

Chapter Five

Once in a fortnight, the inmates were all hurdled out to what was known as “*Shams*”. One by one we were rushed to this room, which did not have a ceiling. Here we were able to breathe fresh air and enjoy some sunlight. As we passed through the corridor which led to “*Shams*”, we saw the ladies with their children seated in captivity. The guard instructed the ladies to cover their faces, while small babies fearfully clung to their mothers. The slightly grown up children played in the corridor, kicking the football, which was not there. They perhaps remembered their days of freedom and imagined things, which would help them, forget the plight of their mothers, or the torture of a passing-by male detainee.

We knew that there were some ladies in the corridor, for while we remained incarcerated in the cell, we distinctly heard hysteric screams of the ladies in the middle of the nights. Was it a nightmare? Or did she dream of her husband, her son or her youthful daughter who had either been captured or had disappeared never to be seen again? Or was it the pain in her ribs after having been mercilessly tortured in Ghufa Amaliyyat down below? One thing is certain. Whenever these shrieks pierced through the dark of the night, a blanket of silence fell upon us all. The Iraqis wondered what had befallen their nation. Could there be any justifiable malice against an innocent woman who has apprehended because her male relative had either defected or committed an offence? There were hundreds of them. Some were in the cells for over a year. How did I know? My wife was there!

While in *Shams* we were asked to remove our shirts and do some exercise. The guard stood there with a rubber hosepipe in his hands, and asked us to run round and round till we were breathless. And this followed by a vigorous exercise, which rendered everyone thoroughly exhausted. There were some who tried to avoid this gruesome drill under health pretexts. Some were spared, but not all. My Sudanese friend, Qasam, once sat down refusing to participate. He had been suffering from a nasty cough and a high temperature for sometime, and had not at all recovered. Right then Abu Mahmood, dressed in his black attire, appeared. His appearance always heralded a misfortune, for his unseemly features were enough to frighten anyone who chanced to see him in an unlit alley. He looked around and found Qasam and his likes retired in a corner. “*Shi Bek?*” “What is the matter with you?” No reason would convince

him. He then delivered a talk to us all in which he emphasized upon the need to exercise which, he said, was meant to keep us fit. "*An-tum Mawqufin*" – You are detainees, "*Ihtarirnu Anfusakurn*" – maintain your self-respect. And with that he ordered all the invalids to jump and run. Qasam ran till he panted and suffered from short breath. Later he was admitted to the 'hospital' down below, chained to his bed. Diagnosis? Tuberculosis."

God knows which medicine was administered to him, but he was sent back to our cell for convalescence. He was still coughing, and ran high temperature. Something within him seemed to eat him up. The Muhaqqiq recognized no infirmities. In that state of health, he was taken by the Haras blindfolded and handcuffed for interrogation. He was asked there by the Muhaqqiq to sing a Sudanese song, and then dance. Despite his frailty, he summoned all his strength to oblige. And then the mercurial mood of the Muhaqqiq became evident. "Tell the truth–Why did you go to Libya? Did you read the Green Book? What are your relations with Gaddafi and Khomeini?" To all this, his answer was simple. He had left Sudan as a political dissident, and came to Iraq to find a job. "Well, well–you do not want to tell the truth. Enough time has been given to you till now–but you refuse to realize. We have decided to.... execute you." With this fateful verdict, he returned to the cell. It is indeed difficult to assess whether he was being steadily devoured by his ailment or by the bare sword that hung over his head.

A visit to Shams was meant to give us opportunity of breathing fresh air and enjoying the sunlight. Here we would see the azure sky, the chirping birds flying, and at times hear the hoot or a siren. Once we heard Adhan also from a nearby mosque. Airport seemed to be not far away; because we could hear the planes take off and land. It is said that divine gifts and blessings are valued high when they are lost.

The sagacity of this maxim was best realized in the Shams, for we were only yards away from freedom. Freedom, which is taken for granted by all of us, and is rightly, considered as our basic right, can only be evaluated when it is denied. Here, while a group of our friends enjoyed the sunshine and fresh air, another group waited for the guard to go, so that they could sit in respite and brood over their fate. As the Haras left us for a few minutes, these friends would sit and cry. The sweet memory of the free past and the prospects of an uncertain future engendered a feeling of depression, which could not be easily overcome. And when we returned to the gloomy cell, the depression continued for hours on end.

And at that moment, the window in the metal door clicked open and the Haras appeared. He asked our chief to come and then spoke something, which was not audible. Abruptly the window was shut, in a manner to convey total indifference and an insult. And then the head said: "Brothers, Seyyid al–Haras (the guard) is totally displeased with the stench and filth in this cell. While we were in Shams, he visited this cell and was horrified to see the shamble. He now commands us to clean the floor, the toilet and the Hammam." All of us were soon mobilized to scrub the floor, and wash the closets. We sprinkled the 'Tide' washing powder originally rationed out to us for washing out torn clothes, and poured water to spread the layers of dirt evenly in the cell!

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