God. But our prayers too are ridden with disease and must be exiled. There will be no more praying in the kingdom, Najib. Anyone caught praying will be severely punished. Henceforth let the moment of prayer walk my streets in silence and leave without a trace.

NAJIB: But that would only be playing into the hands of the Ulema, Your Majesty. I suggest we say there'll be no more prayers till Ghiyas-ud-din Abbasid, the descendant of

the Khalif, visits us. God alone knows when he'll come. Besides, it'll make a beautiful little paradox!

(*Muhammad does not reply. Najib goes out. Barani sobs. Muhammad stands staring at Shihab-ud-din's corpse. Barani gets up, takes the silken cloth from the throne and starts spreading it on the corpse. But Muhammad casts the cloth aside.*)

MUHAMMAD: Don't cover him, Barani. I want my people to see his wounds.

ANNOUNCER: Attention! Attention! The Merciful Sultan Muhammad has ordered—that within the next month every citizen of Delhi must leave for Daulatabad. No one should remain behind in Delhi. Anyone who attempts to stay behind or to go elsewhere will be severely punished. All arrangements have been made to ensure the comfort of citizens on the way to Daulatabad. All the needs of the citizens, regarding food, clothing or medicine, will be catered to by the State. It is hoped that every citizen will use these amenities to the full and be in Daulatabad as soon as possible. Attention! Attention!

SCENE SEVEN

A CAMP ON the Delhi–Daulatabad route. Aziz, still dressed as a Brahmin, and Aazam. A Hindu woman is kneeling in front of Aziz.

HINDU WOMAN: Please let me go, sir ... My child ... Please have mercy on it ... only for a day, sir...

AZIZ: I told you I can't. No one can be allowed out of sight until we reach Daulatabad. I'm sorry, but I have my orders.

HINDU WOMAN: But I'll return tomorrow... I swear by my child I will ... It's dying. Your Excellency, I have to take it to a doctor...

AZIZ: But what can I do? There's the hakim's tent. Go to him. He'll give you some medicine. (*In a low voice.*) I've told you what you can do. I could try and bribe my senior officials, but you'll have to pay for it.

HINDU WOMAN: But I haven't got a paisa on me, Your Excellency. And what will I give the doctor? My husband's also ill, sir, please, I hold your feet—please let me go.

AZIZ: I can't waste any more time on you. There's a lot of work here. Stop screaming and get back to your tent—I said, get back to your tent!

(*The Hindu woman goes out, weeping.*)

AAZAM: Poor thing! Why don't you let her go? The doctor may help her.

AZIZ: Have you seen the child? No witch-doctor can save it now. My niece had that illness and went out like a light. It's a waste of good money and she's going to need every paisa of it. I'm doing her a favour! And watch out for paise, Aazam; they're going to cost a lot soon.

(*Footsteps are heard off-stage. Aziz buries his head into his books. A family comes in. A man with a woman and six*

kids. They come and stand. Aziz continues to read. Aazam, embarrassed, wanders around without looking at them. The family waits patiently.)

Three more families! They must be walking on their knees. (*Looks up and stares at the man.*) So you've come at last, have you? Perhaps you went to visit your in-laws on the way. Don't you know the orders? You were supposed to be here well before sunset.

MAN: What was I to do, Your Excellency? There were two corpses there on the road. Poor things! They must have walked till their hearts gave out. I thought, sinner that I am, I would at least give them a decent burial.

AAZAM: Poor souls. From which camp were they, do you think?

AZIZ: I hope you checked whether they were Muslims before burying them.

MAN: Who's to do all that, Your Excellency? I did what I could.

AZIZ: And what if they were Hindus, pray? You know they don't bury their dead. You'll be in trouble if someone finds out. Actually I ought to send you back to dig them up again. It's against the orders to insult or cause harm to Hinduism—

MAN: I just didn't think of it, Your Excellency. Sinner that I am, I thought I would lighten the burden of my sins by giving them a resting place.

AZIZ: Leave the corpses alone in future. What did you do in Delhi, sinner that you are?

MAN: I am a Kafir, Your Excellency. I have to guard the dead bodies in the palace yard—those executed by the Sultan, you know. I have to guard them for a week, ten at a time, sir, and then dump them in the canal outside the city. There again I have to guard them against thieves.

AZIZ: Thieves? Ugh!

MAN: Isn't it terrible, Your Excellency? But there it is. That's what men have come to. The relatives of the dead have to pay us before taking the bodies. Well, if the orders had been obeyed I would have built a house by now. But no, they won't pay—even for the dead! They come at night and steal them. Not just the poor. Even the rich folk—the most respectable people of Delhi! I could tell you a name or two and you wouldn't believe it. It is terrible. People won't stop at anything once they get into the habit of thieving, that's certain.

(*Aziz looks at Aazam and laughs. Aazam grimaces.*)

AZIZ: So this is your family. All eight here?

MAN: Yes, sir.

AZIZ: Get on with you there. There's a tent kept for you. Yes! Whatever happens to the others, people like you mustn't die. The Sultan will need a lot more like you soon. So what are you going to do till the Sultan arrives in Daulatabad? Another couple of children?

MAN: Well, we have decided to get married first, Your Excellency.

AAZAM (*in disgust*): Oh God!

MAN (*apologetic*): Couldn't find time for it in Delhi, sir.

AAZAM: Go away. Go away!

(*The family goes off.*)

God, what a dirty man! I am feeling sick.

AZIZ: I like such people. They are the real stoics.

AAZAM: I just keep thinking of that poor woman. Why don't you let her see the doctor? I'm sure she'll come back. Look, if you want money, tell me. There are enough rich men in this camp. I'll get some in to time.

AZIZ: Don't you do anything of the kind! You'll ruin us both if they catch you.

AAZAM: We'll be ruined anyway ultimately. If not today, then tomorrow. What other future's there for us? One day my

fingers will slow down. I'll get caught. Then, no arms! No legs! A torn mat and a begging bowl, that's all.

AZIZ: You are a hopeless case, you know. Pathetic! You've been in Delhi for so many years and you're as stupid as ever. Look at me. Only a few months in Delhi and I have discovered a whole new world—politics! My dear fellow, that's where our future is—politics! It's a beautiful world—wealth, success, position, power—and yet it's full of brainless people, people with not an idea in their head. When I think of all the tricks I used in our village to pinch a few torn clothes from people—if one uses half that intelligence here, one can get robes of power. And not have to pinch them either—demand them! It's a fantastic world!

(*The Hindu woman is heard wailing.*)

AAZAM: That's that Hindu woman. Her child's dead. She'll complain against you now. If you go on like this, Aziz, we'll soon keep the Kafir company in Daulatabad.

AZIZ: Don't call me Aziz. I've told you. As for her, I've only obeyed my orders. Besides I'm a Brahmin and she won't complain against a Brahmin to a Muslim officer. That'll send her straight to hell. In any case—and listen to this carefully—we won't stay in the Sultan's service for long. I heard some rumours in Delhi. The Sultan's going to introduce copper coins soon. And a copper coin will have the same value as a silver dinar. What do you say to that?

AAZAM (*making a face*): Eyah! There's no fun in stealing copper coins.

AZIZ: Shut up! Just listen to what I'm telling you—you are not going to pinch any coins, you are going to make them. Make counterfeit coins, you understand? If your fingers are getting restless, use them there. (*Noise off-stage.*) Ha! There's the next lot!

(*Buries his head in his books.*)

SCENE EIGHT

AD 1332

THE FORT AT DAULATABAD. Two sentries—one young, the other past his middle-age. Night.

YOUNG MAN: What time do you think it is, grandfather?

OLD MAN: Must be just past midnight.

YOUNG MAN: Only that? Good God! When I was in the army, less than two seconds seemed to divide the lamp-lighting hour from the daybreak. Now the night scarcely moves.

OLD MAN: It's only when you wait for the morning that the night stands still. A good sentry must forget that morning even exists.

YOUNG MAN (*looking down the side of the fort*): What a fantastic fort! I have a good head but even I feel giddy when I look down. And isn't that long white thing the road from Daulatabad to Delhi?

OLD MAN: Yes.

YOUNG MAN: They say it's the widest road in the world. But it looks no bigger than a thin snake from here.

OLD MAN: And five years ago that snake bit a whole city to death.

YOUNG MAN: What a fort! What a magnificent thing! I met a foreign visitor the other day and he said he has been round the world and not seen any fort as strong as this anywhere. No army could take this.

OLD MAN: No, invariably, forts crumble from the inside.

YOUNG MAN: You don't love this fort very much, do you, grandfather?

OLD MAN: I am a man of the plains, son. I find it hard to breathe in this eagle's nest.

YOUNG MAN: You are from Delhi?

OLD MAN: Yes.

YOUNG MAN: Was it hard, coming from Delhi to here?

OLD MAN: I survived. But my family was more fortunate. They died on the way.

YOUNG MAN (*sympathetically*): I am sorry. The arrangements must have been very bad.

OLD MAN: Oh no. The merciful Sultan had made perfect arrangements. But do you know, you can love a city like a woman? My old father had lived in Delhi all his life. He died of a broken heart. Then my son Ismail. He was six years old—would have been ten now! The fine dust that hung in the air, fine as silk, it covered him like a silken shroud. After him, his mother.

(*Silence. The young man is embarrassed.*)

YOUNG MAN: Tell me more about this fort, grandfather. Is it true there is a strange and frightening passage within this fort? Dark, they say, like the new moon night.

OLD MAN: Yes, it's a long passage, a winding tunnel, coiled like an enormous hollow python inside the belly of the fort. And we shall be far, far happier when that python breaks out and swallows everything in sight—every man, woman, child, and beast.

(*Footsteps off-stage.*)

YOUNG MAN (*raising his spear*): Who is that?

MUHAMMAD: Muhammad.

YOUNG MAN: Muhammad? What Muhammad?

OLD MAN: Shut up, fool. It's the Sultan.

(*Muhammad walks in—almost in a trance.*)

BOTH: In the name of Allah!

MUHAMMAD (*to the old man*): Go and tell Barani I want to see him.

(*The old man bows and retires.*)

YOUNG MAN: I beg Your Majesty's pardon for my impertinence. I didn't realize…

MUHAMMAD: Don't worry. You were doing your duty.

(*Goes to the edge of the wall and looks down.*)

YOUNG MAN: Your Majesty must forgive my impudence, but I beg Your Majesty not to go too near the edge of the fort. It's a very steep fall.

MUHAMMAD (*smiles*): You are new here, aren't you?

YOUNG MAN: Yes, I am, Your Majesty. I was in the army all these years. They sent me here yesterday. I am very sorry if I've said anything wrong, Your Majesty.

MUHAMMAD: Don't apologize at every word. If you stay here long enough you'll anyway learn to ooze spittle before everyone. Be yourself at least until then. How old are you?

YOUNG MAN: Nineteen, Your Majesty.

MUHAMMAD: Nineteen. Nice age! An age when you think you can clasp the whole world in your palm like a rare diamond. I was twenty-one when I came to Daulatabad first, and built this fort. I supervised the placing of every brick in it and I said to myself, one day I shall build my own history like this, brick by brick.

One night I was standing on the ramparts of the old fort here. There was a torch near me flapping its wild wings and scattering golden feathers on everything in sight. There was a half-built gate nearby trying to contain the sky within its cleft. Suddenly something happened—as though someone had cast a spell. The torch, the gate, the fort and the sky—all melted and merged and flowed in my blood-stream with the darkness of the night. The moment shed its symbols, its questions and answers, and stood naked and calm where the stars throbbed in my veins. I was the earth, was the grass, was the smoke, was the sky. Suddenly a sentry called from far. 'Attention! Attention!' And to that challenge the half-burnt torch and the half-built gate fell apart.

No, Young man, I don't envy you your youth. All that you have to face and suffer is still ahead of you. Look at me. I have searched for that moment since then and here I am still searching for it. But in the last four years, I have seen only the woods clinging to the earth, heard only the howl of wild wolves and the answering bay of street dogs. Another twenty years and you'll be as old as me. I might be lying under those woods there by then. Do you think you'll remember me then?

(*No answer.*)

Come, why are you silent?

YOUNG MAN (*scared*): Your Majesty must forgive me, Your Majesty. But I don't understand what Your Majesty is saying.

MUHAMMAD (*incensed*): You don't understand! You don't understand! Why do you live? Why do you corrupt the air with your diseased breath? (*Suddenly calm.*) I'm sorry. It's my turn to apologize. It isn't your fault. You are also one of them.

(*Uncomfortable silence. Barani enters.*)

BARANI: In the name of Allah. Your Majesty sent for me?

(*Muhammad waves the sentries away.*)

MUHAMMAD: I couldn't bear the walls any more. When I came here I felt I needed an audience—someone to confess my self-pity to. You were asleep?

BARANI: No, Your Majesty. I was reading a book by Imam Abu Hanifa.

MUHAMMAD: Fortunate! You can read when you don't feel sleepy. I can't sleep. I can't read. Even Rumi, who once used to transport me, has become simply a web of words. Do you know, five years ago I actually used to pray to God not to send me any sleep? I can't believe it now.

BARANI: Why don't you see a hakim, Your Majesty?

MUHAMMAD: What can a hakim do? You are a historian, Barani, you are the man to prescribe remedies for this.

Have you heard the latest news? Fakr-ud-din has risen against me in Bengal.

BARANI: Oh, I'm…

MUHAMMAD: Yes. And there's been another uprising in the Deccan. In Ma'bar, Ehsanshah has declared himself independent. Bahal-ud-din Gashtasp is collecting an army against me. The drought in Doab is spreading from town to town—burning up the country. Only one industry flourishes in my kingdom, only one—and that's of making counterfeit copper coins. Every Hindu home has become a domestic mint; the traders are just waiting for me to close my eyes; and in my whole kingdom there are only two people I can trust—Ain-ul-Mulk and Shihab-ud-din's father. What should I do, Barani? What would you prescribe for this honeycomb of diseases? I have tried everything. But what cures one disease just worsens another.

BARANI: I am a humble historian, Your Majesty: it's not for me to prescribe. But since Your Majesty has done me the honour of confiding in me, may I make a suggestion? It is a difficult thing to suggest to a king and I beg you to forgive me if it hurts. But you are a learned man, Your Majesty, you are known the world over for your knowledge of philosophy and poetry. History is not made only in statecraft; its lasting results are produced in the ranks of learned men. That's where you belong, Your Majesty, in the company of learned men. Not in the market of corpses.

MUHAMMAD: You want me to retire from my throne? (*Laughs.*) Barani, if you were capable of irony, I would have thought you were laughing at me. But, as usual, you mean it, which makes it harder. I wish it was as easy as that. I have often thought of that myself—to give up this futile see-saw struggle and go to Mecca. Sit there by the Kaaba and search for the peace which Daulatabad hasn't

given me. What bliss! But it isn't that easy. It isn't as easy as abandoning the patient in the wilderness because there's no cure for his disease. Don't you see—this patient, racked by fever and crazed by the fear of the enveloping vultures, can't be separated from me? Don't you see that the only way I can abdicate is by killing myself? I could have done something if the vultures weren't so close. I could have crawled forward on my knees and elbows. But what can you do when every moment you expect a beak to dig into you and tear a muscle out? What can you do? Barani, what vengeance is driving these shapes after me?

BARANI: Your Majesty…

MUHAMMAD: You know what my beloved subjects call me? Mad Muhammad! Mad Muhammad! (*Suddenly pleading.*) How can I become wise again, Barani?

BARANI: Your Majesty, there was a time when you believed in love, in peace, in God. What has happened to those ideals? You won't let your subjects pray. You torture them for the smallest offence. Hang them on suspicion. Why this bloodshed? Please stop it, and I promise Your Majesty something better will emerge out of it.

MUHAMMAD: But for that I'll have to admit I've been wrong all along. And I know I haven't. I have something to give, some-thing to teach, which may open the eyes of history but I have to do it within this life. I've got to make them listen to me before I lose even that!

(*The old man comes in running.*)

OLD MAN: In the name of Allah—a calamity, Your Majesty—the Nayab Vizier has sent word—

MUHAMMAD: What is it?

OLD MAN: Vizier Muhammad Najib is dead. His body was found in his bed. The Nayab Vizier says it is murder…

SCENE NINE

A HIDE-OUT IN the hills. Aziz and Aazam are stretched out on the floor.

AAZAM: It's so hot—I'm fed up, I'm fed up of life, I'm fed up of the whole bloody world.

AZIZ: Why don't you just go and commit suicide?

AAZAM: Tried once. Went and jumped into a well. But the cold water cheered me up so much that I had a good swim and went back home. I don't think I could try again.

AZIZ: You'll never learn to do a thing properly.

AAZAM: But how come I steal properly? I have never made a mistake while stealing. Why am I a thief, Aziz? Why aren't we like other people? Have a nice home, till a farm and live happily?

AZIZ: How many happy people have you met? Besides, a man must commit a crime at least once in his lifetime. Only then will his virtue be recognized!

AAZAM: Aw, shut up!

AZIZ: No, truly. Listen. If you remain virtuous throughout your life no one will say a good thing about you, because they won't need to. But start stealing—and they'll say: 'What a nice boy he was! But he's ruined now…' Then kill and they will beat their breasts and say: 'Heavens! He was only a petty thief all these days. Never hurt anyone. But alas!' Then rape a woman and the chorus will go into hallelujahs: 'He was a saint, a real saint and look at him now…'

AAZAM: Well, you have robbed and killed. Now all you have to do to become a saint is rape.

AZIZ: Presently, presently. No hurry. What's the point in raping for sheer lust? That's a mug's game. First one must have power—the authority to rape! Then everything takes on meaning.

AAZAM (*giggles*): So you want power, do you? What do you want to be, a Sultan?

AZIZ: Laugh away, stupid. You'll soon see. It all depends on whether Karim will bring the goods.

AAZAM (*seriously*): But no, Aziz, why are you so dissatisfied? We have such a nice establishment here. We take enough money from travellers and the other robbers are scared to death of you. There's no limit to what we can amass here.

AZIZ: I am bored stiff with all this running and hiding. You rob a man, you run, and hide. It's all so pointless. One should be able to rob a man and then stay there to punish him for getting robbed. That's called 'class'—that's being a real king!

AAZAM: May Allah shower His blessings on Your Majesty! Is there a post for your humble slave at the Court?

AZIZ: Oh, yes! You are brainless. So you'll make a good nobleman—an Amir.

AAZAM (*in disgust*): Eah! I don't like that. I don't think I could be anything but a common pickpocket. What about a court thief? (*Aziz bursts into laughter.*)

AZIZ: That's beautiful, Aazam! A court thief! I'd never thought of that. It opens up all sorts of possibilities ... There's Karim now!

(*Karim comes in with a man, bound and gagged.*)

You are late. Are you sure this is the right man?

KARIM: No need to worry.

AZIZ: Excellent. Here you are. (*Gives him a purse.*) I'll send for you if there's any more work.

(*Karim salaams and exits.*)

AAZAM: Who is this animal?

AZIZ: Wait and see. Untie him first.

(*Aazam unties the man. Aziz stares at him and an expression of horror spreads on his face.*)

My God! I'll kill that ass Karim! He's brought the wrong man!

MAN: I told him so. I told him who I was. I told him clearly. The rascal wouldn't listen. Tied me up. Me! Let the Sultan hear of this outrage. He'll whip you to death.

AZIZ, AAZAM: The Sultan?

AZIZ: We beg your pardon, sir. There's been a mistake. Karim was supposed to bring someone else—a Turk merchant. But—may we know who you are?

MAN: You'll soon know, you scoundrels. I am Ghiyas-ud-din Abbasid. The descendant of Khalif Abbasid. I am the Guest of Honour of His Majesty.

AAZAM: Ya Allah!

(*Aziz and Aazam prostrate themselves in front of him.*)

GHIYAS-UD-DIN: You'll pay for this! I've come all the way from Arabia and not a soul dared touch me. They trembled at the mention of my name. And now this outrage! You'll hear more about this—

AZIZ: Forgive us, Your Worship. It was a mistake. There's been a slip somewhere. It's just that you are alone—I mean the Sultan's Guest of Honour—from the Holy Family of the Khalifs—

GHIYAS-UD-DIN: Mind your own business, slave. I'll have an entourage as soon as the Sultan knows I've arrived. He is sending a special convoy from Daulatabad.

AZIZ: Then perhaps Your Worship will allow us to make amends for this sacrilege by following you? We'll be your slaves till you reach Daulatabad.

GHIYAS-UD-DIN: Hm! You may redeem yourself that way. Get up. No need to prostrate yourself so long. Yes, I do need guides. It's an unfamiliar country and the people here are treacherous. The moment they know you are a foreigner they're out to rob you. Yes, you'll do till the entourage arrives.

AZIZ: But haven't you been here before, Your Worship? Haven't you seen the Sultan?

GHIYAS-UD-DIN: I haven't. But I shall soon.

(*In the meantime, Aazam has spread a mat on which Ghiyas-ud-din sits imperially. Aazam offers him some fruits to eat.*)

AZIZ: Forgive me if I am talking beyond my station, Your Worship. But I must warn you that the Sultan is in a suspicious frame of mind, we hear. There have been a lot of deaths since he came to Daulatabad.

GHIYAS-UD-DIN: Yes, I've heard all that. I'm not worried.

AZIZ: Recently he flogged a man to death, had his body filled with straw and strung up in the market place—all because the man claimed to be a descendant of the Prophet—may peace be upon him.

GHIYAS-UD-DIN: You talk too much. What's your name?

AZIZ: Aziz, Your Worship, and this is Aazam. I realize I sound impertinent, Your Worship. We are happy to follow you to Daulatabad, be your slaves to make up for our sacrilege. But Your Worship will forgive us for being worried about our necks—

GHIYAS-UD-DIN: You don't need to worry. I have got the Sultan's letter with me—and the ring he sent as a mark of recognition. (*Shows the ring.*) I know there are no precious stones in it. But that would have attracted too much attention.

AZIZ: The Sultan is a wise man. But Your Worship has no friends or acquaintances in Daulatabad?

GHIYAS-UD-DIN (*irritated*): You ask too many questions for a slave. No, no friends there. You just hold your tongue and follow me.

(*Aziz laughs. Ghiyas-ud-din looks at him, suddenly suspicious. Aziz bursts into loud laughter and jumps up.*)

AZIZ: Caught him, Aazam! He fell into my trap like a mouse. This is the goods, Aazam, this is it! I had heard he was

here—without a paisa on him but boasting of his good fortune—

GHIYAS-UD-DIN: What do you mean?

AZIZ: In five minutes, you won't need to know any meanings.

AAZAM (*frightened*): Don't kill him, Aziz, please don't! He's the Khalif's grandson—

GHIYAS-UD-DIN (*frightened*): Kill me? But why? What'll you gain by killing me? I've nothing—you know that—I'll get nothing till I reach Daulatabad—I'm a poor man. Why kill me?

AAZAM: He is right, Aziz.

GHIYAS-UD-DIN: It's the truth, I swear. That's how I've come here alive—no one could get anything out of me. What do you want from me? Look, if you come with me to Daulatabad, I'll see you'll get something too—

AZIZ: I am not going with you. I am going in your place.

AAZAM: Aziz, listen—

AZIZ: Shut up! Don't waste your breath! We'll never get an opportunity like this again. Arabia must be full of the Khalif's descendants. They were a fertile lot, the Khalifs. Now the Sultan's picked this rat up from the gutters for some game of his own. Who will worry about this fool when people are dying without food in Daulatabad? Get out now. Get out. You'll just make things worse.

(*Aazam goes out.*)

GHIYAS-UD-DIN: Don't kill me, please, I'll kiss your feet. Take everything—my ring, letters, everything. I'll go back. I'll go back to my village. I won't bother you. Please don't kill me. I'll kiss your feet. Please let me go. (*Embraces his legs.*)

AZIZ: No!

GHIYAS-UD-DIN: No? No! No! I knew it. I knew something like this would happen. It was too good to be true—to grow up in filth, live in filth—and then a letter from nowhere. A hope—a ray of light. Now my fate will change,

I thought, now I'll be happy. Now things will start afresh. So I started. But I knew it was too good—good things don't come like that—they don't stay—

(*He gives Aziz a sudden push. Aziz falls down on the floor. Ghiyas-ud-din runs out.*)

AZIZ (*shouts without getting up*): Stop him, Aazam. Stop him.

(*Jumps up and runs out. Noise of a scuffle.*)

AZIZ (*off-stage*): That's it, Aazam! Bravo!

GHIYAS-UD-DIN (*off-stage*): Don't kill me, please.

(*A scream. Then silence. Aazam comes in running. He is covered with blood. He is sweating, trembling and weeping. After a while Aziz comes in, with Ghiyas-ud-din's turban on his head.*)

AZIZ: Why are you crying, you clown?

AAZAM: Don't talk to me—God! God! Why did I stop him? Why didn't I let him go?

(*Aziz opens Ghiyas-ud-din's bundle.*)

AZIZ: You are a funny creature. You have seen enough corpses to last you seven lives. You have stuffed them with straw, practised obscenities on them. And still you can't see a man die. (*Takes out a robe and puts it on.*) How do I look, eh? The great-grandson of the Khalif!

(*Aazam looks away. Aziz slaps him on the back.*)

Laugh, you fool, laugh. Celebrate! What are you crying for? Look, look at the palace doors. They are opening for us. Dance, dance, you son of an ass—

(*Sings.*)

Grandson of the Khalif! Great grandson of the Khalif! Great-great-great-grandson of the Khalif!

(*Sings and dances in a circle, clapping his hands. Aziz looks at him angrily. Then slowly his face breaks into a smile and soon he is laughing.*)

SCENE TEN

THE PALACE. *Muhammad is looking out of the window. The Step-Mother comes in.*

STEP-MOTHER: Muhammad, do you know what's happening outside?

MUHAMMAD: Yes.

STEP-MOTHER: Why are you doing it?

MUHAMMAD: What else can I do? I said the new copper coins would have the same value as the silver dinar. Now I can't go against my own orders.

STEP-MOTHER: But this is sheer folly! The Vizier says there are five hundred carts out there and they are all full of counterfeit coins. Are you going to exchange them all for silver?

MUHAMMAD: There's nothing else for it. I should have expected this but didn't—that was my fault. If I don't withdraw the coins now, the whole economy will be in shambles. It's in a bad enough state already.

STEP-MOTHER: Five hundred carts on the first day! And what about tomorrow and the day after? You are just legalizing robbery—

MUHAMMAD: It's all their wealth. I can't let my whim ruin them.

STEP-MOTHER: And how is a treasury full of counterfeit coins going to help them? Will that revive your economy?

MUHAMMAD: Don't worry, Mother. The coins aren't going into the treasury. They'll all be heaped in the new rose garden.

STEP-MOTHER: What's the matter with you? You spent years planning that rose garden and now—

MUHAMMAD: Now I don't need a rose garden. I built it because I wanted to make for myself an image of Sadi's poems. I wanted every rose in it to be a poem. I wanted every thorn in it to prick and quicken the senses. But I don't need these airy trappings now; a funeral needs no separate symbol.

STEP-MOTHER: Then why don't you stop the funeral? Why this unending line of corpses? Muhammad, I have been hearing rumours lately. The Amirs and Khans are apparently getting upset because you are hounding them about Najib.

MUHAMMAD: I am not hounding them. I merely want to find out who murdered Najib.

STEP-MOTHER: Is it true five of them have fled?

MUHAMMAD: Not five—four. The fifth committed suicide. Amir Jalal-ud-din.

STEP-MOTHER: Oh God!

MUHAMMAD: He told his wife he knew who had killed Najib. One of his servants overheard the conversation.

STEP-MOTHER (*alarmed*): Please, don't go on like this. Please. Najib's dead. Finished. You can't drive the nobles to rebellion for his sake?

MUHAMMAD: Don't you think it strange that an Amir like Jalal-ud-din should kill himself in order to save the murderer? It must be someone very special.

STEP-MOTHER: I'm glad Najib's dead. He was leading you astray. It's because you wouldn't trust anyone as much as him that the kingdom's in this state! The Ulema are against you; the noblemen are against you; the people hate you. It's all his fault. I'm glad he's dead. He should have died a long time ago.

MUHAMMAD: Najib wasn't loyal to me; he was loyal to the throne. The day he turned against me I would have known I'd made a mistake.

STEP-MOTHER: Why not forget him? What good is it to the throne—

MUHAMMAD: I must know who killed him and why.

STEP-MOTHER: Muhammad, how long are you going to torment yourself like this?

MUHAMMAD: Not for long. The Amirs will return. If they don't, I'll be sorry for their families.

STEP-MOTHER: You frighten me, Muhammad, you really do. Please stop this. Muhammad—please—for my sake.

(*No reply.*)

Won't you? I appeal to you.

(*No reply.*)

All right. I killed him. I had him murdered.

MUHAMMAD (*exploding*): For God's sake, don't joke about it! And don't try to be noble and save me from the moronic Amirs and Khans. This isn't a small thing.

STEP-MOTHER: I am perfectly serious. I had him poisoned.

MUHAMMAD: Stop it! Why are you tormenting me now? Don't you see how you're burning out my guts with your infantile dramatics?

STEP-MOTHER: Why shouldn't I have killed him? It was easier than killing one's father or brother. It was better than killing Sheikh Imam-ud-din.

MUHAMMAD: I killed them—yes—but I killed them for an ideal. Don't I know its results? Don't you think I've suffered from the curse? My mother won't speak to me—I can't even look into a mirror for fear of seeing their faces in it. I had only three friends in the world—you, Najib and Barani. And now you want me to believe you killed Najib. Why are you doing this to me?

STEP-MOTHER: It's only seven years ago that you came to the throne. How glorious you were then, how idealistic, how full of hopes. Look at your kingdom now. It's become a

kitchen of death—all because of him. I couldn't bear it any longer.

MUHAMMAD: But you don't know that for the past few months he had been advising me against violence, do you? He wanted me to hold back my sword for the stability of the throne.

STEP-MOTHER: Then why didn't you?

MUHAMMAD: Because I couldn't. Not now. Remember Shihab-ud-din of Sampanshahr? He was the first man I killed with my own hands. And I had a glimmer then of what now I know only too well. Not words but the sword—that's all I have to keep my faith in my mission. Why should Najib be sacrificed for that?

STEP-MOTHER: You had your share of futile deaths. I have mine now.

MUHAMMAD (*shouting*): No, they were not futile. They gave me what I wanted—power, strength to shape my thoughts, strength to act. Strength to recognize myself. What did your little murder give you?

(*Suddenly freezes. Stares at her. Then quietly.*)

Woman, woman, so you are also one of them! So that's what you too wanted! Mother is annoyed she can't control me. And now you too are trying the same game, aren't you? Get rid of Najib, so you could control me?

STEP-MOTHER: I want nothing for myself. You are my life, Muhammad. You know that. If I had wanted power, I wouldn't have confessed.

MUHAMMAD: You needn't have confessed. I would have found out on my own. Or else, the Amirs would have rebelled. And then, what power? Clever you. You thought I wouldn't punish you, didn't you? Because I love you more than I have loved anyone in my life. That was the price of your love, wasn't it? (*Suddenly in agony.*) Mother! Why did you have to do it?

STEP-MOTHER (*puts her hand on his shoulder*): Listen to me—

MUHAMMAD: Don't touch me! There's only one punishment for treachery—death!

(*Claps twice.*)

STEP-MOTHER: Don't be a fool, Muhammad. I'm telling you for your own sake. My death won't make you happy. You have enough ghosts to haunt you. Don't add mine to it.

MUHAMMAD: The others died unjustly. You deserve to die—

(*Two soldiers enter.*)

You are worse than an adulteress. But I can't think of a worse punishment for you. Take her to prison.

(*The Step-Mother stands petrified. The soldiers are also baffled.*)

(*Screaming.*) Take her away!

(*The soldiers hold her. She tries to break away.*)

Tell the Nayab Vizier I want her stoned to death publicly tomorrow morning.

STEP-MOTHER (*finding her voice*): Not that, Muhammad, don't do that to me—please.

MUHAMMAD: That's how an adulteress dies. Take her away.

STEP-MOTHER: Muhammad, please—

(*She is dragged away. Muhammad stands looking stunned. Then suddenly he falls to his knees and clutches his hands to his breast.*)

MUHAMMAD: God, God in Heaven, please help me. Please, don't let go of my hand. My skin drips with blood and I don't know how much of it is mine and how much of others. I started in Your path, Lord, why am I wandering naked in this desert now? I started in search of You. Why am I become a pig rolling in this gory mud? Raise me. Clean me. Cover me with Your Infinite Mercy. I can only clutch at the hem of Your cloak with my bloody fingers

and plead. I can only beg—have pity on me. I have no one but You now. Only You. Only You… You… You… You…

(*Enter Barani.*)

BARANI: In the name…

(*Stops. Muhammad raises his head.*)

MUHAMMAD: Come in, Barani. You've come at the right moment. You have saved me from treason, you know. I was trying to pray! Think of that—no one in my kingdom is allowed to pray and I was praying. Against my own orders! But what else could I do, Barani? My legs couldn't hold me up any longer.

BARANI (*smiles*): You needn't worry, Your Majesty. I'm here because I insisted on bringing the joyful tidings myself—

MUHAMMAD: Joy? It's such a long time since I heard that word.

BARANI: We have just received a letter from your Governor. The good news is that we can all pray now, Your Majesty.

MUHAMMAD: What's the use? I was trying to pray—but I could only find words learnt by rote, which left no echo in the heart. I am teetering on the brink of madness, Barani, but the madness of God still eludes me. (*Shouting.*) And why should I deserve that madness? I have condemned my mother to death and I'm not even sure she was guilty of the crime…

ANNOUNCER: Attention! Attention! Muhammad Tughlaq who craves only for the mercy of Allah and for the blessings of the Khalifs, hereby announces that His Worship Ghiyas-ud-din Muhammad, son of His Worship Abdul Kahir, grandson of His Worship Yusuf, great-grandson of His Worship Abdul Aziz, great-great-grandson of His Imperial Holiness Abbasid Al-Mustansir, the Khalif of Baghdad, will bless and purify Daulatabad by arriving here tomorrow afternoon. And Muhammad is sure that the citizens of this city will collect in large numbers to welcome this Saviour.

This is a holy day for us—a day of joy! And its glory will be crowned by the fact that the Public Prayer, which has been mute in our land these five years, will be started again from next Friday. Henceforth every Muslim shall pray five times a day as enjoined by the Holy Koran and declare himself a Faithful Slave of the Lord. Attention! Attention!

SCENE ELEVEN

A PLAIN OUTSIDE the fort of Daulatabad. Crowds of citizens.

FIRST MAN: Prayer! Prayer! Who wants prayers now?
SECOND MAN: Ask them to give us some food.
FIRST MAN: There's no food. Food's only in the palace. It's prayers for us.
SECOND MAN: The Amirs have food.
FIRST MAN: We starve and they want us to pray. They want to save our souls.
THIRD MAN: Is it true the Sultan has opened up his granary?
SECOND MAN: There was not a grain in it! Not a skin of paddy.
FIRST MAN: And they want us to pray.
THIRD MAN: The other day my younger brother came here from our village. He says it's much worse there. We are better off here, he says. They have to pay twenty grains of silver for a fistful of wheat. And the scenes he saw on his way here! Ugh!
SECOND MAN (*getting annoyed*): Hm…
THIRD MAN: He says the roads are lined with skeletons. A man starved to death right in front of his eyes. In Doab, people are eating barks off the trees, he says. Yes, and women have to make do with skins of dead horses.
SECOND MAN: Shut up.
THIRD MAN: In Baran—that's where Barani, the Sultan's friend, comes from you know—they have to eat burnt strips of skin, he says. No one knows what animals—
SECOND MAN: Why don't you shut up?
(The crowd listens, tensely.)
THIRD MAN: He says we are much better off here. Not them. On his way here he saw people crowding round a butcher's

shop. You know why? To catch the blood spurting from the slaughtered beasts and drink it!
SECOND MAN: Shut up, you butcher—
(*He attacks the third man. There's a fight. The second man throws the third man down, sits on his chest and beats him. He is crying even as he beats. The others watch.*)
FIRST MAN: Why do they need prayer?
(*Music and the announcers are heard from the two sides of the stage.*)
ANNOUNCER I: Attention! Attention! The Slave of the Lord, the Upholder of the Word of the Prophet—may peace be upon him—the Friend of the Khalif, the Faithful, Muhammad Tughlaq—
ANNOUNCER II: Attention! Attention! The Protector of the Faith, the Descendant of the Holy Khalif al-Mustansir, Amir-ul-Mominin Ghiyas-ud-din Muhammad—
(*Aziz, Aazam and their entourage enter from one side. Exactly at the same moment, Muhammad and his entourage step down from the fort. There is tense silence. Muhammad stares at Aziz as though he is not quite sure what is happening. The Hindu woman of Scene Seven steps out of the crowd and stares at Aziz. Her husband pulls her back. Muhammad steps forward and embraces Aziz.*)
MUHAMMAD: Welcome to our city, Your Holiness, welcome to our poor land. My kingdom rejoices at the arrival of your gracious presence. We have waited for years for this joyful moment. Our streets have waited in silence for the moment when the call to the holy prayer will echo through in them again. And each year has been a century. We have waited long, Your Holiness, and our sins have become shadows that entwine round our feet. They have become our dumbness and deprived us of prayer. They have become the fiery sun and burnt up our crops. Now the

moment has come for me and my people to rejoice. Only you can save me now, Your Holiness, only the dust of your feet on my head can save me now—

(*Falls to his feet. The crowd gasps. Then everyone kneels.*)

AZIZ: Amen.

(*Muhammad gets up. They embrace again. They depart to the accompaniment of the announcements.*)

HINDU WOMAN: It's him! It's him—

THIRD MAN: Who?

HINDU WOMAN: He killed my child! Those eyes—I'll never forget them—he killed my child ... (*Screams.*) He killed my child ... (*Keeps on screaming.*)

FIRST MAN: What's it?

SECOND MAN: I didn't hear. Something about a child—

ANOTHER MAN: She says someone killed her child—

FIRST MAN: Who killed the child?

SECOND MAN: I didn't hear properly. Probably the Sultan—

FIRST MAN: Who else will kill her child?

THIRD MAN: It's murder, that's what it is. To ask us to live without food. My daughter died without food. She was murdered.

FIRST MAN: How long are we going to starve like this?

SECOND MAN: Just a fistful of rice—a piece of meat would be enough—

FIRST MAN: We don't want any prayer. We want food—

SEVERAL VOICES: Yes, food—we want food—not prayers—

A SOLDIER: Quiet! Quiet!

FIRST MAN (*shouting*): Kill us, kill us. Don't starve us to death. Kill us quickly...

SECOND MAN: They'll kill us, will they? Let's see who kills whom? Bring them down.

ALL: Bring him down—let's see—So they'll give us poison instead of food, will they? Kill him—kill him—Show him what we can do—

(*Confusion. Some of them mob the soldier and beat him. A group of soldiers arrives and starts beating them, ordering them to keep quiet. The riots begin.*)

SCENE TWELVE

THE PALACE. Aziz is eating some fruit. Aazam enters.

AAZAM: Aziz—

AZIZ: Shut up! I've told you not to call me by that name.

AAZAM: I'm fed up of these games, Aziz, I'm going.

AZIZ: Going? Where?

AAZAM: I don't know. But I've bribed two servants of the palace. They are to bring two horses. They'll be here with the horses inside of half an hour. So hurry up.

AZIZ: Fool, now you've probably made them suspicious. I've told you a hundred times nothing can happen to us here. You're asking for the butcher's block.

AAZAM: Have you seen the city? The people are like mad dogs. They have been screaming, burning houses, killing and marauding for a whole week now. Have you ever stepped out of the palace?

AZIZ: Of course not.

AAZAM: I have. Twice.

AZIZ: Twice! Is your skull filled with dung? Twice! How did you go out?

AAZAM: There's a secret passage. I discovered it the day we came here. I have been through it. Twice. And do you know what the city is like? In the northern part, the houses are like forts, the streets narrow as the little finger. And they are choked with dead bodies. Corpses and flies. It stank so much I almost fainted—I can't stand it any longer, Aziz. Today the people are a little quieter. They are tired; besides, they have to dispose of the bodies. Tomorrow they'll start again…

AZIZ: Now look. Why don't you think? Just once—once in your lifetime? How do you know the servants won't betray you? Listen to me. Stay in the palace. It's the safest place now.

AAZAM: Safe? This palace? Ha! The Sultan's mad. How can you trust him? Don't you know how he can slaughter people? How can you trust this lord of skins? It's better to trust servants. Listen. You know there are those heaps of counterfeit coins in the garden outside my window?

AZIZ: I hope they haven't scared you. After all, quite a lot of them are our handiwork.

AAZAM: On the night we came here, I was so nervous I couldn't sleep. So I was standing by the window, looking at those heaps. They looked like giant ant-hills in the moonlight. Suddenly I saw a shadow moving among them. I stared. It was a man wandering alone in the garden. He went to a heap, stood there for half an hour, still as a rock. Then he dug into the heaps with his fists, raised his fists and let the coins trickle out. It was frightening. And you know who it was? Your Sultan. He does that every night—every single night—it's like witchcraft—

AZIZ: So you are running away because the Sultan has insomnia? What about all that you were hoping to achieve? And what happens to me if you go? How will Ghiyas-ud-din Abbasid explain the disappearance of his disciple?

AAZAM: You come with me too, Aziz. I can't go alone. I've tied all our presents in a bundle. It's a huge bundle. Will last us for ever. You are a clever man, Aziz. I know I am a fool. I can't survive without you… It's time. The horses will probably have come. Let's go. Come on…

AZIZ: I order you to stay, Aazam.

AAZAM: I can't. I can't. I'll die of fright here.

AZIZ: All right then. Go. Get out, you traitor.

AAZAM: What else can I do? I wish you would come too. Look. We'll forget all this wealth, these courts, this luxury and live in peace. Please come… please, Aziz, I'll kiss your feet—

(*No reply.*)

I'm going, Aziz…

(*No reply.*)

Good-bye.

(*Goes out.*)

AZIZ: Idiot!

SCENE THIRTEEN

ANOTHER PART OF the Palace. Muhammad and Barani.

MUHAMMAD: May I know why, Barani?

BARANI: It's as I said. Your Majesty, I have just received a letter from Baran and it says my mother's dead. I couldn't be by her side in the last moments of her life. I must be there at least for her funeral.

MUHAMMAD: What did she die of, do you know?

BARANI: I don't know, Your Majesty. The letter didn't say anything more.

MUHAMMAD: I see. (*Pause.*) And you will return to the Court after the funeral, won't you?

BARANI (*evasive*): I don't know, Your Majesty.

MUHAMMAD: If you are only going for the funeral, why shouldn't you be able to come back?

BARANI (*desperately*): I don't know.

MUHAMMAD: Don't you? Because I do. She died in the riots, didn't she, when my soldiers butchered everyone in sight—old men, women, children, everyone? So you see, even I know what is happening in my kingdom. I may be responsible for that massacre, I accept. But have I really fallen so low that even you have to lie to me?

BARANI (*almost crying*): I don't know. I don't know. Please don't ask me. I beg of you.

(*Silence. A soldier enters running.*)

SOLDIER: In the name of Allah. A terrible thing—Your Majesty, I don't know how to—

MUHAMMAD: What is it now?

SOLDIER: Your Majesty, Aazam Jahan, the friend of His Holiness Ghiyas-ud-din Abbasid, is dead.

BARANI: Dead?

SOLDIER: Murdered, Your Majesty. I was on sentry duty at the mouth of the secret tunnel from the palace. I heard a scream. I ran to the spot. It was Aazam Jahan. He was lying in a pool of blood.

BARANI: Heaven have mercy on us!

MUHAMMAD: Was anyone else there?

SOLDIER: Two horsemen, Your Majesty. They had a big bundle with them. But before I could even shout, they were gone. I didn't even see their faces—

MUHAMMAD: Did he say anything before he died?

SOLDIER: No, Your Majesty. He was alive for a while. When I went near I thought—I thought—

MUHAMMAD: Yes?

SOLDIER: I thought he was laughing—giggling. But of course it could be just—his dying breath—

(*There is a long silence. Muhammad stares at the soldier, stunned and incredulous.*)

MUHAMMAD: Not a word of this to anyone. Not even to His Holiness Ghiyas-ud-din Abbasid. No one in the palace must know. You understand?

SOLDIER: Yes, Your Majesty.

MUHAMMAD: Go back to your place. And ask the doorman to fetch His Holiness—at once.

SOLDIER: Yes, Your Majesty.

(*Goes out.*)

MUHAMMAD (*almost to himself*): Don't you think it absurd that a man who has just come from Arabia should prefer the bloody streets to the palace?

BARANI: But I don't understand, Your Majesty, I can't understand how—

MUHAMMAD: You wanted to see history form in front of your eyes, didn't you? Just wait a few moments, and you'll see not just the form but the coiled intestines of it.

BARANI (*wounded*): Your Majesty is a learned man and has every right to laugh at a poor fool like me. But I implore Your Majesty to understand I am not going because my life here has been futile. I have spent seven years in your presence and the greatest historians of the world would have given half their lives to see a year in it. Your Majesty has given me a gift—

MUHAMMAD: Must there be a farewell speech before you go? You want to go. Go. That's all there is to it.

(*Silence.*)

BARANI (*suddenly remembering*): But the public prayer! It's to start within half-an-hour! It wouldn't be right to start it when the palace is in mourning. Your Majesty must—

MUHAMMAD: No, no, no! This is the first public prayer in my kingdom after a silence of five years! We are praying because a holy man like Ghiyas-ud-din Abbasid has come to our land and blessed us! We can't let anything stop that! (*Laughs.*) Oh Barani, Najib should have been here now. He would have loved this farce.

(*Aziz enters with soldiers. Barani and Muhammad bow. The soldiers bow and retire.*)

AZIZ (*blessing them*): May Heaven guide Your Majesty.

MUHAMMAD: I hope Your Holiness is well.

AZIZ: Who would have grounds for complaint when the generosity of Your Majesty looks after him?

MUHAMMAD: I hope Your Holiness has not been too inconvenienced by the riots. I was busy and couldn't attend to your needs personally. And now that I see you, I stand a bearer of evil tidings. We have just received some tragic news. (*Pause.*) Aazam Jahan's body has been found outside the palace. He was murdered.

AZIZ: May Allah save our souls. What's happening to this world? What's Man coming to if even an innocent like Aazam Jahan isn't to be spared the sword?

MUHAMMAD: Who are you?
(*Silence. For a moment no one speaks. Aziz is obviously frightened.*)
Who are you? How long did you hope to go on fooling us with your masquerade?
BARANI: But Your Majesty—
MUHAMMAD: Answer me. Don't make me lose my temper.
AZIZ: I am a dhobi from Shiknar. My first name was Aziz. There have been many others since then.
BARANI: But—what about His Holiness?
MUHAMMAD: Do you know the punishment for killing a saint like Ghiyas-ud-din Abbasid? And for deceiving me and my subjects?
AZIZ (*bolder*): No, Your Majesty, though I have never underestimated Your Majesty's powers of imagination. But it would be a gross injustice if I were punished, Your Majesty.
BARANI: What's happening here?
AZIZ: 'Saint' is a word more appropriate for people like Sheikh Imam-ud-din. I doubt if Your Majesty would have used it for Ghiyas-ud-din Abbasid. I know I am a dhobi and he was a descendant of the Khalif. But surely Your Majesty has never associated greatness with pedigree.
MUHAMMAD: Be careful, dhobi. Don't overreach yourself.
AZIZ: I daren't. But may I say that since Your Majesty came to the throne, I have been your most devout servant? I have studied every order, followed every instruction, considered every measure of Your Majesty's with the greatest attention. I insist I am Your Majesty's true disciple.
MUHAMMAD: Don't try to flatter me. I am accustomed to it.
AZIZ: It's hardly flattering you, Your Majesty, to say I am your disciple. But I have watched Your Majesty try to explain your ideas and acts to the people. And I have seen with regret how few have understood them.

BARANI (*who is just beginning to comprehend*): Your Majesty, this scoundrel is trying to spread a net of words around you. It's dangerous even to talk to him. He must be punished forthwith.
AZIZ: Come, sir, let's be sensible. You know His Majesty will never do that to me.
MUHAMMAD: Won't I?
AZIZ: Forgive me. But Your Majesty has publicly welcomed me as a saint, started the public prayers after a lapse of five years in my honour, called me a Saviour. Your Majesty has even—forgive me for pointing it out, I wasn't responsible for it—fallen at my feet, publicly.
BARANI: Villain—
AZIZ: But I am not a common blackmailer, Your Majesty. I stand here on the strength of my convictions and my loyalty to you.
MUHAMMAD: What do you want to say?
AZIZ: I was a poor starving dhobi, when Your Majesty came to the throne and declared the brotherhood of all religions. Does the Sultan remember the Brahmin who brought a case against him and won? I was that Brahmin.
MUHAMMAD: Was the disguise necessary?
AZIZ: I believe so. (*Pause.*) Soon after that Your Majesty introduced the new copper currency. I succumbed to its temptation.
BARANI: God... God...
AZIZ: There was enough money in that business, but too much competition. Soon it became unprofitable, so we took the silver dinars and went to Doab and bought some land there for farming.
BARANI: But this is nonsense! There has been famine there for five years...
MUHAMMAD: That's exactly his point. They got the land dirt-cheap and collected the State subsidy for farmers. When

they were discovered, they ran into the hills and became robbers. (*With mock humility to Aziz.*) Am I right?

AZIZ: Dare I contradict what the whole world knows about His Majesty's acumen? But Your Majesty missed out an important stage in my life. Your officers track down criminals with the zest of a tribe of hunters and there was only one way to escape them. We joined them. We had to shift the corpses of all the rebels executed by the State and hang them up for exhibition.

Such famous kings, warriors and leaders of men passed through our hands then! Beautiful strong bodies and bodies eaten-up by corruption—all, all were stuffed with straw and went up to the top of the poles.

One day, suddenly, I had a revelation. This was all human life was worth, I said. This was the real meaning of the mystery of death—straw and skin! With that enlightenment, I found Peace. We left the camp and headed for the hills.

MUHAMMAD: Yes, that was a rather important stage.

AZIZ: One day I heard about a beggar who claimed to be Ghiyas-ud-din Abbasid and was on his way to the capital—I couldn't resist the temptation of seeing my master in person. I admit I killed Ghiyas-ud-din and cheated you. Yet I am Your Majesty's true disciple. I ask you, Your Majesty, which other man in India has spent five years of his life fitting every act, deed and thought to His Majesty's words?

BARANI: This man should be buried alive this minute!

AZIZ: I only acted according to His Majesty's edicts.

MUHAMMAD (*exploding*): Hold your tongue, fool! You dare pass judgement on me? You think your tongue is so light and swift that you can trap me by your stupid clowning? Let's see how well it wags when hanging from the top of a pole. I haven't cared for the bravest and wisest of men—

you think I would succumb to you, a dhobi, masquerading as a saint?

AZIZ (*quietly*): What if I am a dhobi, Your Majesty? When it comes to washing away filth, no saint is a match for a dhobi.

(*Muhammad suddenly bursts into a guffaw. There is a slight hysterical tinge to the laughter.*)

MUHAMMAD (*laughing*): Checkmate! Checkmate! I don't think I have ever seen such insolence. This man's a genius—all right, tell me. What punishment should I mete out to you for your crimes?

AZIZ: Make me an officer of your State, Your Majesty.

MUHAMMAD: That would be punishing myself—not you.

AZIZ: All these years I have been a beggar, wasting my life, and I'm not proud of that. I beg Your Majesty to give me a chance to show my loyalty. I'm ready to die for my Sultan.

MUHAMMAD: I don't know why I am acting like a fool. Yet perhaps a State office really would be the best punishment for you. You'll have to return to Arabia after Aazam Jahan's funeral, and disappear on the way. Can you do it?

AZIZ: It certainly won't be the first time I've done that.

MUHAMMAD: Good, then go to the Deccan. I'll give you a letter for Khusrau Malik appointing you as an officer under him. He'll look after you.

AZIZ: What can I say? How can I express my gratitude? In the name of the Prophet—may peace be upon him, I swear—

MUHAMMAD: Don't overdo it. It's time for the prayer. Remember, you are still His Holiness Ghiyas-ud-din Abbasid and you have to be there to lead the prayer. Be off now.

AZIZ: Your Majesty's most faithful servant.

(*Bows and retires. Muhammad slowly moves to the throne. He looks tired, dispirited. There is silence for a while. Barani can't contain himself any longer.*)

BARANI: But why? Why?

MUHAMMAD: All your life you wait for someone who understands you. And then—you meet him—punishment for wanting too much! … As he said, 'One day suddenly I had a revelation'.

BARANI: By all the history I know, I swear he'll stab you in the back. This is sheer folly. He is a ruthless scoundrel and Your Majesty knows he won't keep trust. Once he has power in the Deccan, his ambition will know no barriers. He is bound to find unlimited scope for his villainy there. He is bound to rebel against the Sultan. How can you not see that, Your Majesty?

MUHAMMAD: I forgave Ain-ul-Mulk once and you were on my side then.

BARANI: But how can one mention Ain-ul-Mulk in the same breath as this rascal?

MUHAMMAD: Last week I received a letter from Ain-ul-Mulk. He has invited me and my subjects to his capital to stay there until the famine here subsides.

BARANI: He is a great man, a great friend of yours—

MUHAMMAD: A friend? How are you so sure it's his friendship that invites us to his capital? You know that, since the day he killed Sheikh Imam-ud-din, he has lost his hold on people. His maulvis won't support him, his people don't trust him. He needs my support now. How do you know he isn't inviting me to strengthen himself?

BARANI: Then … Your Majesty isn't accepting the invitation?

MUHAMMAD: There is only one place to go back to now. Delhi. Back to Delhi, Barani, I have to get back to Delhi with my people.

BARANI: But why—why are you doing this to yourself and your people? Your subjects starve for you—struggle for you—die for you—and you honour this murderer? What's the logic in it? It's criminals like him that deserve to die.

Death would be too simple a punishment for him. It wouldn't be enough if you flogged the skin off his back. It wouldn't be enough if you had his tongue pulled out. It wouldn't even be enough if you had him put in a sack and tied to a running horse—

MUHAMMAD: Bravo! I doubt if even that dhobi could have thought of so many tortures—

(*Barani shudders as though he were slapped in the face.*)

If justice were as simple as you think or logic as beautiful as I had hoped, life would have been so much clearer. I have been chasing these words now for five years and now I don't know if I am pursuing a mirage or fleeing a shadow. Anyway, what do all these subtle distinctions matter in the blinding madness of the day? Sweep your logic away into a corner, Barani, all I need now is myself and my madness—madness to prance in a field eaten bare by the scarecrow of violence. But I am not alone, Barani. Thank Heaven! For once I am not alone. I have a companion to share my insanity now—the Omnipotent God! (*Tired.*) When you pass your final judgement on me, don't forget Him.

BARANI: Who am I to pass judgement on you, Your Majesty? I have to judge myself now and that's why I must go and go immediately. I am terrified when I think of all the tortures I recommended only a moment ago. I am a weak man, Your Majesty. I don't have your strength to play with violence and yet not be sucked in by it. Your Majesty warned me when I slipped and I am grateful for that. I ask Your Majesty's permission to go while I'm still safe.

(*Waits for an answer. There's no answer. Muhammad is sitting on the throne with his eyes closed.*)

Your Majesty—

(*No answer.*)

Your Majesty—

MUHAMMAD (*opening his eyes*): Yes?

BARANI: Is Your Majesty not feeling well?

MUHAMMAD: I am suddenly feeling tired. And sleepy. For five years sleep had avoided me and now suddenly it's flooding back. Go, Barani. But before you go—pray for us.

(*Closes his eyes again. Barani bows and exits, obviously in tears. There is silence on the stage for a while, and then a servant comes in.*)

SERVANT: In the name of...

(*He sees that Muhammad is asleep and goes out. Muhammad's head falls forward on his chest in deep sleep. The servant re-enters with a shawl which he carefully wraps round the Sultan. He is about to go out when the Muezzin's call to prayer is heard. The servant turns to wake the Sultan, then after a pause, goes out without doing so.*)

MUEZZIN (*off-stage*): Alla-Ho-Akbar! Alla-Ho-Akbar!
Alla-Ho-Akbar! Alla-Ho-Akbar!
Ashahado La Elaha Illilah
Ashahado La Elaha Illilah
Ashahado Anna Muhammadur Rasool Illah
Ashahado Anna Muhammadur Rasool Illah
Haiyah Alis Salaat—Haiyah Alis Salaat
Haiyah Salil Falaa—Haiyah Salil Falaa
Alla-Ho-Akbar! Alla-Ho-Akbar!
La Elaha Illilah...

(*As the Muezzin's call fades away, Muhammad suddenly opens his eyes. He looks around, dazed and frightened, as though he can't comprehend where he is.*)