

CHAPTER I

ABÚ SA'ÍD IBN ABI 'L-KHAYR

ABÚ SA'ÍD and Omar Khayyam are associated in the history of Persian literature by the circumstance that each of them is the reputed author of a famous collection of *rubá' iyyát* in which his individuality has almost disappeared. That these collections are wholly, or even mainly, the work of Abú Sa'íd and Omar no one who examines the evidence is likely to assert: they should rather be regarded as anthologies—of which the nucleus, perhaps, was formed by the two authors in question—containing poems of a particular type composed at various periods by many different hands. It is possible, no doubt, that Omar's view of life and his general cast of thought are more or less reflected in the quatrains attributed to him, but we can learn from them nothing definite and distinctive. The same considerations apply with equal force to the mystical *rubá'ís* passing under the name of Abú Sa'íd. In his case, however, we possess excellent and copious biographical materials which make us intimately acquainted with him and throw a welcome light on many aspects of contemporary Persian mysticism.

The oldest of these documents is a short treatise on his life and sayings, which is preserved in a manuscript of the British Museum (Or. 249). It bears neither title nor indication of authorship, but Zhukovski in his edition of the text (Petrograd, 1899) identifies it with the *Hálát ú Sukhúnán-i Shaykh Abú Sa'íd ibn Abi 'l-Khayr*, a work composed about a century after Abú Sa'íd's death by one of his descendants whose name is unknown. He was a cousin of Muḥammad ibnu 'l-Munawwar, the great-great-grandson of Abú Sa'íd.

Using the *Hálát ú Sukhúnán* as a foundation, Muḥammad ibnu 'l-Munawwar compiled a much larger biography of his ancestor which he entitled *Asráru 'l-tawḥíd fí maqámáti 'l-Shaykh Abi Sa'íd* (ed. by Zhukovski, Petrograd, 1899) and dedicated to the Ghúrid prince, Ghiyáthu'ddín Muḥammad

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ibn Sám (*ob.* A.D. 1203). The author, like Abú Sa'íd himself, was a native of Mayhana or Mihna in Khurásán. From his earliest youth it had been a labour of love for him to gather the sayings of the Saint and to verify the records and traditions which were handed down in his family and were still fresh in the minds of his fellow-townsmen. The task was undertaken not a moment too soon. In A.D. 1154 the Turcoman tribe of the Ghuzz swept over the borders of Khurásán and carried fire and sword through that flourishing province. Everywhere the population was massacred; the author tells us that 115 descendants of Abú Sa'íd, young and old, were tortured to death in Mayhana alone, and that no memorial of him was left except his tomb. Religion, he says, fell into utter ruin; the search after Truth ceased, unbelief became rampant; of Islam only the name, and of Şúfism only the form survived. Impelled by divine grace, he complied with the request of some novices that he should write an account of the spiritual experiences and memorable sayings of Shaykh Abú Sa'íd, for the encouragement of those who desired to enter upon the Path (*ṭarīqa*) and for the guidance of those who were travelling on the road of the Truth (*ḥaqīqa*)¹. Abú Sa'íd died in A.D. 1049, and the *Asyáru 'l-tawḥīd* was probably completed not less than 120 or more than 150 years later. As Zhukovski points out, it is almost the first example in Persian of a separate work having for its subject the life of an individual mystic. The portrait of Abú Sa'íd amidst the circle of Şúfís and dervishes in which he lived is drawn with extraordinary richness of detail, and gains in vividness as well as in value from the fact that a great part of the story is told by himself. Although the Mohammedan system of oral tradition by which these autobiographical passages have been preserved forbids us to suppose that we have before us an exact transcript of Abú Sa'íd's words as they were spoken to the original reporter, there is no reason to doubt that in most cases the substance of them is given correctly. His own veracity is not incontestable, but this question, which leads at once into the darkest abysses of psychology, I must leave in suspense.

¹ *Asyár*, 4, 16—6, 5.

The *Hálát ú Sukhunán* and the *Asráru 'l-tawhíd* render the more recent biographies of Abú Sa'íd all but superfluous¹. A certain amount of new material is found in the Supplement to Farídu'ddín 'Aṭṭár's *Tadhkiratu 'l-Awliyá* (vol. II of my edition, pp. 322–337) and Jámí's *Nafahátu 'l-Uns* (ed. by Nassau Lees, No. 366)².

For the sake of clearness, I have divided the following study into three sections, of which the first deals with the life of Abú Sa'íd, the second with his mystical sayings and doctrines, and the third with miracles and other matter belonging to his legend.

I.

Abú Sa'íd Faḍlu'llah was born at Mayhana, the chief town of the Kháwarán district of Khurásán, on the 1st of Muḥarram, A.H. 357 (December 7th, A.D. 967). His father Abu 'l-Khayr, known in Mayhana as Bábú Bu 'l-Khayr, was a druggist, “a pious and religious man, well acquainted with the sacred law of Islam (*sharí'a*) and with the Path of Şúfism (*ṭaríqa*)³.” He and other Şúfís were in the habit of meeting every night in the house of one of their number. Whenever a strange Şúfí arrived in the town, they would invite him to join them, and after partaking of food and finishing their prayers and devotions they used to listen to music and singing (*samá'*). One night, when Bábú Bu 'l-Khayr was going to meet his friends, his wife begged him to take Abú Sa'íd with him in order that the dervishes might look on him with favour; so Bu 'l-Khayr let the lad accompany him. As soon as it was time for the music to begin, the singer (*qawwál*) chanted this quatrain:

God gives the dervish love—and love is woe;
By dying near and dear to Him they grow.
The generous youth will freely yield his life,
The man of God cares naught for worldly show.

¹ In referring to these two works I shall use the abbreviations H = *Hálát* and A = *Asrár*. Since A includes almost the whole of H, I have usually given references to the former only.

² The oldest notice of Abú Sa'íd occurs in the *Kashf al-Mahjúb* of his contemporary, Hujwírí, who mentions him frequently in the course of that work. See especially pp. 164–6 of the translation.

³ A 13, 4.

On hearing this song the dervishes fell into ecstasy and kept up the dance till daybreak. The *qawwāl* sang the quatrain so often that Abú Sa'íd got it by heart. When he returned home, he asked his father the meaning of the verses that had thrown the dervishes into such transports of joy. "Hush!" said his father, "you cannot understand what they mean: what does it matter to you?" Afterwards, when Abú Sa'íd had attained to a high spiritual degree, he used sometimes to say of his father, who was then dead, "I want Bábú Bu 'l-Khayr to-day, to tell him that he himself did not know the meaning of what he heard on that night¹."

Abú Sa'íd was taught the first rudiments of Moslem education—to read the Koran—by Abú Muḥammad 'Ayyárí, an eminent divine, who is buried at Nasá². He learned grammar from Abú Sa'íd 'Ayyárí and the principles of Islam from Abu 'l-Qásim Bishr-i Yásín, both of Mayhana. The latter seems to have been a remarkable man.

I have already referred to the mystical quatrains which Abú Sa'íd was fond of quoting in his discourses and which are commonly thought to be his own. Against this hypothesis we have his definite statement that these quatrains were composed by other Şúfis and that Bishr-i Yásín was the author of most of them³. From Bishr, too, Abú Sa'íd learned the doctrine of disinterested love, which is the basis of Şúfism.

¹ A 13, 9.

² H 8, 10. A 14, 16.

³ H 54, 3. The following is a translation of the text as it stands in Zhukovski's edition: "Whenever I have addressed poetry to any one, that which falls from my lips is the composition of venerable Şúfis (*'azizán*), and most of it is by Shaykh Abu 'l-Qásim Bishr." I am not sure that instead of the first clause (ما هرگز شعر نگفته ایم) we ought not to read ما هرگز شعر نگفته ایم. The statement will then run: "I have never composed poetry. That which falls from my lips, etc." In another passage (A 263, 10) it is stated on the authority of the writer's grandfather (Abú Sa'íd's grandson) that of all the poetry attributed to Abú Sa'íd only one verse and one *rubá'i*, which are cited, were his own composition, the remainder being quoted from his spiritual directors. The credibility of this is not affected by the explanation that he was too absorbed in ecstasy to think about versifying. In addition to the single *rubá'i*, of which Abú Sa'íd is expressly named as the author, H and A contain twenty-six which he is said to have quoted on different occasions. Of the latter, two occur in Ethé's collection (Nos. 35 and 68).

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One day Abu 'l-Qásim Bishr-i Yásín (may God sanctify his honoured spirit!) said to me: "O Abú Sa'íd, endeavour to remove self-interest (*tama'*) from thy dealings with God. So long as that exists, sincerity (*ikhhlás*) cannot be attained. Devotions inspired by self-interest are work done for wages, but devotions inspired by sincerity are work done to serve God. Learn by heart the Tradition of the Prophet—*God said to me on the night of my Ascension, O Mohammed! as for those who would draw nigh to Me, their best means of drawing nigh is by performance of the obligations which I have laid upon them. My servant continually seeks to win My favour by works of supererogation until I love him; and when I love him, I am to him an ear and an eye and a hand and a helper: through Me he hears, and through Me he sees, and through Me he takes.*" Bishr explained that to perform obligations means "to serve God," while to do works of supererogation means "to love God"; then he recited these lines:

Perfect love proceeds from the lover who hopes naught for himself;
What is there to desire in that which has a price?

Certainly the Giver is better for you than the gift:

How should you want the gift, when you possess the very
Philosopher's Stone¹?

On another occasion Bishr taught his young pupil how to practise "recollection" (*dhikr*). "Do you wish," he asked him, "to talk with God?" "Yes, of course I do," said Abú Sa'íd. Bishr told him that whenever he was alone he must recite the following quatrain, no more and no less:

Without Thee, O Beloved, I cannot rest;
Thy goodness towards me I cannot reckon.
Tho' every hair on my body becomes a tongue,
A thousandth part of the thanks due to Thee I cannot tell.

Abú Sa'íd was constantly repeating these words. "By the blessing which they brought," he says, "the Way to God was opened to me in my childhood." Bishr died in A.H. 380 (A.D. 990). Whenever Abú Sa'íd went to the graveyard of Mayhana his first visit was always paid to the tomb of the venerated teacher who had given him his first lesson in Súfism².

¹ A 16, 9.² A 16, 20.

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Reynold A. Nicholson

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If we can believe Abú Sa'íd when he declares that in his youth he knew by heart 30,000 verses of pre-Islamic poetry, his knowledge of profane literature must have been extensive¹. After completing this branch of education, he set out for Merv with the purpose of studying theology under Abú 'Abdallah al-Ḥuṣṣrî, a pupil of the famous Sháfi'ite doctor, Ibn Surayj. He read with al-Ḥuṣṣrî for five years, and with Abú Bakr al-Qaffál for five more². From Merv he moved to Sarakhs, where he attended the lectures of Abú 'Alí Záhír³ on Koranic exegesis (in the morning), on systematic theology (at noon), and on the Traditions of the Prophet (in the afternoon)⁴.

Abú Sa'íd's birth and death are the only events of his life to which a precise date is attached. We know that he studied at Merv for ten years, and if we assume that his *Wanderjahre* began at the usual time, he was probably between 25 and 28 when he first came to Sarakhs. Here his conversion to Şúfism took place. He has described it himself in the following narrative, which I will now translate without abridgement. I have relegated to the foot of the page, and distinguished by means of square brackets, certain passages that interrupt the narrative and did not form part of it originally.

Abú Sa'íd said as follows⁵:

At the time when I was a student, I lived at Sarakhs and read with Abú 'Alí, the doctor of divinity. One day, as I was going into the city, I saw Luqmán of Sarakhs seated on an ash-heap near the gate, sewing a patch on his gaberdine^a. I went up to him and

^a [This Luqmán was one of the "intelligent madmen" (*uqald'u 'l-majánin*)⁶. At first he practised many austerities and was scrupulous in his devotions. Then of a sudden he experienced a revelation (*kaṣhf*) that deprived him of his reason. Abú Sa'íd said: "In the beginning Luqmán was a man learned

¹ H 8, 20. A 17, 16.

² H 9, 1. A 17, 18; 22, 6.

³ Died A.H. 389 (A.D. 999). See Subkî, *Ṭabaqátu 'l-Sháfi'iyya al-Kubrâ*, Cairo, A.H. 1324, II. 223. Yáqút, *Mu'jamu 'l-Buldán*, IV. 72, 12.

⁴ A 22, 14.

⁵ H 10, 14—12, 7. A 23, 6—26, 10. There is not much to choose between the two versions. I have generally preferred the latter, which adds some interesting details, although it is not quite so tersely and simply written.

⁶ Concerning this numerous class of Mohammedan mystics see Paul Loosen, *Die weisen Narren des Naisábürî* (Strassburg, 1912).

stood looking at him, while he continued to sew^b. As soon as he had sewn the patch on, he said, "O Abú Sa'íd! I have sewn thee on this gaberdine along with the patch." Then he rose and took my hand, leading me to the convent (*khánaqáh*) of the Súfís in Sarakhs, and shouted for Shaykh Abu 'l-Faḍl Ḥasan, who was within. When Abu 'l-Faḍl appeared, Luqmán placed my hand in his, saying, "O Abu 'l-Faḍl, watch over this young man, for he is one of you^c." The Shaykh took my hand and led me into the convent. I sat down in the portico and the Shaykh picked up a volume and began to peruse it. As is the way of scholars, I could not help wondering what the book was. The Shaykh perceived my thought. "Abú Sa'íd!" he said, "all the hundred and twenty-four thousand prophets were sent to preach one word. They bade the people say 'Allah' and devote themselves to Him. Those who heard this word with the ear alone, let it go out by the other ear; but those who heard it with their souls imprinted it on their souls and repeated it until it penetrated their hearts and souls, and their whole being became this word. They were made independent of the pronunciation of the word, they were released from the sound and the letters. Having understood the spiritual meaning of this word, they became so absorbed in it that they were no more conscious of their own non-existence¹." This saying took hold of me

in the law and pious, but afterwards he ceased to perform the duties of religion. When he was asked how this change had come to pass, he replied: "The more I served God, the more service was required of me. In my despair I cried, "O God! kings set free a slave when he grows old. Thou art the Almighty King. Set me free, for I have grown old in Thy service." I heard a voice that said, "Luqmán! I set thee free." The sign of his freedom was that his reason was taken away from him. Abú Sa'íd used often to say that Luqmán was one whom God had emancipated from his commandments.]

^b [Abú Sa'íd was standing in such a position that his shadow fell on Luqmán's gaberdine.]

^c [Shaykh Abu 'l-Faḍl was exceedingly venerable. When, after the death of Abu 'l-Faḍl, Abú Sa'íd became an adept in mysticism, he was asked what was the cause of his having attained to such a degree of perfection. He answered, "The cause was a look that Shaykh Abu 'l-Faḍl gave me. I was a student of theology under Shaykh Abú 'Alí. One day, when I was walking on the bank of a stream, Shaykh Abu 'l-Faḍl approached from the opposite direction and looked at me out of the corner of his eye. From that day to this, all my spiritual possessions are the result of that look."]

¹ This rendering of Abu 'l-Faḍl's admonition agrees with H 11, 5 foll., where the text is given most fully.

and did not allow me to sleep that night. In the morning, when I had finished my prayers and devotions, I went to the Shaykh before sunrise and asked permission to attend Abú 'Alí's lecture on Koranic exegesis. He began his lecture with the verse, *Say Allah! then leave them to amuse themselves in their folly*¹. At the moment of hearing this word a door in my breast was opened, and I was rapt from myself. The Imám Abú 'Alí observed the change in me and asked, "Where were you last night?" I said, "With Abu 'l-Faql Ḥasan." He ordered me to rise and go back to Abu 'l-Faql, saying, "It is unlawful for you to come from that subject (Ṣúfism) to this discourse." I returned to the Shaykh, distraught and bewildered, for I had entirely lost myself in this word. When Abu 'l-Faql saw me, he said: "Abú Sa'id!

*mastak shuda'i hamí nadání pas u pish*².

Thou art drunk, poor youth! Thou know'st not head from tail." "O Shaykh!" I said, "what is thy command?" He said, "Come in and sit down and devote thyself wholly to this word, for this word hath much work to do with thee." After I had stayed with him for a long time, duly performing all that was required by this word, he said to me one day, "O Abú Sa'id! the doors of the letters of this word³ have been opened to thee. Now the hosts (of spiritual grace) will rush into thy breast, and thou wilt experience diverse kinds of self-culture (*adab*)." Then he exclaimed, "Thou hast been transported, transported, transported! Go and seek a place of solitude, and turn aside from men as thou hast turned aside from thyself, and behave with patience and resignation to God's will." I abandoned my studies and came home to Mayhana and retired into the niche of the chapel in my own house. There I sat for seven years, saying continually, "Allah! Allah! Allah!" Whenever drowsiness or inattention arising from the weakness of human nature came over me, a soldier with a fiery spear—the most terrible and alarming figure that can possibly be imagined—appeared in front of the niche⁴ and shouted at me, saying, "O Abú Sa'id, say Allah!" The dread of that apparition used to keep me

¹ Kor. 6, 91.

² Though printed as prose in both texts, this line appears to belong to a *rubá'i*, since it is written in one of the metres peculiar to that form of verse.

³ According to H: "the doors of the spiritual gifts (فتوح) of this word."

⁴ H has merely: "a terrible figure appeared in front of the niche."

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burning and trembling for whole days and nights, so that I did not again fall asleep or become inattentive; and at last every atom of me began to cry aloud, "Allah! Allah! Allah!"

Countless records of mystical conversion bear witness to the central fact in this description—the awakening of the soul in response to some unsuspected stimulus, by which, as Arnold says,

A bolt is shot back somewhere in the breast,

opening a way for the flood of transcendental consciousness to burst through. The accompanying ecstasy is a normal feature, and so is the abandonment of past occupations, habits, ambitions, and the fixing of every faculty upon that supreme reality which is henceforth the single object of desire. All these phenomena, however sudden they may seem, are the climax of an interior conflict that perhaps only makes itself known at the moment when it is already decided. Probably in Abú Sa'íd's case the process was at least to some extent a conscious one. He had been long and earnestly engaged in the study of theology.

I possessed many books and papers, but though I used to turn them over and read them one after the other, I was never finding any peace. I prayed to God, saying, "O Lord, nothing is revealed to my heart by all this study and learning: it causes me to lose Thee, O God! Let me be able to do without it by giving me something in which I shall find Thee again¹."

Here Abú Sa'íd acknowledges that he sought spiritual peace, and that all his efforts to win it from intellectual proofs ended in failure. The history of that struggle is unwritten, but not until the powers of intellect were fully tried and shown to be of no avail, could mightier forces drawn from a deeper source come overwhelmingly into action. As regards the perpetual iteration of the name Allah, I need hardly remind my readers that this is a method everywhere practised by Moslem mystics for bringing about *faná*, i.e. the passing-away from self, or in Pascal's phrase, "oubli du monde et de tout hormis Dieu."

¹ A 50, 12.

We have seen that the first act of Abú Sa'íd after his conversion was to enquire of Shaykh Abu 'l-Faḍl what he must do next. That is to say, he had implicitly accepted Abu 'l-Faḍl as his spiritual director, in accordance with the rule that "if any one by means of asceticism and self-mortification shall have risen to an exalted degree of mystical experience, *without having a Pír to whose authority and example he submits himself*, the Şúfís do not regard him as belonging to their community¹." In this way a continuous tradition of mystical doctrine is secured, beginning with the Prophet and carried down through a series of dead Pírs to the living director who forms the last link of the chain until he too dies and is succeeded by one of his pupils.

Abú Sa'íd's lineage as a Şúfí is given in the following table:

Mohammed, the Prophet
'Alí (<i>ob.</i> A.D. 661)
Ḥasan of Baṣra (<i>ob.</i> A.D. 728)
Ḥabíb 'Ajamí (<i>ob.</i> A.D. 737)
Dáwud Ṭá'í (<i>ob.</i> A.D. 781)
Ma'rúf Karkhí (<i>ob.</i> A.D. 815)
Sarí Saqaṭí (<i>ob.</i> A.D. 867)
Junayd of Baghdád (<i>ob.</i> A.D. 909)
Murta'ish of Baghdád (<i>ob.</i> A.D. 939)
Abú Nasr al-Sarráj of Ṭús (<i>ob.</i> A.D. 988)
Abu 'l-Faḍl Ḥasan of Sarakhs
Abú Sa'íd ibn Abi 'l-Khayr

¹ A 55, 15.