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Chapter Seven

The modes of chastisement varied. At times it depended upon the Muhaqqiq. There seemed to be a long list of punishments, and he would prescribe any for the detainee. From Mosul, there was Husain, an old man who was a farmer. For six days on end no morsel of food or sip of water was allowed to him. He had a bulky, beefy frame, and perhaps this helped him survive. When he was finally allowed the first meal, he could hardly open his eyes to see what went into his mouth. He had been denied sleep as well. When sleep stealthily took the better of him, he was slapped and kicked by the ever attending Haras. His speech became incoherent, his eyes blank. Sitting next to me, he showed some sign of recovery after weeks. What was his offence? "I used to go to the mosque fairly regularly. They thought I was religious, and therefore affiliated to Hizbud-Da'wah." Then, with an admonition he said "Do not mention Da'wah here. They will strangle you."

The detainees came and went. From the first three hundred, our number fell to around one hundred and eighty. And it dwindled still further to eighty-six. What a relief! We were now able to stretch our legs and sleep. It was not so before. Our chief had contrived an ingenious method for our sleeping cycles. Everyone was a Badeel to his mate. While my friend slept, I stood upon his body for six hours or so. No movement was possible because of congestion, nor could I sit because of the feet interlocking each other's. And then he woke up to allow me to sleep. He stood over my body as if to prevent me from escaping.

But our room soon became crowded as scores of Egyptian and Jordanian young men were brought in. We were nearing the three hundred mark again. The cell now rang with Arabic dialects, punctuated with hilarity so characteristic of the Egyptians. There were other companions who stuck to us so faithfully. They were the overgrown black lice, which skipped from one person to another, causing intolerable rash, irritation and pain. These parasites never left us alone. They were to be seen everywhere on our bodies, on our torn and slit shirts, in the buttonholes, and hundreds of them crawling in the plaited curly hair of the Sudanese, the Somalis and other Arab friends. Killing them became a good pastime, and we soon obliged each other by picking up a stray louse crawling on the ground, or on the other fellow's clothes.

Sores appeared everywhere, and scratching became an obsession.

A 'Doctor' came to the metal door thrice a day. The window would open and a trimly young man accompanied by Haras would appear. *"Man Indahu Ilaj?"* he would shout. Those who needed treatment flocked to the door. The common complaints were *'ishal'* (diarrhoea), *'Qabdh'* (constipation), *'Ghudood'* (tonsils), sores on the tongue and upon the palates and the nostrils. The medicine man had a list, which he consulted. If one said *'Ishal'*, one was given the red tablets to swallow in his presence, and if it was *'Qabdh'*, then the tablet was invariably pink; and so on. Minor ailments like sores were never treated; they were all classified as "Hassasiyyah", allergic. Some killer cream finally treated the scourge and havoc played by the lice, and we felt greatly relieved. The lice were there, but their number had considerably reduced.

It takes all sorts of men to make a society in the cell. There were political refugees, dissidents, defectors, smugglers, thieves, foreign exchange dealers, pimps and sexually perverted. And along with them were men like me who were accused of espionage. Jawad, aged 19 years, was there because he tried to trace the President's portrait and inadvertently drew his nose crooked; Muhsin was there because he visited mosques and the Holy Shrines of Najaf and Kerbala quite frequently; Abdul-Rab was apprehended because he was found with a note-book in which he had written quotations from Nahjul Balagha; Mustafa, a Turk, was brought in because they mistook him for another Mustafa, also a Turk, who was wanted; Jasim was there because he dealt with ammunition and firearms; Ibrahim came because he believed that Iraq-Iran war must stop and strongly expressed his opinions before the informers; Abu Mansoor was here for no reason known to him, and a half-mad Muhammad was with us because he visited the Shrine of Najaf, and banged his slippers upon the sacred Zareeh. An Indian, Kehar Kaushal, entered the cell because he joined a strike, which was illegal in Iraq. They had struck together since they had not been paid for six months. Two Pakistanis came to Iraq without visa, another one without a passport. One Indian tampered with his own Passport, trying to erase an old, expired visa so that a new one could be stamped. Such was the colourful, motley crowd, each with a peculiar story.

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