

A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century: Shaikh Ahmad al-Alawi (1869-1934)

Martin Lings

Seen From Outside

The narrative which follows is by Dr. Marcel Carret. It speaks for itself and needs no introduction; and having read it, the reader will no doubt understand why I have chosen to begin with it rather than with anything else, although at its outset the Shaikh is already fifty years old.

‘I met the Shaikh Al-‘Alawī for the first time in the spring of 1920. It was not a chance meeting, for I had been called in to him in my capacity as doctor. It was then only a few months since I had started a practice at Mostaganem.

‘What could have prompted the Shaikh to consult a doctor, seeing that he attached so little importance to the petty misfortunes of the flesh? And why had he chosen me, a newcomer, from among so many others?

‘It was from him himself that I eventually learned the answers to these questions: not long after my arrival at Mostaganem, I had set up a clinic in the Arab town of Tigitt exclusively for the use of Moslems, and three times a week I gave consultations there for a minimum fee. Moslems have an instinctive repugnance for State-organized dispensaries, and my clinic, which was set up in their very midst and arranged to suit their tastes and customs, was a success. Echoes of this came to the ears of the Shaikh.

‘His attention was attracted by this initiative on the part of a newly arrived French doctor who, unlike most Europeans, apparently did not look down on Moslems from the heights of a disdainful pride. Without my knowing it, and without the least attempt at investigation on his part, he was benevolently informed by his disciples as to how I looked, what I did, my movements, my way of treating the sick and my sympathetic attitude towards Moslems. As a result, the Shaikh Al-‘Alawī already knew me quite well when I was still ignorant of his very existence. A rather serious attack of influenza which he had during the Spring of 1920 made him decide to send for me.

‘From my first contact with him I had the impression of being in the presence of no ordinary personality. The room I was shown into, like all rooms in Moslem houses, was without furniture. There were simply two chests which, as I found out later, were full of books and manuscripts. But the floor was covered from end to end with carpets and rush mats. In one corner was a rug-covered

mattress, and here, with some cushions at his back, sitting straight upright, cross-legged, with his hands on his knees, was the Shaikh, in a motionless hieratic attitude which seemed at the same time perfectly natural.

‘The first thing that struck me was his likeness to the usual representations of Christ. His clothes, so nearly if not exactly the same as those which Jesus must have worn, the fine lawn head-cloth which framed his face, his whole attitude—everything conspired to reinforce the likeness. It occurred to me that such must have been the appearance of Christ when he received his disciples at the time when he was staying with Martha and Mary.

‘My surprise stopped me for a moment on the threshold. He too fixed his eyes on *my* face, but with a far-away look, and then broke the silence by asking me to come in, with the usual words of welcome. His nephew, Sidi Muhammad, acted as his interpreter, for although the Shaikh understood French well he had some difficulty in speaking it, and in the presence of a stranger he made as if he did not know it at all.

‘I asked for some sandals to cover my shoes, so as not to defile the carpets and the mats, but he said that this was quite unnecessary. A chair was brought for me, but it seemed so ridiculous in such surroundings that I declined it, saying I would rather sit on a cushion. The Shaikh smiled almost imperceptibly, and I felt that by this simple gesture I had already gained his sympathy.

‘His voice was gentle, somewhat subdued. He spoke little, in short sentences, and those about him obeyed in silence, waiting on his least word or gesture. One felt that he was surrounded by the deepest reverence.

‘I already knew something of Moslem ways, and realizing that I had to do with someone who was not just “anyone”, I was careful not to broach too abruptly the subject for which I had been called in. I let the Shaikh question me, through Sidi Muhammad, about my stay in Mostaganem, what had brought me there, the difficulties I had met with, and how far I was satisfied.

‘During this conversation a young disciple had brought in a large brass tray with some mint-flavoured tea and some cakes. The Shaikh took nothing, but invited me to drink when the tea had been served, and himself pronounced the “Bismillah” (in the Name of God) for me as I raised the cup to my lips.

‘It was only after all this usual ceremonial was over that the Shaikh decided to talk to me about his health. He said that he had not sent for me to prescribe medicines for him; certainly, he

would take medicine, if I thought it absolutely necessary and even if I thought it would help him, but he had no desire to do so. He simply wanted to know if the illness he had contracted a few days previously was a serious one. He relied on me to tell him quite frankly, and without keeping anything back, what I thought of his condition. The rest was of little or no importance.

‘I felt more and more interested and intrigued: a sick man who has not the cult of medicines is rare enough as it is, but a sick man who has no particular desire to get better and who simply wants to know where he stands is a still greater rarity.

‘I proceeded to make a most thorough medical examination, to which the patient docilely submitted. The more circumspect I showed myself during this examination, the more confidently he put himself into my hands. He was amazingly thin, so much so that one had the impression of an organism in which life was only working at a reduced speed. But he had nothing seriously wrong with him. The only other person present at this examination was Sidi Muhammad who, with his back towards us and eyes cast down, stood sadly and respectfully in the middle of the room, translating the questions and answers in a low voice, but seeing nothing of what took place.

‘When I had finished, the Shaikh resumed his hieratic attitude on the cushions, Sidi Muhammad clapped his hands, and the young man brought in some more tea.

‘I then explained to the Shaikh that he had a fairly bad attack of influenza, but that there was nothing seriously wrong with him, that his chief organs were working quite normally and that probably all his troubles would disappear of their own accord after a few days. But although it was unlikely there would be any complications, there was always a certain risk of them in such cases, so that his illness must be closely watched, and I would have to come and see him again by way of precaution. I added that I found his thinness somewhat alarming, and that he ought to eat a little more. I had in fact learnt, in answer to my questions, that his daily diet consisted of no more than one litre of milk, a few dried dates, one or two bananas, and some tea.

‘The Shaikh seemed very satisfied with the result of my examination. He thanked me with dignity, apologized for having troubled me, and told me I could come to see him again whenever I thought it necessary. As to the question of food, his point of view was somewhat different from mine: for him eating was an obligation, but he was in the habit of reducing his diet to a minimum.

‘I pointed out that if he did not have enough to eat he would grow weaker and weaker and would have less resistance against future illnesses. I understood very well that he attached no importance to this, but on the other hand if he felt at all bound to prolong his life or simply to keep

himself alive, it was indispensable for him to bow to the demands of nature, however annoying they might be.

‘This argument evidently impressed him, for he remained silent for quite a time. Then, with an evasive waive of the hand and a slight smile he said gently: “God will provide.”

‘He was now sitting just as he had been at my entry, and there was a far-away look in his eyes. I retired discreetly, carrying with me an impression which, after more than 20 years, remains as clearly engraved on my memory as if it was barely yesterday since all this took place.

‘I have described this first visit to the Shaikh Al-‘Alawī in all its detail because I thought that the best way to bring out his personality was to start by transmitting the impression he made on me at our first meeting. This impression is all the more reliable for my having known nothing about him before I set eyes on him.

‘I tried to find out something about this unusual person, but no one seemed able to tell me anything in particular. North African Europeans live as a rule in such ignorance of the inner workings of Islam, that for them a Shaikh or a Marabout is a kind of wizard, without any importance except for what political influence he may have; and as this Shaikh had no such influence, they knew nothing about him.

‘Moreover, on second thoughts, I began to wonder whether I had not been rather the victim of my imagination. That Christ-like face, that gentle voice, so full of peace, those courteous manners, might have influenced me into supposing a spirituality which was in fact non-existent. His attitude might have been a calculated “pose”, and beneath this promising surface there might be nothing at all.

‘None the less he had seemed so simple and natural that my first impression persisted, and it was duly confirmed by what followed.

‘The next day I went to see him again, and also for several days after that, until he had quite recovered. Each time I found him just the same, motionless, in the same position, in the same place, with the far-away look in his eyes and the faint smile on his lips, as if he had not moved an inch since the day before, like a statue for which time does not count.

‘At each visit he was more cordial and more confiding. Although our conversations were fairly limited and altogether general in topic, apart from medical questions, my impression grew

stronger and stronger that the man in front of me was no impostor. We were soon on friendly terms, and when I told him that I considered my visits as doctor no longer necessary, he said that he had been very pleased to make my acquaintance and that he would be glad if I would come to see him now and then, whenever I had time.

‘This was the beginning of a friendship which was to last until the death of the Shaikh in 1934. During these fourteen years I was able to see him at least once a week. Sometimes I went for the pleasure of talking to him when I had a few spare moments, sometimes it was because he had had me sent for on account of some member of his family, and often also because his own precarious health needed my attention.

‘Little by little my wife and I became intimates of the house. After a certain time they made us feel altogether at home there, and eventually they came to consider us almost as members of the family. But this took place gradually and imperceptibly.

‘When I first met the Shaikh the present *zāwiyah* [Sufi place of prayer] had not yet been built. A group of *fuqarā* [Sufi disciples] had bought the ground and made a present of it to the Shaikh, and the foundations had already been laid, but the troubles of 1914 had interrupted the work, which was not resumed until 1920.

‘The way in which this *zāwiyah* was built is both eloquent and typical: there was neither architect—at least, not in the ordinary sense—nor master-builder, and all the workmen were volunteers. The architect was the Shaikh himself—not that he ever drew up a plan or manipulated a set-square. He simply said what he wanted, and his conception was understood by the builders. They were by no means all from that part of the country. Many had come from Morocco, especially from the Riff, and some from Tunis, all without any kind of enlistment. The news had gone round that work on the *zāwiyah* could be started once more, and that was all that was needed. Among the Shaikh’s North African disciples there began an exodus in relays: masons some, carpenters others, stone-cutters, workers on the roads, or even ordinary manual labourers, they knotted a few meagre provisions in a handkerchief and set out for the far-off town where the Master lived to put at his disposal the work of their hands. They received no wages. They were fed, that was all; and they camped out in tents. But every evening, an hour before the prayer, the Shaikh brought them together and gave them spiritual instruction. That was their reward.

‘They worked in this way for two months, sometimes three, and then went away once more,

glad to have contributed to the work, and satisfied in spirit. Others took their place and after a certain time went off in their turn, to be immediately replaced by new arrivals, eager to start work. More always came, and there was never any lack of hands. This went on for two years, by the end of which the building was finished. This manifestation of simple and outspoken devotion gave me a deep sense of inward happiness. The world evidently still contained some individuals disinterested enough to put themselves, without any recompense, at the service of an ideal. Here, in mid-twentieth century, was the same fervour that had built the cathedrals in the Middle Ages, and no doubt the actual building itself had taken place along somewhat the same lines. I was happy to have been an astonished eye-witness.

‘As soon as the *zāwiyah* was finished, the *fuqarā* said that they would like to have a big festival to celebrate its inauguration, and the Shaikh gave his consent, feeling that he could scarcely do otherwise.

‘By that time I had known him long enough to be able to tell him exactly what I thought, and I expressed my surprise that he should consent to a manifestation which accorded so ill with his habits and which was so contrary to his taste for solitude and self-effacement.

‘He had already given up using his nephew as interpreter during our conversations. None the less, Sidi Muhammad was nearly always present at our meetings. We spoke as a rule in French, and he only intervened when the Shaikh felt himself unable to give exact expression in our language to some particular thought.

‘At my expression of surprise he gave an almost imperceptible shrug of the shoulders, and said more or less—I cannot remember his exact words: “You are right. Such things are superfluous. But one must take men as they are. Not all can find complete satisfaction in pure intelligence and contemplation. They have a need now and then to gather together and to feel that their own ideas are shared by a great many others. That is all they are asking for now. Besides, there is no question of the sort of festivity that you must have seen at some of the Moslem places of pilgrimage, with pistol shots, displays of riding, various games and far too much food. For my disciples a festival means spiritual rejoicing. It is simply a reunion for the exchange of ideas and for communal prayer.”

‘When looked at in this light, the idea of a festival no longer jarred on me. To judge by the number of disciples who came, it was a success. They came from all directions and from all classes

of society. According to what the Shaikh had told me, I had expected that this reunion would be no more than a sort of congress where the academically minded hope to shine in discussing knotty questions of doctrine and displaying their talent for pin-point hair-splitting quibbles.

‘As far as I could gather from certain passages of inaugural speeches which Sidi Muhammad roughly translated for me, it was in fact something of the sort, especially among the younger disciples. It was not there, however, that the interest lay, but with the older disciples who did not talk and who were rapt in deep meditation. I was specially struck by the most humble of them all, the Riff mountaineers, who had been travelling for a whole month, going on foot from hamlet to hamlet, with their spirits kept up by the inward fire that burned in their simple souls.

‘They had set out full of enthusiasm, like the pioneers of the gold-rush, but it was no temporal riches that they had come in search of. Their quest was purely spiritual, and they knew that they would not be deceived. I watched them, motionless, silent, drinking in the atmosphere as if plunged in a kind of beatitude through the very fact of being there, penetrated by the holiness of the place, with their chief aspiration realized. They were happy, in complete accord with themselves, in the Presence of God...

‘At other times, after remaining motionless and silent for hours at a time, the disciples would softly start up a lingering chant. Then they would divide up into circular groups, and holding hands would begin to sway forwards and then backwards, slowly and rhythmically, pronouncing clearly, in time to each movement, the Name “*Allāh*”. This began to a fairly slow rhythm which was given by a sort of choir leader at the centre of each circle, whose voice could be heard above the others. Meantime some of them went on with the chant, which grew progressively louder and more vigorous. Little by little the speed of the rhythm increased. The slow swaying to and fro gave place to an up-and-down movement with knees bent and then suddenly straightened. Soon, in each circle of rhythmic movement (the feet remained stationary), they began to gasp and the voices became hoarse. But the time went on growing quicker and quicker; the up-and-down movements became more and more violent, jerky and almost convulsive. The Name of God was now no more than a breath, and so it went on, always quicker and quicker, until the breathing itself was no longer heard. Some of them would fall to the ground in a state of exhaustion.

‘This exercise, which is analogous to those of the whirling dervishes, is evidently intended to produce a particular state of soul. But I wondered what could be the spiritual link between such rough and crude practices as these and the nobility and refinement of the Shaikh.

‘And how had the Shaikh’s fame spread so far? There was never any organized propaganda. The disciples made not the slightest attempt to proselytize. In any town or village that happened to contain some of their number they had, and they still have today, their own little secluded *zāwiyahs*, each under the guidance of a *muqaddam*, that is, one who is invested with the confidence and authority of the Shaikh. These little brotherhoods refrain on principle from all outward action, as if they were jealously bent on letting no one share their secrets. None the less, the influence spreads, and would-be novices are always coming forward to ask for initiation. They come from all walks of life.

‘One day I voiced my surprise to the Shaikh. He said:

“All those come here who feel troubled by the thought of God.”

‘And he added these words, worthy of the Gospels:

“They come to seek inward Peace.”

‘That day I did not dare to question him any further for fear of seeming too inquisitive. But I realized that there was a connection between what he had said and the incantations which I had sometimes heard and which had intrigued me. Fairly often, in fact, while I was talking quietly with the Shaikh, the Name “*Allāh*” had come to us from some remote corner of the *zāwiyah*, uttered on one long drawn out, vibrant note:

“*A...l...lā...h!*”

‘It was like a cry of despair, a distraught supplication, and it came from some solitary cell-bound disciple, bent on meditation. The cry was usually repeated several times, and then all was silence once more.

“Out of the depths have I cried unto Thee, O Lord” (Psalm 130:1).

“From the end of the earth will I cry unto Thee, when my heart is overwhelmed: lead me to the rock that is higher than I” (Psalm 61:2).

‘These verses from the Psalms came to my mind. The supplication was really just the same, the supreme cry to God of a soul in distress.

‘I was not wrong, for later, when I asked the Shaikh what was the meaning of the cry which we had just heard, he answered:

“It is a disciple asking God to help him in his meditation.”

“May I ask what is the purpose of his meditation?”

“To achieve self-realization in God.”

“Do all the disciples succeed in doing this?”

“No, it is seldom that anyone does. It is only possible for a very few.”

“Then what happens to those who do not? Are they not desperate?”

“No: they always rise high enough to have at least inward Peace.”

‘Inward Peace. That was the point he came back to most often, and there lay, no doubt, the reason for his great influence. For what man does not aspire, in some way or other, to inward Peace? . . .

‘When he was relatively well, the Shaikh always received me, except in winter, on a sort of verandah at the bottom of a little garden surrounded by high walls, reminiscent of certain paintings in Persian manuscripts. It was in these peaceful surroundings, far from the noise of the world, amid the rustling of leaves and the song of birds that we exchanged remarks sometimes interspersed with long silences.

‘As happens with those who understand each other and have reached a certain degree of intimacy, we did not mind being silent; and silence was sometimes imposed on us by a remark that called for reflection. Moreover the Shaikh never wasted words, and we felt no need to talk except when we really had something to say.

‘He had been surprised at first to find that I knew a little about the Moslem religion, at least as regards its essence and principles, that I knew something about the life of the Prophet, in its outlines at any rate, and the history of the first Caliphs, and that I was not altogether uninformed about the Kaaba and the Well of Zamzam and the flight of Ishmael in the desert with his mother Hagar. All this was very little, but the average European is generally so ignorant about these things that the Shaikh could not hide his surprise.

‘For my part, I was surprised by his broad-mindedness and tolerance. I had always heard that every Moslem is a fanatic and could never have anything but the greatest contempt for non-Moslem foreigners.

‘The Shaikh said that God had inspired three Prophets, first Moses, then Jesus, then Muhammad. He concluded that Islam was the best in that it was based on the most recent message of God, but said that Judaism and Christianity were none the less divinely revealed religions.

‘His conception of Islam was equally broad. He only insisted on the essential. He used to say:

“To be an orthodox Moslem it is enough to observe five points: to believe in God and to

recognize Muhammad as His last Prophet, to pray the five daily prayers, to give the prescribed alms to the poor, to keep the fast, and to make the pilgrimage to Mecca.”

‘What I appreciated especially in him was his complete lack of proselytism. He expressed his views when I questioned him, but seemed to care very little whether they did me any good. Not only did he never make the least attempt to convert me, but for a long time he seemed totally indifferent to what my religious beliefs might be. That was, moreover, altogether characteristic of him. He used to say:

“Those who have need of me come to me, Why seek to attract the others? They care little for the only things that matter, and they go their own way.”

‘Our conversations were thus not unlike what might take place between two neighbours on good terms with each other who exchange remarks from time to time over the hedge that separates their gardens.

‘But one day my own ideas happened to come up for discussion and this led him to sound me a little. Perhaps he had already thought of doing so, without knowing how to broach this delicate question, and was simply waiting for the opportunity.

‘It came in connexion with those Negro Moslems who have brought some Sudanese practices into Islam. They go through the streets at certain times leading a bull garlanded with flowers and ribbons, to the sound of drums and tambourines accompanied by dances, shouts, songs, and the clapping of metal castanets. It was now one of these occasions, and beneath the verandah, at the end of the peaceful garden, the distant and muffled sounds of one of these processions came to our ears. I do not know why, but I gave vent to a comparison between these manifestations and certain Catholic processions, which, I added, seemed to me pure idolatry, just as the Eucharist was nothing more or less than sorcery, unless one considered it symbolically.

“It is none the less your religion,” he said.

“In a sense”, I replied. “I was baptized when I was still at my mother’s breast. Apart from that there is nothing that binds me to it.”

“What is your religion then?”

“I have none.”

There was a silence. Then the Shaikh said:

“That is strange.”

“Why strange?”

“Because usually those who, like yourself, have no religion are hostile to religions. And you do not seem to be so.”

‘What you say is true, but the people you refer to have kept the intolerant religious mentality. They have remained restive. They have not found, in the loss of their beliefs, the inward Peace that you speak of. On the contrary.’

“And you? Have you found it?”

“Yes. Because I have followed things to their furthest conclusions and I look at everything according to its true value and in its proper place.”

‘He thought for some time, and then he said:

“That also is strange.”

“What?”

“That you should have arrived at this conception by means other than those of the doctrine.”

“What doctrine?”

‘He made a vague gesture and sank into a state of meditation. I understood that he was unwilling to say any more about it, and I withdrew.

‘From this day I had the impression that I interested him more. Until then our relationship, always very cordial, with every appearance of intimacy, had not gone beyond the limits of a casual friendship. He had found me a pleasant enough acquaintance and he liked me, but none the less I was a foreigner and somewhat remote. Several years had passed during which I had been for him no more than a fleeting distraction, probably of very little importance in his eyes, the passer-by that one meets on life’s journey, a momentary companion that one accepts for part of the road because he is polite and not tedious, and then forgets.

‘After this, whenever we were alone together, the conversation took an abstract turn... I regret with all my heart that I did not write down then and there those wonderful conversations which implied far more even than was actually said, and which I now realize would have made a document that was precious not only for me but also for others. But at that time I did not attach the importance to them that they have acquired in my memory with the lapse of the years.

‘I can only therefore give a general glimpse of these meetings, simply noting down one or two striking points which have remained fixed in my mind. Sometimes the dialogue was limited to a few remarks interspersed between long silences; sometimes it consisted of an exposition of

my point of view, asked for by him. For now it was he who was the questioner. We never argued, that is we never had anything in the nature of those controversies in which each party tries to convince the other that he is right. It was just an exchange of ideas, no more.

‘That was how I came to explain to him my attitude towards religion. I said that since everyone is troubled by the enigma of his existence and his future, we each seek some explanation that will satisfy us and set our minds at rest. The religions provide an answer which satisfies most people. What right have I to trouble those who have found spiritual tranquillity in religion? Besides, whatever means are used, whatever path is chosen, anyone who is bent on gaining peace of mind is always obliged to take some belief as his starting point. Even the path of science, which is the one I have followed, is based on a certain number of assumptions, that is, affirmations which are considered as self-evident truths but which none the less cannot be proved. Along whatever line one looks, there is always some element of belief, whether it be great or small. The only truth is what one believes to be true. Everyone follows the course which suits him best. If he finds what he is looking for, then for him this course is the right one. They are all equal.

‘Here he stopped me, saying:

“‘No, they are not all equal.’”

‘I said nothing, waiting for an explanation, which came.

“‘They are all equal if you only consider the question of being set at rest. But there are different degrees. Some people are set at rest by very little; others find their satisfaction in religion; some require more; it is not only peace of mind that they must have, but the Great Peace, which brings with it the plenitude of the Spirit.’”

“‘What about religion?’”

“‘For these last religion is only a starting point.’”

“‘Then is there anything above religion?’”

“‘Above the religion there is the doctrine.’”

‘I had already heard him use this word: the doctrine. But when I had asked what he meant by it he had been unwilling to answer. Timidly I tried again:

“‘What doctrine?’”

‘This time he answered:

“‘The means of attaining to God Himself.’”

“‘And what are these means?’”

‘He gave me a smile tinged with pity.

“‘Why should I tell you, since you are not disposed to make use of them. If you came to me as my disciple I could give you an answer. But what would be the good of satisfying an idle curiosity?’”

‘On another occasion it so happened that we were talking about prayer, which I considered as a piece of inconsequence on the part of those who believe in the Sovereign Wisdom of the Divinity.

“‘What is the point of prayer?’” I had asked.

“‘I see what you have in mind’”, he said. “‘In principle you are right. Prayer is superfluous when one is in direct communication with God. For then one has direct knowledge. But it helps those who aspire to this communication and have not yet reached it. None the less, even in this case, prayer is not indispensable. There are other means of reaching God.’”

“‘What means?’”

“‘The study of the doctrine and meditation or intellectual contemplation are among the best and most effective means. But they are not within the scope of everyone.’”

‘What surprised him the most was that I should be able to go on living quite serenely in the conviction that I was destined to total annihilation, for he saw beyond doubt that I was deeply sincere. Little by little, when, at various intervals, he came back to this question, I brought him to understand that my serenity was due to humility rather than to pride. Man’s anxieties spring from his wanting at all costs to survive his own death. Calm is obtained when one has altogether rid oneself of this desire for immortality. The world existed before me and would continue to exist without me... It was no more than an entertainment to which I had been invited without knowing why or how, and the meaning of which I could not grasp, if indeed it had one. But this entertainment was none the less not without its interest. That is why I turned my eyes towards nature rather than towards abstract ideas. When I had to leave the entertainment I would do so regretfully, because I found it interesting. But in time it would no doubt end by boring me. Besides, in any case, I had no choice. And what did it matter? When one crushes an ant the world goes on just the same.

“‘What you say is true of the body no doubt’”, he said. “‘But what of the Spirit?’”

“True, there is also the spirit. The consciousness we have of ourselves. But we did not have it at birth. It was developed slowly together with our bodily sensations. We only acquired it progressively, little by little, as our knowledge increased. It developed alongside of the body, grew up with it, came to full strength with it, like a sum total of acquired ideas, and I fail to convince myself that it could survive this body to which it really owes its existence.”

‘There was a long silence. Then, coming out of his meditation, the Shaikh said:

“Do you want to know what is lacking in you?”

“Yes, what?”

“To be one of us and to see the Truth, you lack the desire to raise your Spirit above yourself. And that is irremediable,”

‘One day he asked me point-blank:

“Do you believe in God?”

‘I replied:

“Yes, if you mean by that an indefinable principle on which all depends and which no doubt gives a meaning to the Universe.”

‘He seemed satisfied by my reply. I added:

“But I consider this principle as being beyond our reach and our understanding. What surprises me, however, is to see that so many people who claim to be religious and even believe that they are so, and who are convinced of their immortality in God, should be able to go on attaching importance to their earthly existence. They are neither logical, nor honest with themselves... It seems to me that if I were certain of life after death, the scene of this earthly life would become devoid of all interest for me and I should be utterly indifferent to it. I would live entirely in expectation of the true life yonder, and like your *fuqarā* I would devote myself altogether to meditation.”

‘He looked at me for a while as if he were reading my thoughts. Then his eyes met mine with a piercing glance which went far beyond them, and he said slowly:

“It is a pity that you will not let your Spirit rise above yourself. But whatever you may say and whatever you may imagine, you are nearer to God than you think.”

“You are nearer to God than you think.”

‘When he spoke these words, the Shaikh Al-‘Alawī had not much longer to live. The pilgrimage to Mecca which he had been bent on making before his death and to which he had added a journey to Syria and Palestine, had exhausted him. He was extremely weak, but his mind was still alert.

‘Meantime Sidi Muhammad, his nephew, who had fulfilled the function of *muqaddam*, had died, and his place had been taken by another of the Shaikh’s nephews of whom he was particularly fond, Sidi Addah Bin-Tūnis.

‘Sidi Addah did not hide his anxiety from me. Through him I learnt that the Shaikh was becoming more and more given to deep meditation, from which he seemed to emerge only against his will. He ate practically nothing, and although I both scolded and entreated him, he simply gave me the shadow of a smile and said gently:

“‘What is the use? The hour is drawing near.”

‘There was nothing I could answer.

‘The *fuqarā* began to look at me in a special way. I realized that they were trying to make out what I thought of the Shaikh’s health. Usually I saw little of them. They knew who I was, and the friendship that the Shaikh showed me was enough to make them well disposed towards me. But none the less, they generally remained somewhat aloof. The feeling that their Master was in danger brought them nearer to me. I reassured them with a smile. I was in fact convinced that the Shaikh would go on living to the very last flicker of his strength—not that he would fight to live, but that he had accustomed his body to do with so little that his organism went on working at a reduced speed. I knew that he would continue like this, with a minimum of strength which would have long since proved insufficient for anyone else. He would use up the very last drop of oil in the lamp of life, which he had turned so low that it was now no more than a night-light. And he knew this as well as I did.

The Shaikh scarcely ever introduced me to any of the *fuqarā* except those who were of Western origin. Westerners did in fact come to him now and then. But my relationship with them was always rather limited. Not being an initiate, I did not speak their language, and I felt it would have been inquisitive to question them as to what had brought them to this path.

‘Some of them were real personalities—for example, a well-known artist, whose

acquaintance I would never have expected to make in this way. On joining the tradition this artist had taken to wearing Moslem dress, which suited him so well that he might himself have passed for a Shaikh. He spent eight days in the *zāwiyah*, and was accompanied by a member of the Tribunal of Tunis and by a lady, both initiates, as he was, and extremely likeable.

‘There was also an American, more or less without means, who had arrived no one knew how, but who fell ill after a few days, and had to be sent to hospital, and eventually repatriated....

‘Despite his increasing weakness, the Shaikh continued to talk to his disciples, but was obliged to make his sessions with them shorter. His heart was growing feeble, and its beat became irregular, and I had much trouble to make him take the stimulants which were necessary to restore its defective rhythm. Fortunately, infinitesimal doses were enough to act on an organism that had never been contaminated by the action of medicines.

‘In 1932 we were badly shaken by his having a partial heart attack. I was summoned in all haste, and when I arrived his pulse was imperceptible and he seemed to have lost all consciousness. An intra-veinous injection brought him round. He opened his eyes, and looked at me reproachfully.

“‘Why did you do that?’ he said. ‘You should have let me go. There is no point in keeping me back. What is the good?’”

“‘If I am at your side’, I answered, ‘it is because God willed it so. And if He willed it so, it was in order that I might do my duty by you as your doctor.’”

“‘Very well’, he said. *‘In shā’Allāh.’*”

‘I stayed with him for some time so as to watch his pulse, fearing that he might have a relapse, and I only left him when he seemed to me to be out of immediate danger.

‘After this warning there were others. None the less the Shaikh lived on, with ups and downs, for nearly another two years. When he was relatively well he resumed his normal life as if nothing had happened. He seemed however to be waiting, eagerly but patiently, for the end. His intense inward life only showed itself in his expression. His body seemed no more than a worn-out prop which at any moment was going to crumble to powder.

‘One morning he sent for me. His condition, to all appearances, was no more serious than it had been the day before or the day before that, but he said:

“‘It will be today. Promise me to do nothing, and to let things take their course.’”

‘I said that he seemed to be no worse, but he insisted.

“‘I know it will be today. And I must be allowed to return to God.’”

‘I left him, impressed by what he had said, but none the less a little sceptical. I had seen him so often with his life hanging by a thread without the thread having broken, and so, I thought, it would be again that day.

‘But when I came back in the afternoon, the picture had changed. He was scarcely breathing, and I could not count his pulse. He opened his eyes when he felt my fingers on his wrist, and recognized me. His lips murmured:

“I am going at last to take my rest in the Presence of God.”

‘He clasped my hand feebly and closed his eyes. It was a last farewell. My place was no longer there. He belonged from then on to his *fuqarā*, who were waiting in the background. I withdrew, telling Sidi Addah that I had seen the Shaikh for the last time,

‘I learnt that evening that two hours after I had left he had gently passed away, almost imperceptibly, reverently surrounded by all those disciples who lived at the *zāwiyah* or were staying there.

‘The last drop of oil had been used up.

‘I have tried to give here an idea of what the Shaikh Al-‘Alawī was like. I am well aware that this account leaves much to be desired, but I was bent on relating nothing except what I was absolutely sure of. Some of the remarks I have quoted are exactly, word for word, those that were used by the Shaikh himself. As regards others, I cannot be sure that he used exactly the same expressions that I have ascribed to him, but I can guarantee the general sense as being his.

‘It would have been easy to embroider such a theme, but I preferred to keep to the dry sobriety of the memories of which I was certain, and I feel that the Shaikh stands out all the clearer and truer to life. My portrayal of him has moreover the special characteristic of having been made impartially and objectively, without needless panegyrics and without the halo that a disciple would no doubt have been tempted to put in. It is enough in itself, and perhaps gains for having been sketched by one of “the profane”.

‘I have avoided any personal appreciation of the Shaikh’s doctrine. My opinion about such questions would have been in any case irrelevant, because my intention was simply to give an impression of the Shaikh as I had known him, and not to discuss his ideas. I know that the doctrine in question was an esoteric one, and since I am not an initiate my ideas are inevitably very vague about it.

‘Perhaps the initiates will smile when they read some of my impressions, but they will thank me for my sincerity and for having been as simple and straightforward as I could. They will notice also that never in any place have I used the word “faith”... I remember once having said to him that what prevented me from trying to “raise my spirit above myself” was no doubt lack of faith.

‘He answered:

“Faith is necessary for religions, but it ceases to be so for those who go further and who achieve self-realization in God. Then one no longer believes, because one sees. There is no longer any need to believe, when one *sees* the Truth.”

Seen from Within

The Shaikh was born at Mostaganem in 1869. His name, as given on the title-pages of most of his books, was Abu ’l-‘Abbās Ahmad ibn Mustafa ’l-‘Alawī, and he was an only son, with two sisters. A little less than a year before his birth his mother Fātimah ‘saw in her sleep the Prophet with a jonquil in his hand. He looked her full in the face and smiled at her and threw the flower to her, whereupon she took it up with humble modesty. When she woke, she told her husband of the vision, and he interpreted it as meaning that they would be blessed with a pious son, and he had in fact been importuning God not to leave him without an heir.... After a few weeks God confirmed her dream, and she conceived her son.’

After the Shaikh’s death in 1934, the following autobiographical extract was found among his papers. He had evidently dictated it some years previously to one of his disciples:

‘As to learning how to write, I never made much effort in that direction, and I never went to school, not even for a single day. My only schooling was what I learned from my father at home during the Koran lessons which he used to give me, and my handwriting is still quite unproficient. My learning by heart the Book of God went as far as the *Sūrah ar-Rahmān*, and there I came to a standstill owing to the various occupations which I was forced to turn to through sheer necessity. The family had not enough to live on—although you would never have thought it, for my father was proud and reserved to the point of never showing on his face what was in his mind, so that nobody could have concluded from outward signs that he was in need of anything. I hesitated

between several different crafts, and finally took to cobbling and became quite good at it, and our situation improved in consequence. I remained a cobbler for a few years, and then went into trade, and I lost my father when I was just sixteen. Although I was so young I had been doing all sorts of things for him and I was bent on nothing so much as giving him pleasure. He was exceedingly fond of me, and I do not remember him ever blaming me for anything or beating me, except when he was giving me lessons, and then it was because I was lazy in learning the Koran. As to my mother, she was even more lavish in her affection, and she worried more about me than he had done. In fact after his death she did all she could in the way of harsh words and blows and locking the door and so on to prevent me from going out at night. I wanted very much to humour her, but I could not bring myself to give up attending lessons at night and gatherings for *dhikr* [Sufi sessions of Invocation]. What made her so anxious was that our house was outside the town on a road which one might well fear to go along alone at night; and she continued in her attempts to stop me, and I for my part continued to attend those gatherings, until by the Grace of God she gave her full consent, and there was nothing to mar our love for each other, which remained unclouded until the day of her death in 1332 [1914], when I was 46.

‘As to my attendance at lessons, it did not amount to much, as it was only possible now and then, in between work, and if I had not had a certain natural aptitude and understanding I should not have gained anything worth speaking of. But I was very much addicted to learning, and would sometimes steep myself in books the whole night long; and I was helped in these nocturnal studies by a Shaikh whom I used to bring back to our house. After this had been going on for several months, my wife took offence and claimed divorce from me on the grounds of my not giving her her rights, and she had in fact some cause to complain. My attendance at lessons, such as it was, did not go on for as much as two years; it none the less enabled me to grasp some points of doctrine in addition to what I gained in the way of mental discipline. But it was not until I had busied myself with the doctrine of the Folk, and had come to know its Masters, that my mind opened and I began to have a certain breadth of knowledge and understanding.’

(At this point the scribe to whom this was dictated asked him about how he first came into contact with those who follow the path of the mystics.)

‘My first leaning in that direction was marked by my attachment to one of the Masters of the ‘Īsāwī Tarīqah, who impressed me by his unworldliness and evident piety. I made every effort to comply with the requisites of that order, and this came quite easily to me on account of my

youth and the instinctive attraction for wonders and marvels which is part of human nature. I became proficient in these practices, and was well thought of by the men of the order, and I believed in my ignorance that what we did was purely and simply a means of drawing near to God. On the day when God willed that I should be inspired with the truth we were at one of our gatherings, and I looked up and saw a paper that was on one of the walls of the house we were in, and my eye lit on a saying that was traced back to the Prophet. What I learned from it caused me to give up what I had been doing in the way of working wonders, and I determined to limit myself in that order to the litanies and invocations and recitations of the Koran. From that time I began to extricate myself and to make excuses to my brethren until I finally gave up those other practices altogether. I wanted to drag the entire brotherhood away from them also, but that was not easy. As for myself, I broke away as I had intended, and only retained from that contact the practice of snake-charming. I continued to charm snakes by myself or with some of my friends until I met Shaikh Sidi Muhammad Al-Būzīdī.

‘As to my meeting with this Shaikh, whichever way I look at it, it seems to me to have been a pure Grace from God; for although we—that is, I and my friend Sidi al-Hājj Bin-‘Awdah who shared my business with me—were longing to find someone who could take us by the hand and guide us, we did not go to the Shaikh Al-Būzīdī and seek him out where he was, but it was he who came to us, quite unexpectedly. My friend had already told me about him. He said: “I used to know a Shaikh called Sidi Hamū of the family of the Prophet. He left his home and went for several years to Morocco, and when he returned many people attached themselves to him. He used to speak with authority about the path of the mystics, but to try him God sent against him a man who did him much harm so that he found himself faced with all sorts of opposition, and now he is as subdued as any disciple, without a trace of his former spiritual activity. However, I think that he is one who could be relied on for guidance upon the path. No true spiritual guide has ever appeared whom God did not try with someone who wronged him either openly or behind his back.”

‘This was the gist of what he said, and immediately I determined to go to this Shaikh on my friend’s recommendation. I myself knew nothing about him except that once, when a boy, I had heard his name in connection with an illness which I had. They brought me an amulet and said: “This is from Sidi Hamū Shaikh Būzīdī”, and I used it and was cured.

‘My friend and I were at work together some days after this conversation, when suddenly he said: “Look, there is that Shaikh going down the road.” Then he went up to him and asked him

to come in, which he did. They talked for a while, but I was too busy with my work to be able to notice what they were talking about. When the Shaikh got up to go, my friend begged him not to stop visiting us. He said good-bye and went, and I asked my friend what impression he had had, and he said: "His talk is far above what one finds in books." He came to see us from time to time, and it was my friend who talked to him and plied him copiously with questions, whereas I was more or less tongue-tied, partly out of reverence for him and partly because my work left me no time to talk.

‘One day, when he was with us in our shop, the Shaikh said to me: "I have heard that you can charm snakes, and that you are not afraid of being bitten." I admitted this. Then he said: "Can you bring me one now and charm it here in front of us?" I said that I could, and going outside the town, I searched for half the day, but only found a small one, about half an arm's length. This I brought back with me and putting it in front of him, I began to handle it according to my custom, while he sat and watched me. "Could you charm a bigger snake than this?" he asked. I replied that the size made no difference to me. Then he said: "I will show you one that is bigger than this and far more venomous, and if you can take hold of it you are a real sage." I asked him to show me where it was, and he said: "I mean your soul which is between the two sides of your body. Its poison is more deadly than a snake's, and if you can take hold of it and do what you please with it, you are, as I have said, a sage indeed." Then he said: "Go and do with that little snake whatever you usually do with them, and never go back to such practices again", and I went out, wondering about the soul and how its poison could be more deadly than a snake's.

‘Another day, during this period when the Shaikh used to call on us, he fixed his eyes on me and then said to my friend. "The lad is qualified to receive instruction" or "He would be receptive to instruction", or some such remark; and on another occasion he found a paper in my hand on which was written something in praise of Shaikh Sidi Muhammad ibn 'Īsā, and after looking at it he said to me: "If you live long enough you will be, God willing, like Shaikh Sidi Muhammad ibn 'Īsā", or "You will attain to his spiritual rank"—I forget his exact words. This seemed to me a very remote possibility but I said: "God willing"; and it was not long before I was attached to his order and took him as a guiding light in the path of God. My friend had already been received into the order about two months previously, though he had kept this from me, and only told me after I myself had been received. I did not understand at that time the reason for this secrecy.

‘After the Shaikh had transmitted to me the litanies for morning and evening recitation, he

told me not to speak about them to anyone—“until I tell you”, he said. Then in less than a week he called me to him and began to talk to me about the Supreme Name (*Allāh*) and the method of invoking it. He told me to devote myself to *dhikr Allāh* [Invocation of the Name *Allāh*] in the way generally practised in our order at that time; and since he had no special cell of retreat for *dhikr*, I was unable to find a place where I could be alone undisturbed. When I complained of this to him, he said: “There is no place better for being alone than the cemetery.” So I went there alone at nights, but it was not easy for me. I was so overcome with fear that I could not concentrate on the *dhikr*, although for many nights I tried to do so.

‘I complained again to the Shaikh, and he said: “I did not give you a binding order. I merely said there was no place better for being alone than the cemetery.” Then he told me to limit my *dhikr* to the last third of the night, and so I invoked at night and made contact with him during the day. Either he would come to me, or else I would go to him, although his house was not always a good place for meeting on account of the children and for other reasons. In addition to this, at midday, I went on attending the lessons in theology which I had attended previously. One day he asked me: “What lessons are those that I see you attending?” I said: “They are on the Doctrine of Unity (*at-tawhīd*) and I am now at “the realization of proofs”. He said: “Sidi So-and-so used to call it ‘the doctrine of turbidity’ (*at-tawhīl*)”. Then he added: “You had better busy yourself now with purifying your innermost soul until the Lights of your Lord dawn in it and you come to know the real meaning of Unity. But as for scholastic theology, it will only serve to increase your doubts and pile up illusion upon illusion.” Finally he said: “You had better leave the rest of those lessons until you are through with your present task, for it is an obligation to put what is more important before what is of lesser importance.”

‘No order that he ever gave me was so hard to obey as this. I had grown very fond of those lessons and had come to rely on them so much for my understanding of the doctrine that I was on the point of disobeying him. But God put into my Heart this question: How do you know that what you are receiving from the Shaikh Al-Būzīdī is not the kind of knowledge that you are really seeking, or something even higher than it? Secondly, I comforted myself with the thought that the prohibition was not a permanent one; thirdly, I remembered that I had taken an oath of allegiance to obey him; and fourthly I told myself that perhaps he wanted to put me to trial, as is the way of Shaikhs. But all these arguments did not stop the ache of sorrow that I felt within me. What sent that away was my spending in solitary invocation the hours which I had previously devoted to

reading, especially after I had begun to feel the results of this invocation.

‘As to his way of guiding his disciples, stage by stage, it varied. He would talk to some about the form in which Adam was created and to others about the cardinal virtues and to others about the Divine Actions, each instruction being especially suited to the disciple in question. But the course which he most often followed, and which I also followed after him, was to enjoin upon the disciple the invocation of the single Name with distinct visualization of its letters until they were written in his imagination. Then he would tell him to spread them out and enlarge them until they filled all the horizon. The *dhikr* would continue in this form until the letters became like light. Then the Shaikh would show the way out of this standpoint—it is impossible to express in words how he did so—and by means of this indication the Spirit of the disciple would quickly reach beyond the created universe provided that he had sufficient preparation and aptitude—otherwise there would be need for purification and other spiritual training. At the abovementioned indication the disciple would find himself able to distinguish between the Absolute and the relative, and he would see the universe as a ball or a lamp suspended in a beginning-less, endless void. Then it would grow dimmer in his sight as he persevered in the invocation to the accompaniment of meditation, until it seemed no longer a definite object but a mere trace. Then it would become not even a trace, until at length the disciple was submerged in the World of the Absolute and his certainty was strengthened by Its Pure Light. In all this the Shaikh would watch over him and ask him about his states and strengthen him in the *dhikr* degree by degree until he finally reached a point of being conscious of what he perceived through his own power. The Shaikh would not be satisfied until this point was reached, and he used to quote the words of God which refer to: *One whom his Lord hath made certain, and whose certainty He hath then followed up with direct evidence* [Koran 11:17].

‘When the disciple had reached this degree of independent perception, which was strong or weak according to his capability, the Shaikh would bring him back again to the world of outward forms after he had left it, and it would seem to him the inverse of what it had been before, simply because the light of his inward eye had dawned, He would see it as *Light upon Light*, and so it had been before in reality.

‘In this degree the disciple may mistake the bowstring for the arrow as has happened to many of those who are journeying to God, and he may say as more than one has said: “I am He whom I love, and He whom I love is I”, and the like—enough to make anyone who has no

knowledge of the attainments of the mystics and is unfamiliar with their ejaculations throw at him the first thing that he can lay hands on. But the master of this degree comes before long to distinguish between the spiritual points of view, and to give to each of the different degrees of existence its due and to each of the spiritual stations what rightly belongs to it. This station took hold of me, and it has been my home for many years, and I have become as it were expert in it, and made known its obligations, and my followers have had what I wrote about it when I was first in its grip, and some of them now have knowledge of its obligations, and some of them fall short of this knowledge. The acuteness of this state still comes back to me sometimes, but it does not compel me to write about it. True, it prompts me to speak about it, but it is easier to live with than it was, something that I feel rather than something that I am submerged in.

‘This path which I have just described as being that of my Master is the one that I have followed in my own spiritual guidance, leading my own followers along it, for I have found it the nearest of the paths which lead to God.’

From A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century