

Chapter Thirteen

The corridor to which I was brought the first day was dimly lit. As I sat on the floor, I remembered that it was Friday night: "Laylatul Jumu'ah".... and then my eyes fell on the handcuffs. I could not believe my eyes. Was this actually happening? Or was it a bad dream? Raising my head towards heaven, I sighed, and in a bid to control my emotions, I said: "Alhamdulillah – all praise be to Allah".

Unaccustomed to the ways, I pushed the irksome blindfold upwards and managed to survey the surroundings. The corridor was occupied by scores of people, all handcuffed and blindfolded. A cry of agony, now and then, pierced through the pervasive silence. I was terribly upset. My lips were dry, my throat parched.

Looking towards the Haras, I raised my finger and asked for water. He exchanged a glance of surprise with his colleague, and said: "Hear that? He is asking for water!" They both giggled. I had made an outrageously unusual request! But his colleague said: "Huwa Ghareeb", he is a stranger, give him some." A small glass filled with cold water was given to me, with an admonition: "Next time you are thirsty, seek my permission and go to the washroom. You will find water there." He was referring to the boiling water from the taps; but then I did not know.

As dawn broke, men around me shuffled and woke up from their sleep. And then one after another hesitantly sought permission from Haras. "Sayyidi" no reply. "Sayyidi?" no attention. He now dares raise his voice pleading: "Sayyidi?".... The Haras turns his face towards him with total indifference and shouts back "She Bek?" "May I go to the toilets?" "Go", the Haras shouts. This continues the whole day. No one is allowed to talk, and the blindfold must not be raised. Ah, the new Haras who had come to relieve his colleague saw that my bandage was a little higher. He came near and blurted: "Get it lower, and do not try to look around."

It is indeed difficult to describe the uneasiness and distress a person experiences when deprived of vision, knowing full well that God has endowed him with the normal sense of sight. Blindness is different. The latter is a state of resignation to fate, while the former always feels threatened and subdued. O God!

What a horrendous experience it is! Unable to sustain the perpetual darkness caused by the leather cover before my eyes, I kept on pushing it upwards, and then finding that the Haras was not attentive, surveyed the corridors and its inhabitants. Carefully, I placed the cover back to its position before he noticed.

"*Ya Allah Raham Kar.... Ya Allah....*", I heard. It was in my own language, the dialect seemed familiar. As he found his place in the corridor I managed to steal a view. He was middle-aged, with a luxurious growth of beard. I drew closer and asked: "Are you from Pakistan?" He was taken aback, for he least expected anyone who could speak Urdu. With a sigh of relief, he said: "No, I am from India." "Your name?" "Ali Husain." "Why are you here?" "I came for Ziyarat of Arbaeen." "So you are Shia?" "Yes I am." And then we had a brief exchange of information, all conducted in soft whispers.

Rooms lining the corridors were either single cells for solitary confinement, or 'Red Cell', "Ghurfatul Hamraa", where more than twenty would be squeezed in at a time. Murmur of Tasbeeh, Dua-e-Kumail, and Adhan could be heard from these rooms.

For six days, I was in this corridor, every hour expecting a release, which I hoped, was imminent. With the passage of time, hope denuded. The uncertainty was now indeed frightening. The only solace was the company of fellow humans who had shared my plight. It was common suffering. Then one day, my name was announced along with many others. Six of us stood up. We were asked to line up, holding the shirt of one in front, so that "blind would lead blind." Ali Hussein was not to come, so he felt miserable. "Where are you going?", he demanded. Not knowing what destiny held in store for me, I conjectured "I am being released-hopefully. *Khuda Hafiz.*" Ali Hussein raised his shackled hands and prayed: "O Allah, send me where this man goes!"

We were taken to a cell, which was on the fourth floor. As the door opened, our blindfolds and handcuffs were removed, and the Haras pushed us all in. In spite of the cold outside, the cell was warm, and heat inside was stifling. There were more than three hundred unfortunate detainees swarming in this place, where hardly seventy or eighty could be accommodated. Two days later, Ali Hussein appeared. He suffered from myopia, with a limited visual acuity. I advanced to greet him. "Salaamun Alaikum, Bhai Ali Hussein," I said.

Recognizing my voice, he looked up and then after a pause, said: "So my prayer was answered! I asked God to send me where you were going, little knowing where it would be-and here I am, landed in this dungeon *Ya Allah Raham Kar.*"

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