
A FABLE

A Magic Combat from the Tilism-e Hoshruha

Translated from the Urdu by Frances Pritchett

This is a very brief excerpt from a volume of about 900 pages, written or dictated by a professional oral romance narrator (*dastan-go*), Muhammad Husain Jah, in 1881. The volume itself is only the first of a set of eight similarly massive volumes which make up the *Tilism-e hoshruha* (Stunning Enchantment), written or dictated by Jah and another *dastan-go*, Ahmad Husain Qamar, between 1881 and 1895. The whole *Tilism-e hoshruha* itself is in turn merely a single *daftar* of the *Dastan-e Amir Hamza*, a romance cycle published in 46 volumes between 1881 and about 1908 by the Naval Kishore Press of Lucknow. The cycle was a considerable success, and most of its volumes were reprinted a number of times; the *Tilism-e hoshruha* in particular became widely popular.

In the twentieth century, however, times changed, tastes changed, and *dastan-go'i* died. By the late 1930s the last *dastan-go* was dead, and the 46-volume *Hamza* cycle had ceased to be reprinted. There were so many reasons: the influence of Hali, the cult of the western-style realistic novel, the beginnings of the Progressive Movement, etc. But the result was that a whole substantial chapter—and by no means the least fascinating and valuable—fell out of Urdu literary history. Today there is, as far as I know, no complete set of the 46-volume *Hamza* cycle in the world; one is gradually being assembled on microfilm. It is sad to reflect that these few pages are the only ones out of the whole 40,000 or so to have ever been translated.

This passage was chosen to give the flavour of the *dastan* at its best and most imaginative.* The hero of the cycle, Amir Hamza, fights as a gallant Muslim warrior against enemies who are usually magicians. Magicians seem to be human, but their esoteric magical skills equip them with a remarkable variety of superhuman powers. Central to the *dastan* is the notion of a *tilism* or "enchantment", a magic world created and ruled by a single powerful magician.

*For invaluable help in selecting and translating the passage, and in other work with the *Hamza* cycle as well, I thank the distinguished Urdu scholar Shamsur Rahman Faruqi.

In this passage we see a clash between the great magician Kaukab Raushan-Zamir, lord of the *Tilism-e nur-afshan* (Radiant Tilism), and Afrasiyab, ruler of the *Tilism-e hoshruha* itself. Kaukab's daughter Burran happens to rescue 'Amar, a close companion of Hamza's, from Afrasiyab's clutches. Amar's bizarre appearance is part of his special role as undercover agent and trickster. The prose style, though elegant and flowing, moves with great speed: events crowd in upon each other as violently and unpredictably as they do in a James Bond film. They culminate in the spectacular intervention of Emerald-coloured Fish (*Mahi-e Zumurrud-rang*), the magicians' grandmother. The passage begins at a point in the story when Kaukab has just suggested that the ladies of his court display their flying abilities . . .

THEN, tying their dupattas tightly around their breasts, all those sun-faced ones flew towards the skies. Here, the sun was rising; there, when these sun-bodied golden-dressed ones took flight, it was as if thousands of suns had risen that day, and as if these moons of the earth had reached the sky. One moon-faced one went ten miles high, another zoomed upwards and rose even higher than that, another went up six miles and stayed hovering there. It appeared that chandeliers had been hung in the lapis-lazuli palace of the heavens, or that houris had descended from Paradise for a stroll in mid-air. When all had flown, Princess Gauhar-afshan the High-flying went higher than all the rest, so that all the magicians looked through the magic telescope but could not see her. Cries of praise and admiration were raised on all sides.

Then Kaukab said to Burran the Sword-slasher, "Oh child, show your own keenness of wing too, and go so high today that you bring back some token from the *Tilism-e Hoshruha*." Burran, in accordance with her father's command, tying her dupatta tightly around her breasts, loosened her hair, pulled out from it the Star-pearl—this pearl is from the Dome of Samiri, thousands upon thousands of magic effects are born from it, and whoever owns this pearl prevails over the magicians of the world—and held it in her hand. Its light flashed out like a ray from the sun. When she gestured with her finger, that ray began to be cut off at intervals, like the flame of a trimmed lamp, and fell to earth in the form of coiled-up threads. A strange marvel could be seen then, as though the stars had broken loose and were shooting downwards. She cut off so many rays that from the earth a string of pearls was threaded, rising and rising into the sky.

Then that shining pearl of the ocean of beauty, pushing off from the string of pearls, flew upwards. Rays were falling from the Star-pearl, and as they fell to earth they turned into pearls. What a sight it was! As though thousands of torches and lamps had been

lighted in mid-air, or the stars were falling, and pearls rained down on the earth, and strings of pearls were threaded from the earth to the sky. It appeared that Nature, the adorer, had tied a pearl garland around the brow of the sky. Among those pearl-strings, that sun of the sky of beauty, spreading the wings of desire, kept going higher and higher, and shaming the shining sun with her brilliant face, or ensnaring the hearts of the creatures of the air in the net of her hair and ruining them. Cries of praise and admiration could be heard all around, and all, small and great, stared upwards. [(A *masnavi* of five *she'rs* is omitted here.)]

The moment she reached such a height that the earth looked like a grain of mustard-seed [(a *bait*, or *she'r*, is omitted here)], at this height, like the spring breeze or like the sun, that envy of Venus hovered, and sending out the messenger of her glance, she took in news of the whole world. The Mirror Tilism and the Tilism of a Thousand Battlements and the Black Lily Tilism and the Tilism-e Hoshruha, all were before her eyes. As she looked all around, in the Tilism-e Hoshruha a strange spectacle could be seen. That is, a golden net was stretched tight in mid-air, with one of its ends fastened to the Dome of Light, and the other tied to the spire of a pavilion near the Blood-flowing River. And thousands of men were hanging in it. Some were gasping, some had been strangled and had died writhing in pain. And on the plain an army was encamped, guards and guard-posts had been established, gallows had been erected, executioners stood with naked swords, there was a great clamour. Seeing this she was astonished: "What can all this be?" She came nearer.

Suddenly her gaze fell on 'Amar. She saw an individual of strange creation hanging in the net. She thought, "This is some magic animal which has been trapped, therefore its shape is strange: a head like a begging bowl, eyes like cumin seeds, cheeks like bread-buns, teeth like pearls—the mouth, because the neck is being strangled, is open and can be seen. The neck is like thread, the hands and feet are like rope. The lower body is six yards long, the upper body is three yards long." Seeing this she thought: "I ought to save the poor thing from this calamity, and take *this* token of the Tilism to my father." Thinking something like this to herself, she paused in mid-air and cut the rays of the Star-pearl, and so many rays collected that they gathered together and drew into a sun, and she too vanished into the sun and moved with it. The people trapped in the net seemed to be inwardly praying for their release. Their aspect seemed to say, "Oh Creator of the white thread out of the black thread, release us from this net of di ster." [(A *nazm* of five *she'rs* is omitted here.)]

At this tumultuous moment, when the sun of their lives was setting on the horizon, this full moon, become a sun, descended on the net and hovered there. And when the heat of the magic sun fell on them, the meshes of the net began to melt, and the sun suddenly opened. Burran, becoming visible, plunged downwards in the form of a hawk. 'Amar, released from the net, was on the verge of falling, when she seized him in her talons, paused, and was on the point of leaving, when the breaking of the net-meshes caused all the prisoners to fall downwards. But their necks remained strangled, because the rest of the meshes were intact. And Sieve, whose magic this is, he too was alive, so how could they be released? Furthermore, she wanted only to take 'Amar away, so she didn't tear the net into pieces. Finally, just as the net began to fall, the magicians set up a clamour.

Afrasiyab came running, and flew into the air, and released the broken fragment of the net; and when the two or three prisoners in this fragment began to fall, he recited a spell, so that magic claws caught them. Holding the other end of the net, the King of the Tilism raised a shout, "Oh Sieve, come here!" Sieve came flying from somewhere, and took the net. The King of the Tilism, giving him the net, dashed upwards towards the sun. Burran had not gone far when he came and blocked her way, and many magicians came running after their king. As Burran cut the rays of the Star-pearl, they became flames and fell on the magicians, so that their flesh and bones began to burn, and the tumult that comes with magicians' deaths broke out, and fire and stones began raining down. But the King of the Magicians, becoming a serpent, advanced on Burran, and loosed such bolts of fire that, at the hands of this brute (may God strike him down!), that utterly charming one was wounded; from the fire of the serpent's mouth blisters broke out on her body. But steeling herself, she did not let go of 'Amar, and she hurled the Star-pearl at the King of the Tilism. He sprang aside and evaded it. If it had fallen on him, it would have pierced his breast. But from the effect of its rays, and its near passage, Afrasiyab changed back from a serpent into his true form.

Burran, flying up, intercepted her pearl. And the king, taking up a magic noose, came towards her. She recited a spell and clapped, so that two crystal figures came flying and wound themselves around the king's hands. Afrasiyab flicked his fingers, so that lightning flashed and fell on the figures. Both were burned. A cry came, "We have discharged our duty to Kaukabi!" The King of the Tilism again took the noose and rushed at her. Since the king was the King of Kings of the Magicians and the Master of the Tilism, Burran was no match for him; this time she could not ward off the attack of his

noose. He trapped her in the noose, but she was such a powerful magician that she jerked back, and broke free of a number of coils; but the cords of the noose settled themselves tightly around her limbs. Blood flowed from her whole body, and she was wounded in several places. On one side Afrasiyab pulled, on the other side she resisted. But then, she was a woman, delicate of body, he was a man with powerful arms; finally she was dragged along.

But now listen to the situation. When his daughter, who had flown off, had been gone for some time and did not return, Kaukab reflected, "Perhaps she might have gone too high, or because of her great delicacy might have grown tired and fallen somewhere; she might be unconscious or caught in some other disaster. If I order someone to bring news, no one will be able to fly high enough. It's necessary that I myself fly." With this thought, he leaped from his throne and flew, and when he arrived high in mid-air he looked around in every direction. He saw that confusion had arisen in the Tilism-e Hoshrubah: "My daughter is caught in a noose, and magicians surround her, and she is fighting with Afrasiyab!" The moment he saw this, he became a blazing fire and with the greatest speed fell on Afrasiyab in the Tilism, and becoming green lightning, he flashed at his head. Afrasiyab grew fearful. He quickly placed before Kaukab a magic double of himself, and moved away. As Kaukab, in the form of lightning, struck, he cut the double in half, and burning the magic noose he set Burran free, so that she, recovering herself, took 'Amar and went to her home.

In the meantime, Afrasiyab reappeared and, becoming red lightning, flashed at Kaukab. He too placed a magic double of himself in front of Afrasiyab and disappeared. When the red lightning struck, the false Kaukab was cut in half. Afrasiyab thought he had killed him, when suddenly from behind him came a cry, "I am Kaukab!" Then Afrasiyab loosened the Armlet of Samiri from his arm. On the other side, when Kaukab recited a spell and clapped, a magic figure came bearing the Mirror of Jamshid. At the same time Afrasiyab placed the armlet before Kaukab, and Kaukab too placed the mirror face-to-face with Afrasiyab. The reflection of the armlet caused unconsciousness to overcome Kaukab, and when Afrasiyab looked at the mirror he fell into a stupor, then a faint. Both of them, wheeling in circles, were falling toward the earth, when magic figures emerged from the earth, and some magic riders dressed in gold, mounted on winged steeds, came from the direction of Kaukab's Tilism. The magic figures caught Afrasiyab, and the riders supported Kaukab.

The magic figures were on the verge of restoring both kings to consciousness, when suddenly the earth again opened, and a fish whose whole body was like emerald put its head out. This was Afrasiyab's maternal grandmother, Emerald-coloured Fish; mention has often been made of her before. At that time, stretching her mouth wide like a serpent, she swallowed Afrasiyab. In the meantime the magic riders had already revived Kaukab, when the Fish called out and spoke, "Kaukab my son, what is all this fighting and disturbance? Do brothers fight with each other, or quarrel among themselves? He did a great wrong when he raised his hand against your daughter, who is like his own child. I am taking him away. I will reason with Afrasiyab, and son, you too go to your own place." With these words she disappeared, and Kaukab went to his own Tilism.