

Chapter Eighteen

Misfortune seems to have descended like a whirlwind upon Najaf, Kerbala and other Holy cities. Where are those glorious days when the sacred Shrines teemed with visiting pilgrims, and the small winding streets leading to numerous Mosques and Madressas were full of religious students and Ulema? These Holy places are now deserted, and the Madressas have been reduced to destitution and rubble. Most of the foreign students have been expelled, and the Ulema have either been banished or eliminated.

Many would testify that these religious cities and their Holy Shrines provided an atmosphere so peaceful and pure, unsullied by the taint of materialism and undue anxiety. I was here for Arbaeen, an event that normally attracted nearly a million Zuwwar every year. I was surprised to see very few Zuwwar this year. Instead of peace and tranquillity, there was fear and uncertainty everywhere. No young faces in Haram, except of those who were appointed by the authorities as spies and informers.

Just as I entered the Shrine of Imam Hussein A.S., and stood near Habib b. Mazahir's Zareeh, a young man leapt from the left and demanded:

"Who took the photographs?"

"Photographs? Which photographs?" I expressed my total surprise and ignorance. He regarded me threateningly and said:

"I saw a flash."

"I do not know. I do not have any camera on me," I said. He turned and disappeared into the Haram. This unexpected encounter was enough to unsettle me. In the evening, I was entering the courtyard of Hazrat Abbas A.S. when I was suddenly stopped by a soldier:

"Where do you come from?"

I told him. With evident suspicion, he asked:

"Do you have Muslims in your country?"

"Yes, many of them," I replied.

Within the Haram very few Ulema could be seen. How could places, which were virtually ruled by the clergy; where piety was the norm of life, and the streets bustled with religious activities, fall victim to the foul leprosy of nationalism, communism and other infamous ideologies? The institutions and parties, which spawned them, were there since long; probably the elements of complacency, decadence and tragic weakness among those at the helm rendered the region unprepared for the onslaught subsequently unleashed upon them.

The Holy Shrines are controlled by the Mukhaberat. Young security officers, dressed in plain clothes, stand near the main entrance, near the shoe keepers, at the gates, surrounding the Zareeh, under the arches of the courtyard, near the Imam who is leading the prayers and at times, next to you like an inseparable shadow.

In this third place of confinement a young Kurdish listened intently as I conversed with Majid. Then warily he came near and whispered: "I have a gift for you. Take this." He gave me two small green pieces of cloth and said: "I am from Samarra, these are from Askariyyan." A God-sent gift from an unknown quarter! But no sooner he did this, then the Haras apprehended him. Reprimanding the young man, the Haras said: "You still stick to these outmoded, obsolete baubles—you ignorant brute! Forget these. Remember: *'Ar-Risalatul Khalidah'*, the everlasting message of Arabism: wake up from your sleep!"

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