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## A Meeting on Board the Ship

I traveled to Alexandria on the exact day when there was an Egyptian ship on her way to Beirut. I felt exhausted both physically and mentally, so as soon as I got on the ship I went to bed and slept for two or three hours. I woke up when I heard a voice saying: "The brother seems to be tired." I replied positively and said: "The journey from Cairo to Alexandria made me feel so tired, because I wanted to be on time, so I did not have enough sleep last night."

I realized that the man was not Egyptian because of his accent, and I was, as usual, curious about him and eager to introduce myself to him. Apparently he was an Iraqi lecturer from the University of Baghdad and his name was Munim. He came to Cairo to submit his Ph.D. thesis at al-Azhar University.

We started our conversation by talking about Egypt and the Arab and the Muslim worlds, and we talked about the Arab defeat and the Jewish victory. The topics we covered through our conversation varied, and at one point I said that the reason behind the defeat was because of the divisions of the Arabs and Muslims into many small countries, so that despite the great number of their populations, their enemies do not pay any consideration to them.

We talked about Egypt and the Egyptians, and we both agreed about the reasons behind the defeat. I added that I was against these divisions which were emphasized by the colonial powers in order to facilitate our occupation and humiliation. I said that we even differentiated between the Hanafi and the Maliki and told him a sad story about an incident which happened to me in the "Abu Hanifah Mosque" in Cairo.

While I was there I prayed the afternoon prayer "al-Asr" with the men, and after we finished, the man standing next to me asked me with some anger, "Why did you not fold your hands in front of you during the prayers?" I replied with respect and courtesy that the Malikis prefer to drop their hands, and after all I am a Maliki. His reaction was: "Go to Maliki mosque and pray there." I left the mosque feeling disgusted and bitter, and I became even more perplexed.

The Iraqi teacher then smiled and told me that he was a Shi'i. I was a little disturbed by his answer and thoughtlessly said, "If I knew you were a Shi'i, I would not have spoken to you." He asked: "Why?" I

replied, "Because you are not Muslims. You worship 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, and the moderates among you worship Allah but do not believe in the message of the prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.). You curse the Archangel Gabriel for betraying what he was entrusted with. Instead of delivering the message to 'Ali he gave it to Muhammad."

I continued with this type of anecdote while my companion listened carefully, at times smiling and at times showing his astonishment. When I finished talking, he asked me again, "Are you a teacher, teaching students?" I answered, "Yes." He said, "If that is what the teachers think, then we cannot blame the ordinary people who barely have any education."

I said, "What do you mean?" He answered, "I beg your pardon, but from where did you get all these false allegations?" I told him that my information came from famous history books, and the rest is common knowledge. Then he said, "Well let us leave the people, but could you tell me what books have you read?" I started mentioning a few books, such as those by Ahmed Amin "Fajr al-Islam, Duha al-Islam and Zuhor al-Islam" and many others.

He asked: "Since when has Ahmed Amin been an authority on the Shi'a?" He added, "To be fair and objective, one has to refer to the original sources of the subject." I said, "Why should I investigate a subject which is common knowledge to all people?" He replied, "Ahmed Amin himself has visited Iraq, and I was one of the teachers he met in Najaf, and when we rebuked him about what he had written about the Shi'a, he said that he was sorry, and he did not know anything about the Shi'a, and that was the first time he had met Shias. We told him that his excuse was worse than his mistake, for how could he write bad things about us when he did not know anything about us?"

He added, "Brother, if we judge the Jews and the Christians through the Holy Qur'an, they would not accept the judgment, despite the fact that the Qur'an is our absolute proof. Therefore, we should show their mistakes in their books, because then the proof would be stronger, in accordance to the saying: From among them, there was one who bore witness against them."

His speech fell on my heart like cold water falling on the heart of a thirsty man, and I changed from a bitter critic to someone who is willing to listen and think, because I felt there was a sound logic and a strong proof. So I had to show some modesty and listen to him. I said to him, "So you are one of those who believe in the message of our prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.)?" He replied, "All Shias like me believe in it. Brother, you had better investigate the matter yourself, so you do not have any doubt about your brothers the Shias, because perhaps some doubt is a sin."

He added, "If you really want to know the truth and to see it with your own eyes so you could convince yourself, then I invite you to visit Iraq, and there you will meet the Ulama of the Shi'a, as well as the ordinary people, and then you will recognize the malicious lies."

I said, "It has been my wish to visit Iraq one day to see its famous Islamic heritage, especially the Abbasid heritage, and in particular that of Harun al-Rashid. But, first of all, my financial resources are

limited, and I have just enough to enable me to perform Umrah. Secondly, my present passport does not allow me to enter Iraq".

He replied: "Firstly, when I invited you to come to Iraq, that meant that I will take care of all your traveling costs between Beirut and Baghdad, both ways, and while you are in Iraq you will be staying with me, for you are my guest. Secondly, as far as the passport which does not allow you to enter Iraq, let us leave it to Allah, praise be to Him the Most High, and if Allah has decreed that you will visit, then it will be, even without a passport. However, we shall try to obtain an entry visa for you as soon as we arrive in Beirut".

I was very glad about that offer, and I promised my friend to answer his question the next day, if Allah the Most High willed it. I got out of the bedroom and onto the ship's deck breathing the fresh air, thinking seriously, while my mind was taken by the sea which filled the horizon. I thanked my God, Who created the universe, and who brought me to this place.

I asked Him, praise be to Him the Most High, to protect me from evil and the wicked and to guard me against errors and mistakes.

My mind wandered as I started to recall a series of events that I had experienced in the past. I remembered that happiness of my childhood up to that day and dreamed of a better future. I felt as if Allah and His Messenger were providing me with a special care. I looked towards Egypt, whose shores appeared from time to time on the horizon, and remembered how I had kissed the shirt of the Messenger of Allah (s.a.w.); they were my most precious memories of Egypt.

I recalled the words of the Shi'i which brought great joy to my heart, for it would fulfill an old dream of mine, that is to visit Iraq the country which reminded me of the court of al-Rashid and al-Mamun, who established Dar al-Hikmah which was sought by many students from the West in the days when the Islamic civilization was at its peak. In addition to that, it is the country of Shaykh Abdul Qadir al-Jilani, whose reputation had reached all countries, and whose Sufi order had entered every village a man whose high-mindedness surpassed everyone else's.

That, I thought, was another divine care from Allah to fulfill the dream. My mind wandered again until I was awake by the sound of the loudspeaker calling the passengers to go to the canteen for their dinner, I made my way to the place but I found it was crowded with people, shouting and bustling as they were trying to enter it.

Suddenly, I felt the Shi'i pulling me by my shirt, saying: "Come here brother do not bother yourself, we will eat later without this crowd. In fact I looked for you everywhere." Then he asked me, "Have you prayed?" I answered, "No, I have not prayed yet." So he asked me to join him in his prayers and later to come and eat after all the hustle and bustle had gone.

I liked the idea, so I accompanied him to an isolated place where we did our ablution, and then I asked him to lead the prayers in front to test him and to see how he prayed, with the intention of doing my

prayers later on. As soon as he called for the obligatory prayers at sunset and started reciting (Qur'anic verses) and reading various supplications, I changed my mind. I felt as if I was led by one of those pious and God fearing Companions of the Prophet, about whom I had read a lot. After he finished his prayers he read long supplications that I had not heard either in my country or in the countries I knew. I felt at ease every time I heard him praising the Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.) and his family and giving them what they rightly deserve.

After the prayers I noticed tears in his eyes, also I heard him asking Allah to open my eyes and to lead me to the right direction.

We went to the canteen which was almost empty, and he did not sit down until I had sat down, and when they brought us the food, he changed his dish for mine because his had more meat than mine.

He treated me as if I was his guest and kept telling me stories that I had never heard before concerning food, drink and table manners. I liked his manners. He led the evening prayers and extended it by reciting long supplications until I started crying, then I asked Allah, praise be to Him, to change my suspicions about the man because "Some doubt might be a sin." But who knows?

I slept that night dreaming about Iraq and the Arabian Nights, and I was woken by my friend calling the dawn prayers. We prayed together, then sat and talked about Allah's graces on the Muslims. We went back to sleep and when I got up again I found him sitting on his bed with a rosary in his hand mentioning the name of Allah, so I felt more at ease with him, and asked my God for forgiveness.

We were having our lunch in the canteen when we heard from the loudspeaker that the ship was approaching the Lebanese shores, and with Allah's help, we would be in Beirut harbor in two hours time. He asked me if I had thought about the matter, and what I had decided. I told him if Allah willed it and I got an entry visa, then I did not see why not, and I thanked him for his invitation.

We arrived in Beirut, where we spent one night then we left for Damascus.

As soon as we got to Damascus we went to the Iraqi Embassy there and obtained a visa at incredible speed. When we left the Embassy he congratulated me, and we thanked Allah for His help.

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