

SHORT
INTERESTING
STORIES

Bint Al-Huda

xkpr

Chapter 1

FORWARD

Aminah Haidar Al-Sadr was born in the holy city of Kadhmain, Baghdad in 1937. Her father, a renowned religious leader, died when she was two years old. She enjoyed the loving care of her mother and two kind brothers, Sayyid Ismael and Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir Al-Sadr. Aminah Al-Sadr, known as Bint Al-Huda, did not attend any government school, but was well educated at the hands of her two scholar brothers, especially Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir, who recognized her bright talent. As a teenager, Bint Al-Huda was a voracious reader who always spent her pocket money on useful books and increasing her knowledge.

The first half of this century indicated that Western cultural values dominated the Arab and Muslim countries of the world. Secular systems spread deviation and corruption and branded Islam as reactionary and as a hindrance to progress.

At the age of 20, Bint Al-Huda began writing articles in Al-Adhwa magazine published by the religious ulema in the holy city of Najaf, Iraq. Her articles drew the attention of intellectuals in Najaf and became torches which illuminated the darkness for women. Her writings awakened a society which, like many societies in other Muslim countries, was being deviated under the pretexts of freedom and equality. Possessing keen insight, she felt the great damage that was being inflicted upon Islam through the deliberate corruption of women. Her simply-written stories tackled these wrong traditions and presented truly Islamic concepts concerning woman and her specific role in a healthy society.

It is a great pity and a serious setback that the Muslim women of the world lost this great woman writer so early. A major crime of the Iraqi Ba'thist regime was the tortured murder of this noble lady and her brother and religious scholar, Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir Al-Sadr (May Allah bless them both). The tyrannical, anti-Islamic regime of Saddam was well aware of their brave struggle for the sake of Islam and decided to

finish them off. They were arrested in April, 1980, and killed in cold blood three days later

By presenting these stories written by Bint Al-Huda, we aim to acquaint our English readers with this brave woman who confronted tyrants and achieved martyrdom for the sake of Islam.

Islamic Thought Foundation
Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran
October 1987.
<http://www.iran-itf.com>

Chapter 2

INTRODUCTION BY THE AUTHOR

Dear Readers,

To embody the general concepts of the Islamic viewpoint concerning life is the aim behind these stories. I believe concepts at the theoretical level cannot produce a change or an effect as they can when presented in the form of events or incidents from real life. Thus the Holy Qur'an gives examples and values through pictures with details of the events in which prophets and the righteous suffered for the sake of Allah. If these short stories are knitted of imagination, they are certainly taken from the depth of present-day Muslim girls' lives. Hence, any girl may read in these stories, incidents she has experienced in some way or directly.

In each story, there is the positive stance of an Islamic viewpoint. The difference is great between this pure and sublime Islamic stance and the impure, corrupted stance of non-Islamic views.

Bint-Al-Huda

Chapter 3

THE HOMELESS AUNT

Khadijah listened as her aunt tearfully complained to them about her miserable situation. She was saying, "So you see, I have received nothing for my trouble. Both of my children disregard all that I have suffered for their sake. I sold my last gold ornament to send my daughter abroad. I have mortgaged my house twice to enable my son to become a doctor. I sold a valuable carpet so that I could buy a colour T .V. to please my daughter. Do they appreciate or even remember such sacrifices? No. My son wants me to stay away from his home since his wife can't tolerate my presence in the company of her aristocratic visitors. She says she wants to be free in my son's house, as if I deprived her of her freedom."

"I thought that my daughter would be happy to have me live in her house. She is my only daughter. You remember how I helped her to live a life free from worry. Do you know how she treated me in return? Like a maid in her service who should clean her house for her and look after her child while she and her husband spent their time at theaters and clubs. Yesterday, she was out until one in the morning. Her child cried and cried and I couldn't calm him. When she finally came home, I was tired and complained about her behavior. I wanted her to treat me like her mother, not like a servant or a baby sitter...."

"Can you guess what she said to me? Without any shame, she told me that since she gave me shelter and food, I had no cause to complain. She also told me that she valued her freedom and was not ready change for the sake of either her child or her mother."

She wept bitterly, unable to continue. Khadijah gave her something to drink and Khadijah's mother tried to comfort her sister. Khadijah told her aunt gently, "...It is a pity that you have taken so much trouble to raise your children. You have brought them up in such away that you

yourself produced the present state of affairs. You thought that your daughter's happiness could be found in unlimited freedom, and, as a result, she did not learn what her responsibilities were towards you. You helped her neglect her religious duties. Your methods have backfired. She enjoyed life to the utmost without the least concern for Allah, and she forgot the high position Allah the almighty has assigned to a mother. She forgot the Qur'anic verse: *And your Lord has commanded that you shall not serve but Him, and goodness to your parents. If either or both of them reach old age with you, reprimand them not, nor chide them, and speak to them a generous word. And make yourself submissively gentle to them with compassion and say: Oh, my Lord! Have compassion on them as they brought me up.* (al-Isra, 23 & 24)

And the Qur'anic verse: "... and keep up prayer, surely prayer is timed ordinance for the believers" (al-Nisa, 103)

"You should have taught her the verse in the Holy Qur'an concerning hijab," continued Khadijah, "... and let them (women) wear their covering over their bosoms and not display of their ornaments.." (al-Nisa, 31)

"The result of being raised with no regard to religious duties is always deviation from the right path. There is a great difference between one who spends long hours watching television and indecent films and a person who spends his nights reading religious books which tell him that caring for parents is equal to worshipping Allah, and that Paradise lies at the feet of mothers. You have sold your gold ornament," she continued, "and sent your daughter abroad, but you have forgotten that such travel can uproot all good instincts still buried within her conscience. She has returned to you a figure empty of compassion."

Her aunt sighed deeply and said, "You are quite right, Khadijah. It is my own fault, but I have realized this too late. I followed my husband's advice, which was to raise my children free of all complexes, and to allow them to have whatever they desired. Now, I see how mistaken I have been. Your parents, who brought you up with much attention to religious instructions, are quite happy with you." Khadijah replied, "They are happy as well with my husband and with my brother's wife. My husband encourages me to fulfil my duty towards my parents in order to please Almighty Allah."

Her aunt then said, "I wish I had chosen a righteous husband for my daughter to help her rid herself of all deviation. She should not have married a man who gambles and drinks."

Khadijah then asked, "Why did you agree to such a marriage?"

"It was his expensive car that attracted my daughter, and the high dowry impressed me and prompted me to accept him as a son-in-law," replied her aunt. Sorrowfully, Khadijah said, "Oh, how frank you are, dear aunt! It is a pity that you have realized the truth too late. May Allah save you from this loss, since you admit your fault."

The aunt spent a week in her sister's house, and during that time neither her daughter nor her son showed any concern for her well-being. Khadijah's mother wanted her sister to live with them, but their house was small. The aunt was seriously pressed for a place to live. One morning, Khadijah and her husband said to her, "Please come and stay with us. We really would like to have you. Don't disappoint us."

"Oh, I am a broken-hearted woman. What can I do for you?" her aunt replied. Then she accepted their kind offer gratefully. Khadijah mentioned a narration of the Prophet of Islam (s) in this regard, which states: A Muslim believer came to the Prophet (s) and asked what he could do to please Allah. The Prophet (s) asked him if he had a mother, and the man said: "No". Then the Prophet (s) asked if he had an aunt, and he answered: "Yes". The Prophet (s) recommended that he should look after her and love her because she had the same position as mother. The aunt feared that she would be a burden to them.

But Khadijah's husband said, "Please do not say such a thing. I lost my mother too early in life to enjoy her love and care. Perhaps Allah has sent you to make up for that loss. You can live with us and you can receive your son and daughter here whenever you like."

Khadijah's mother, who was seated nearby, said, "They are quite serious about wanting you to live with them. I would be very happy to know that you are near my daughter."

The aunt moved to her new home and was comfortable and at ease for the first time in her life. She never felt like an intruder, and Khadijah accompanied her when she attended religious meetings. The aunt benefited very much from these meetings and enhanced her religious

knowledge. She compared Khadijah's happy marriage to her daughter's. She could feel the harmony and spiritual understanding between Khadijah and her husband, and recalled her daughter's life, which was full of quarrels resulting from jealousy, selfishness and indifference. She could easily differentiate between the normal, healthy life of her niece and the disturbed, unnatural one of her daughter. She could do nothing but pray to Allah to guide her daughter and son to the right path.

Early one morning a few months later, the doorbell rang continuously, and Khadijah hurried to open it. She was surprised to see her cousin standing at the door, carrying her child in her arms. Her eye was black and she looked pale. Khadijah welcomed her cousin and took her to her mother's room. The mother was surprised to see her daughter, and she rushed towards her to take her in her arms. She thought that her daughter longed to see her and she had regretted her past behaviour. But her daughter sat down on the nearest chair without the faintest idea of her mother's feelings.

The daughter said, "My husband has turned me out of our house, as if I were a piece of used furniture that could be replaced." Her mother's face grew pale and she said, "He turned you out? When? How?"

Her daughter replied, "Oh, mother. You know how he is. He returns home late every evening, quite drunk. He throws himself on the bed dead with sleep. When I object to his behaviour, he reminds me of our deal that we should respect each other's freedom. I can do nothing but keep silent, since this idea of freedom was my wish from the beginning. But things have grown worse recently. He has started to help himself by my salary and deprived me of my rights in my house.

"Yesterday he said he would no longer tolerate the chains of marriage and made me leave my own home. I spent the night in the garden. I have nowhere to go! My only brother won't allow me to stay in his house. I have none to turn to but you."

Her mother did not know what to say. She thought her niece was kind enough to have her in her house. Could she bring someone else to live with her? It was too much a favor to ask. Khadijah, who had heard everything, knew of her aunt's hidden suffering. She decided to save her the trouble. She told her cousin, "You have done the correct thing by

coming to your mother. She will be happy to have you with her until things get better."

The distraught young woman thanked her cousin for her kind help and said, "Oh, how grateful I am to you, Khadijah! You have been so kind to my mother. Now you are doing me a great favor."

Khadijah smiled and said, "Oh, don't say such things. You should consider this house as your own." The aunt was so moved that she rushed to Khadijah and kissed her. She said, "How wonderful you are, my dear! What great faith you have."

Khadijah whispered into her ear, "Please aunt, tell your daughter to wear her hijab as long as she is in our house." The aunt answered immediately, "Oh, yes, I have Already decided to do so."

She settled herself near her daughter and said "I have never felt such comfort in my life as I feel here. I have found in your cousin Khadijah and her husband love and care that I never found in you and your brother. You are my own children, but you showed ingratitude towards me, while my niece and her husband flood me with kind feelings. I wish you knew the reason." She was silent for a while. Then her daughter said, "Oh, mother, surely it is faith in Allah and His Pleasure that dominates their life, while we lack such faith."

"Praise is due to Allah the Almighty that you have realized the truth by yourself I" said her mother. "Therefore, you should start to show regret for the past and return to religion by first wearing your hijab." The daughter looked down at the floor and was silent. Then Khadijah said "...I think she has found out what happens when one neglects one's religion. She now feels the importance of Islamic ethics."

Her cousin looked up at her and said "You are right, Khadijah. I am tired of this life of pretence. I need someone to lead me and teach me true faith and real salvation with no submission to other's wishes and desires. But I can't help wondering what people will say about me."

Khadijah replied, "You always tried to please people in the past, which made you their slave. You have gained nothing from that but false happiness. You have wasted years, running the wrong way. Now, it is time for you to come back to your religion and understand Islamic values in order to gain happiness in this life and the Hereafter."

"Will Allah accept my repentance after years of deviation?", her cousin asked.

"Yes, of course, Allah loves those who repent and hates those who insist on doing wrong." Then Khadijah recited the Qur'anic verse: "*Do they not know that Allah accepts repentance from his servants and takes the alms, and that Allah is All Compassionate? Say: Work and Allah will see your (good) work and so will His Apostle and the believers ...*" (*al-Bara'at*, 104 & 105)

The cousin spent a few weeks with her mother. She was greatly affected by Khadijah's strong faith. Khadijah did her best to help her, and she gave her some Islamic books that she read and discussed later. Khadijah's cousin eventually became a good Muslim, and she knew she could no longer live with a man addicted to drinking and gambling. She filed for divorce. She gave up all her rights to her home in return for keeping her only child. She intended to raise him to be a good believer.

Chapter 4

A MUSLIM STUDENT'S DIARY

I was feeling depressed yesterday because of Layla's words. She tried to prejudice the class against me, saying that my Islamic dress was nothing but immature behavior designed to attract attention. Her words were cutting and left me spiritually hurt. How difficult it is when a woman doubts her purpose in life! She often acts harshly towards Muslim women. I was shocked, dismayed and hurt by her words.

I thought about the matter at home and sought guidance from Allah. I realized that I was not immature, as Layla had claimed. In fact, being an adolescent is but a stage of an individual's physical and mental growth. At this stage, knowledge flourishes and rids itself of childhood confusion. One becomes used to life's contradictions.

Hence, my attitude towards hijab is not abnormal. I rationalized that attracting attention is not accomplished by wearing long garments, but through dressing without hijab. I used to go out in public without Islamic dress before Allah guided me to the right path. I could actually feel the sharp looks of men wherever I went. I always noticed and was embarrassed by their looks and their obvious pleasure at seeing an unlimited exposure of beauty. Now that I have my hijab on, what can they be attracted to? If they look, they see nothing to excite them. This hijab reminds them that a Sacred Law protects the blessed creatures of the Creator.

I have come to a conclusion: Layla does not understand her words and I only feel sorry for her. Her beauty may become spoiled by this corrupted society. I pray to Allah to help me guide her in understanding Islam.

Feb. 7th, 19...

Yesterday I was waiting for my friend, Wala, to come over so we could study for exams together. She did not show up, and I became worried. I waited for her to phone me but she didn't. She has just now phoned to apologize and to tell me that she isn't feeling well. I wished her a speedy recovery.

I like Wala very much because she is a good Muslim. Our beliefs, dreams and hopes are the same. We became friends at the beginning of the school years. Harmony in beliefs and ideals brings strangers together, while disputes always leave close friends apart.

Today we are going to have our weekly Islamic meeting. We shall recite some Qur'anic verses and try to understand their meaning, then we will discuss religious subjects. I wonder if Wala is coming.

Feb.12th,19...

Our meeting last week was a real success. Despite her illness, Wala attended and gave an interesting lecture about religion's sublime aim. I, in turn, spoke about the issue of obedience and disobedience in regard to Islamic instructions. One of the sisters complained of her mother's insistence that she not wear hijab. This Muslim girl wondered if she had to obey her mother's orders, since obeying parents is a religious duty. I explained to her that she should obey her parent's orders as long as their rules did not violate religious instructions or cause Allah's displeasure. She can disobey her mother and keep her hijab to please her Creator.

March 2nd, 19...

I have really tried hard to make Layla listen to me. She has often been unyielding; however, I won't give up. I feel she has changed a bit. I gave her some Islamic books about why women should dress modestly. She accepted the books and promised to read them and discuss them with me.

When I visited Layla's home yesterday, she gave me a warm welcome. I shall never regret this visit. We discussed the Islamic books and she asked whether she could continue her high school studies with hijab. I assured her that Islam has ordered both men and women to seek knowledge. The Prophet's hadith relates: "It is an Islamic duty for men and women to learn."

March 11th,19...

How happy I am! I have seen Layla wearing her Islamic dress in school. She has become a good Muslim girl. In our history lesson today, the teacher claimed that if the Holy Qur'an were revealed today, it would not order woman to wear hijab, since woman today plays a significant role in society. She cannot be isolated within the house. I asked the teacher to allow me to answer her point of view. I told the class that: "Throughout history woman has been involved in society. In fact, she played a significant role in ancient civilizations. Women were queens and empresses. In the Holy Qur'an, for instance, the Queen of Saba is mentioned: *Surely I found a woman ruling over them and she has been given abundance and she has a mighty throne.* (al-Naml, 23)

"History also tells us of Cleopatra, who ruled Egypt and resorted to suicide when she was defeated by the Roman invaders. However, past civilizations generally considered women to be inferior to men. Some religions considered woman to be unclean and did not allow her to perform religious rituals or enter places of worship.

I continued, "Islam neither isolated woman nor belittled her contributions to society. On the contrary, Islam has given a woman equal rights, as is clearly stated in the Qur'anic verse: *"I will not waste the work of any worker among you whether male or a female; the one of you being from the other... I will most certainly make them enter gardens beneath which rivers flow; a reward from Allah, and with Allah is yet better reward."* (Aale-Imran, 194)

"In another Qur'anic verse concerning hijab, Islam does not address women only; men, as well, are ordered to cast down their eyes. Had Islam aimed at isolating woman, there would not have been the necessity for such an order: *Say to the believing men to cast down their looks and guard their private parts... and say to the believing women to cast down their looks and guard their private parts and not to display their ornaments except what appears thereof; and let them wear their head covering over their bosoms and not display their ornaments except to their husbands or their fathers or their sons... and turn to Allah all of you, oh, believers, so that you may be successful.* (al-Nur, 37)

"Islamic history illustrates the role of women in the Muslim community. Women were present at the Prophet's battles. They nursed the wounded and supplied water and food to the believers. Some even carried a sword and defended Islam. The Prophet (s) appreciated their role

and gave them their share of the spoils. We also read in Islamic history that Muslim women held meetings to recite and interpret the Qur'an. Such evidence indicates that Islam never isolated women or negated their role in the community... Furthermore, hijab is necessary for woman and is in harmony with her nature and man's nature too. Men are inclined naturally towards women and women are inclined to draw men towards them. Hence the exposure of woman without hijab in society can arouse the inner instincts that lead to sexual relations that affect not only individuals, but the family and the community as well. One illustration of this is in the Western so-called civilized societies where corruption and immorality are increasing and more and more homes are being broken."

March 26th, 19...

I have noticed recently that my dear friend Saffia does not look well. Though she has not missed our meetings, I feel something is wrong with her. I wish I could help her. I know nothing about her family. May be she needs money and does not want others to know about her hardship. She is quite wrong. Muslim believers do not care for an easy life, and they are kind to each other. What counts are good, righteous deeds as mentioned in the Qur'an: *As for the scum, it vanishes as jetsam, what profits men, abides in the earth.*

(*al-Ra'ad, 17*)

April 20th, 19...

At last I have discovered the reason for Saffia's uneasiness. She lives in a humble house and thinks this may cause her to be ashamed among her friends. I managed to make her change her opinion. I told her our great Prophet (s), the greatest man in history who achieved the most sacred mission, was a poor man. He could have lived as a king or an emperor, but he did not. Fatimah (a), his daughter, lived in a humble house with a minimum of furniture. The Prophet's companions lived the same sort of humble life. History relates that a great fire broke out in Al-Madyin (in Iraq) when the companion, Salman al-Farsi, was the ruler. People rushed to save their valuable possessions, but Salman carried nothing but a small bundle of clothes, a Qur'an, a prayer rug and a water pot. He was heard to have said, "In this way, light travelers are saved."

May 2nd, 19...

I came across an old friend of mine the other day. She used to be a very optimistic and active girl with tremendous belief in Islam. She never hated others or harbored any ill intention towards anybody. She trusted all her friends and was ready to help them in order to please Almighty Allah. Anyway, it had been a long time since I last saw her. I was so happy to meet her again, but I was shocked to see that she had changed into a different person with a pessimistic view towards life. She was sad to see that those around her never differentiated between good and bad deeds. She had nearly lost confidence in everything and had resorted to living a solitary life, avoiding both friends and relatives. She was spiritually depressed. When I saw her in such a state, I realized she had been a victim of our deviated society. I told my friend, "Do you really regret your good deeds?" I felt the question put her at a loss. I hoped she would say "No", but she remained silent. I said to her gently, "Say, no, please. Doing good is something wonderful and gives spiritual satisfaction. Never regret good actions. It is enough that you can examine your deeds and find that nothing shameful stains your record. Allah will surely reward you. Don't regret anything and don't be hopeless. Life is filled with promise and there are those who appreciate good deeds. Please don't let disappointment with society cause you to hate it. If you fall, try again and remove this cloud of doubt in order to see more clearly. Keep on being a good righteous believer, think of Allah's reward and you will feel much better": she listened to me attentively and I hope my words will be of some help.

May 22nd, 19...

Today a Muslim sister has asked me to explain a phrase in Du'a Ku-mail: "... Oh, Allah! I appeal to you by your Holy Names to make me pray to you day and night..."

The sister asked, "How could one pray continuously day and night? We live in an age that requires cooperation with others in order for us to carry out our various jobs and daily work. How can we put aside our duties and resort to du'a all the time?" I said to her, "Be at ease, sister. We are not supposed to pray day and night. Though it is a good habit that gains reward, this is not everything. Many people glorify and praise Allah with their tongues but forget Him in their deeds. We can enrich our lives with prayer easily and without neglecting our duties. "Religious rituals, such as daily prayers, can be reflected in our actions. If you are a good housewife, then you are a righteous individual glorifying II day and night. One of the Prophet's traditions relates that a woman came to

him and asked "what women could do in that way of jihad." The Prophet (s) said, "Righteousness and good house management are features of good Muslim woman and are well-rewarded by Allah. A woman, whether a housewife or a young girl, can be in the service of Allah All the time, if she gives a helping hand to the needy for the pleasure of Allah. Any help to others for the sake of heavenly reward is a du'a and a prayer to Allah the Exalted. Any hardship endured for the sake of elevating the Word of Allah is a prayer. Any good idea on behalf of the community's welfare is an act of worship."

Reference to Allah's bounties without the notion of *kibr* (self-pride), can be a prayer. A smile without the intention of flattery or pretension can be a prayer to Allah. But telling a person's secrets or someone's defect without the least necessity and for non-religious aim is disobedience to Allah's orders.

"Our final exams draw near and we should schedule our time wisely in order to pass them successfully and prove that Islamic activity can not hinder study or prevent reading. In fact, it can widen the scope of the brain and deepen thinking.

Chapter 5

CHOOSING A WIFE

Seeing that his mother was in a good mood, Ahmad sat near her and said, 'Mother, I have an idea which should bring you much joy.' His mother answered eagerly, 'My son, all that you give me makes me happy. What is on your mind?'

'You know,' he told her, 'I have finished my studies and can afford to begin a family. I have decided to marry.'

His mother's face brightened with a smile. 'This is very good news! I have long awaited such a day,' she told him. 'How often I have wished you would marry one of your cousins. Praise be to Allah that you have made this decision before it is too late!' Ahmad exclaimed, 'Before it's too late? What do you mean?' 'Your cousin Maryam is now old enough to marry. Every day there is someone visiting her home, seeking her hand.'

Ahmad sat silently for a moment and said, 'Then why should we bother her suitors?'

'What do you mean, Ahmad?,' asked his mother, dismayed.

'My cousin Maryam is not fit for me.'

'Why not? No, my son, you're mistaken. I shall go and see about your engagement tomorrow,' his mother told him.

Ahmad frowned and said, 'No, mother. Please do not do such a thing. I will not agree to this.' 'When she becomes your fiancé, you will feel love for her. Put aside your fears. Maryam is beautiful, and she has a respectable job.'

Ahmad disagreed, 'No. This matter only concerns me.'

Ahmad's mother thought for a moment and said, 'If you dislike Maryam, then there's my brother's daughter. She is as beautiful as Maryam, and she has inherited a large sum of money from my brother.'

'Mother, please think about this matter from my point of view. I need someone to share my life, not a business partner.'

His mother became angry and sharply asked, "What's wrong with my niece? Why isn't she good enough to be your wife?"

Ahmad replied, "She is not a practicing Muslim. I want a Muslim wife."

Ahmad's mother laughed sarcastically and said, "You speak as if you were an angel who could only marry another angel. Why don't you stop saying such nonsense, my son? You are an educated young man, you should give up your impossible ideals."

"I am neither an angel, nor do I seek a saint for a wife. I am a Muslim believer looking for a girl who also believes in Islam." replied Ahmad.

Ahmad's mother told him, "I don't know any girls who share your ideals."

He said, "I know someone who measures up to my expectations."

Startled by this admission, Ahmad's mother asked, "You know someone? Who is she? Since when do you begin friendship with girls?"

Ahmad answered quickly, "I didn't mean that I know a girl personally, but I know of her." "I see," she said. "You have already chosen your wife. Who is this lucky girl?" "Mother, please be more understanding. I hope you will take my side and persuade father to agree with my choice."

This appeal to Ahmad's mother softened her, and she said, "I swear that I think only of your welfare. I'll help you. Tell me, what are this girl's qualifications?"

Ahmad told her, "Nothing matters except the religious aspect. She is Muslim, and wears complete hijab." "Oh, then she is uneducated!" "No, she has a high school education and her religious knowledge is extensive."

Then his mother asked, "What family is she from? Do I know them?"

"She is from a good family known for their piety", Ahmad told her. "Of what use is a well-known family if a girl has no Islamic morals?" He silently beseeched Allah to give him the patience to overcome his mother's resistance. "A happy marriage doesn't depend on fame or wealth. Happiness stems from spiritual nearness and mutual understanding." Then, in a different tone of voice his mother asked,

"What does her father do for a living?" "He is a grocer," Ahmad replied.

"A grocer?!", she exclaimed. "Yes. He is a grocer and a very righteous man. He is the head of a happy and virtuous family."

Ahmad's mother interrupted him, "You are the son of a wealthy man; with your college degree you wish to marry a grocer's daughter? What a shame! Yet you ask me to assist you! If I had chosen the daughter of a jeweler, how would you feel?"

His mother replied, "There is a big difference between a jeweler and a grocer."

"The only difference is with regard to the substance. The former sells rings and the latter sells sugar. Both work in order to earn money," Ahmad answered.

His mother lamented, "Imagine your father's reaction to this news! "

Ahmad said firmly, " This is my desire, either you help me or I'll do it myself."

He spoke so seriously that his mother laughed mockingly, saying, "Does the matter require a great effort? The least move you make, they will give their daughter to you gladly."

Ahmad shook his head in doubt and said, "Wait and see!"

"What an odd situation this is! Am I to present my son to a grocer's daughter? What special beauty does this girl possess to make you blind to every other consideration?"

"I have not yet seen her," Ahmad said.

"Then how do you know she's not ugly?" asked his mother.

"I know she is not. As far as good conduct is concerned, physical beauty is of little importance."

"Oh Ahmad, my amazement never ceases."

The next morning, Ahmad told his father of his intentions. His father became angry, but Ahmad remained determined to marry the woman of his choice. Finally his father agreed and Ahmad asked his mother to visit the girl's home to make the proposal and overcome any obstacles.

The following afternoon Ahmad's mother, accompanied by his oldest sister, went to the girl's house. On the way there, Ahmad's sister asked her mother what the girl's name was. Her mother replied, " I forgot to ask him! "When they knocked on the family's door, they were surprised to see a beautiful young girl open it. The girl was surprised to see the two unfamiliar women, but she showed them into the living room and went to tell her mother that they had visitors. Her mother welcomed the guests and waited for them to explain the reason for their visit. After exchanging greetings, Ahmad's mother asked who the young girl was who

had opened the door. "It was my daughter, Zaynab," she replied. "Do you have any other daughter?" asked Ahmad's mother. "No, she's my only daughter", replied her mother. Ahmad's mother and sister were delighted to learn that the beautiful girl was Zaynab. Just then, Zaynab entered with coffee for their visitors. She sat next to Ahmad's sister and they soon found much to discuss. Then she collected the empty coffee cups and left the room.

Ahmad's mother began, "We have come with a blessed aim. We would be happy to have your daughter Zaynab as a wife for my son." She praised her son for his intelligence, his good looks and his wealth, but she neglected to mention his firm Islamic beliefs, which was very important to Zaynab's mother. Therefore, Ahmad's mother was stunned when Zaynab's mother shook her head slowly and said, "I'm very sorry. It is difficult for me to agree to this proposal; in fact, it's impossible." With much surprise, Ahmad's mother asked, "What is impossible?"

"My daughter is still young. I'm sure your son can find a girl who suits him." Ahmad's mother protested, "But Zaynab suits him well! Would you be kind enough to justify your refusal?"

"I only have one daughter, and I should be sure of her future married life."

"But Ahmad is well-off financially," said his mother. "He is an engineer!"

Zaynab's mother replied, "Zaynab would not marry someone because he is wealthy or has a college degree."

Ahmad's mother was at a loss for words. "Then what will ensure your daughter's happiness and consent?"

"When a mother looks for a wife for her son, she should mention her son's conduct." said the mother of Zaynab. "My daughter is a committed Muslim. She wants a Muslim husband, and remember, my daughter wears hijab, and your son may want a modern wife, who dresses like his mother and sister."

Ahmad's mother laughed with relief and told her, "You're correct. I haven't mentioned his conduct. I thought that other aspects of his character were of more importance. My son is a faithful Muslim. He is, in fact, looking for a wife who observes hijab. Be sure that my appearance (un-Islamic clothing) is not to Ahmad's taste."

Zaynab's mother also smiled and said, "You should have told me earlier! Please give us your address so we can visit you and learn more about your son."

"We hope you can come early next week," said Ahmad's mother.

Ahmad was waiting anxiously for his mother's return. As soon as she and her daughter returned home he asked, "Well, mother? How was your visit?"

"It was very strange," she replied.

"What was strange?", he asked. "Has anything bad happened?"

"Oh no, Ahmad. But I never expected such a thing," she answered. "Then they have refused?" Ahmad's father said, "How could a grocer's daughter refuse a wealthy young man?"

Ahmad's mother turned to her husband and said, " They did, in fact, refuse... "

"What! they refused?" asked the father. "I spoke about Ahmad's good qualities, but I didn't mention his Islamic morals. My appearance also caused her to decline my proposal because her daughter is a very faithful Muslim. When I realized their objections, I told them that you are a true Muslim as well. I have come to respect them very much. They don't care about status or wealth."

"Have you seen the girl?", asked Ahmad's father.

"Yes, she is lovely and polite. Ahmad is a lucky man to have made such a choice."

The following week, Zaynab's family paid a visit to Ahmad's home and plans were made for the upcoming wedding. They were soon married and there was much rejoicing.

Chapter 6

A VISIT TO A BRIDE

After finishing her morning prayer, Fatimah usually sat down to recite a chapter from the Holy Qur'an. She always found great pleasure in reading each verse as she thought about the sublime meaning of the Divine words. At such times, she felt as if she was existing on a higher plane, a spiritual world with a sacred atmosphere. The words taught her lessons and flooded her life with new light when she read the Qur'anic verses:

And one of His signs is that He created mates for you from yourselves that you may find rest in them, and He put between you love and compassion. Most surely, there, are signs in this for people who reflect. (al-Rum, 21)

And,

And they who say: Oh our Lord! Grant us in our wives and our offspring the joy of our eyes and make us guides to those who guard (against evil). (al-Furqan, 74)

The words reminded her of famous Muslim believers. She gave a deep sigh. She really felt quite sad when she saw some Muslims failing to continue striving towards perfection. However, there were still promising examples. She thought about her friend, Khadijah, who had just begun her married life and was visiting some holy shrines during her honeymoon. Khadijah was a good Muslim sister who chose her partner carefully and according to religious measures. She rejected all anti-Islamic traditions that distorted the meaning and essence of marriage. She always said that, according to Islam, marriage is the first brick of a foundation in raising a generation of good believers. Fatimah beseeched Allah to guide her dear friend along the right path in her new life. She had barely finished her prayer when one of her Muslim friends rang the doorbell. She had come to tell Fatimah that Khadijah had returned from her honeymoon and that she had settled in her new home. Fatimah rushed to put on her hijab to go and visit her, but the sister told Fatimah

it was too early to go that day, and that Khadijah was not quite ready to receive visitors. Fatimah was surprised. How could Khadijah refuse a Muslim sister's visit? She felt sad and said, "I can hardly believe this. Why don't we go and clear up the matter?"

The sister replied, "Oh, perhaps Khadijah will be annoyed for some particular reason."

Fatimah said, "Yes, it may be so. Otherwise, she would not refuse her sister's visit simply because she lacked furniture or some similar reason. She has never been concerned about materialistic things."

Fatimah spent that day depressed. She feared Khadijah might yield to the false values of society, yet she knew that her friend was a good believer and would not change easily.

At nine o'clock that evening, the doorbell rang and Fatimah went to open it. She was so pleased to see Khadijah standing there that she could hardly believe her eyes. They exchanged kisses and words of welcome and Fatimah congratulated Khadijah, and told her of her desire to visit her. Khadijah expressed surprise at the delay in visiting her, but Fatimah said, "Have you not announced that you are not ready to receive friends?"

Khadijah replied, "Why should I? I have missed you all so much and have been waiting for your visit since my arrival."

Fatimah said, "Well someone said that your house was not fit yet for visitors."

Khadijah was surprised and said, "Oh, dear! Since when have I cared for such trifles? How can you believe it?" Fatimah was pleased to hear this. She said, "Praise be to Allah! How happy I am to hear you say this! But such un-Islamic rumors should be stopped. We are quite happy that you have begun your married life in harmony with your religious beliefs. We shall soon visit you, God willing."

Khadijah warmly replied, "You are all welcome any time. The sooner, the better."

The next morning Fatimah phoned the other sisters and told them of her proposed visit to Khadijah on that day. While she was thinking about telling her cousin, she heard her talking to her mother. Fatimah went to her and asked her to join them, but her cousin said, "Oh, thank you, but... "

Fatimah was surprised at her cousin's answer, and asked, "What is the matter with you? Didn't you say that you wanted to go with us?"

Her cousin replied, "Yes, but it is clear that you do not want me to accompany you."

Fatimah was amazed. "What makes you think so?" she asked.

Her cousin answered, "How can you inform me of the visit on the same day? How am I to get ready when I need at least two days to get anew dress and buy a nice present? Do you think I can go without a gift?"

Fatimah said, "Not necessarily. A present can enhance friendship and is recommended in our religion. But buying a present should not cause financial strain. Otherwise, it seems as if it were a tax to be paid. A present can be something simple and still special. Our Prophet (s) used to accept even a cup of milk as a present."

Fatimah's cousin retorted, "Don't you think it would be shameful to give her a cheap present?"

Fatimah said firmly, "A gift is not valuable because of its price, but by its being given. A useful book, for instance, is a good gift. As for anew dress, I suggest you visit Khadijah in your old dress and you can buy a new one another time."

The cousin thought for a while, than agreed to go. On that day, the new bride Khadijah was busy with her daily work. She baked a cake for her expected visitors.

She was active and at ease. Thinking of the upcoming visit, she recalled pleasant memories of the past. The doorbell rang and one of her relatives, who also happened to be her neighbor, was at the door. Khadijah welcomed her and invited her in. They sat down and chatted a while.

Her relative told Khadijah about their district, most of the inhabitants of which were wealthy. Khadijah said, "I do not care much for this aristocratic district. A true Muslim does not change his or herself to fit in with any particular class of people."

The relative answered, "Well, I just wanted to tell you about some matters concerning the district where you have settled."

"Does it really matter?" asked Khadijah.

"The style of your hijab is not accepted here. You look peculiar."

Khadijah proudly replied, "I am happy to look different in my decent Islamic dress."

Bewildered, her relative asked, "Why should you be happy to be so different from the rest?"

Khadijah said, "First of all, my aim is to obey my Creator and gain His pleasure. Also, when I wear my hijab, I surely remind others of Allah and their obligation to worship Him according to the Qur'anic verse:

And I have not created the jinn and mankind except that they should worship Me.

(al-Zariat, 56)

"My duty is to enjoin the good and forbid evil. Through my appearance I call people to Allah's religion. In any case, thank you for your advice."

Khadijah's relative could not believe her ears. She changed the subject, saying, "You are expecting some guests, aren't you? I smell fresh cake."

Khadijah smiled and said, "Yes, I expect some of my sisters in faith."

"It is pity you have not furnished your home yet,"

Khadijah's relative remarked, looking around the living room. "Since you have no chairs, I can lend you some, and any other things you might need."

"Thank you very much, but I do not need to borrow any chairs. I can manage without them. I consider such things to be of little value. I believe in the Qur'anic verse:

... And the embellishment of gold, and all of this is naught but provision of this world's life; and the hereafter is with your Lord; only for those who guard (against evil)." (al-Zukhruf, 35)

That evening, Khadijah entertained her friends, who enjoyed the visit and were warmly welcomed by the bride.

DETERMINATION

It was a gloomy, overcast night. The wind was blowing and it was going to storm. Khadijah and her three young children were sitting on an old worn carpet in their room. Khadijah looked out the window often, trying not to draw her children's attention. She was worried that the storm would break before her husband arrived. Finally, hearing the key turn in the lock, she quickly got up, telling her children to go welcome their father.

"Oh mother", said the youngest child, "Has he brought us food?" She gently scolded him, saying, "This is not important. Don't ask him this question." The children ran towards their father and, although she was upset, Khadijah, too, greeted him with a smile. Her husband had brought a few pieces of bread and cheese, which he handed to his wife. She soon served the simple meal on plates that had lost their colour through long use.

Khadijah spoke cheerfully while they ate and later the children slept, dreaming of sweets, toys and games. Their parents sat quietly for a while.

"So this year is about to end," Khadijah's husband, Hassan, said bitterly, "And I still haven't found a job. We have spent our savings and sold what we could of our furniture. We have nothing left with which to fight our hunger."

His wife replied, "We still have faith and determination, which are the keys to all which is good and brings happiness."

"What good thing or happiness has our faith brought us? Our children are wearing torn clothes and are hungry. It is this very faith that has made life difficult for us, and it is guidance, which has led us to poverty! In the past we were living in luxury... "

Khadijah interrupted her husband, asking, "What kind of luxury was it? Since when has gambling been a way of providing for one's family! Allah has said that gambling is forbidden to Muslims. How could we have been happy knowing that the food we ate and the clothes we wore would send us to the Fire in the Hereafter? Our gain caused others to go hungry and naked!"

"Yes, Khadijah," Hassan said. "I know you are right. For these very reasons I gave up gambling, but it has brought us nothing. I thank you for helping me out of that bottomless pit. All praise belongs to Allah for His guidance. Still, poverty is bitter and the shamefulness of being needy is almost unbearable."

Upon hearing these words, Khadijah consoled him saying, "Oh Hassan, it is only temporary. Allah says that with every difficulty comes relief. The life of the Hereafter is the real and endless one. We still have hope. This future, everlasting life is the one we should care about and make ready with good deeds. Don't regret what has passed; instead, thank Allah for possessing the means of obtaining His forgiveness. Happiness belongs to those who are patient while facing hardships and avoid disobeying Allah."

"Oh Khadijah, I am not without hope, but I'm afraid that Satan will cause me to sin- then I will fall and lose everything."

"I still have my gold wedding ring," his wife said.

"Tomorrow I shall sell it and we will have money for a while. Almighty Allah will help us. Be confident that you will find a job, with Allah's help. Allah doesn't leave those who worship Him without hope of His compassion. You will surely see how the future will brighten for you, and how generous Allah is to those who believe."

With a sigh, her husband replied, "If you think so, I will believe you but what is the wisdom behind our hardship?"

"Oh, Hassan!" She cried. "Don't you know the Qur'anic verse: *'And we will most certainly test you with what you fear, and hunger, and loss of property and lives. Therefore, give good news to the patient'* (al-Baqarah, 155)

"But when will this hardship end?" he asked.

"As soon as we pass our test successfully," she replied. "Through patience, prayer, and avoiding sinful ways of getting money, we shall succeed."

At this point, the couple stopped talking and fell asleep, putting their trust in Allah. At dawn they awoke for their morning prayers. Afterwards, Khadijah began preparing breakfast and her husband sat down to recite some suras from the Qur'an. When the children woke up, their mother poured tea for them. One of the children asked for bread. He said, "My friend and his brothers have eggs and butter every morning."

His mother, feeling great pain in her heart, smiled, kissed him and said, "Tomorrow, by Allah's will, you will have whatever you like."

The child innocently asked, "Why do you say: 'By Allah's will?'"

"Because," she replied, "It is Allah Who gives us everything and helps us to do our work. Without His will, we can't even breathe."

"Mother, does that mean Allah will give us eggs and bread for breakfast?"

"Yes, my son. By the will of Allah it will happen." The father listened to his wife. He was greatly surprised by her strong faith. He began to feel hopeful and confident. He started talking with his children about the days to come and how Allah would help him to find a good job. Then he would buy whatever sweets and fruits they like. Then there was a knock at the door. Wondering whom it could be at such an early hour, Hassan went to find out. When he returned, his face was shining with happiness. Upon seeing this, his wife said, "Hassan, I feel our test is over."

In a voice choking with emotion, he replied. "Yes, my dear wife, Allah, the Exalted, has ended our test. Praise to Allah, it has happened with your patience, efforts and faith. There is a hadith which says: 'A good woman is better than 1000 men' Our hardship is finished by the grace of Allah and your strong faith."

"Was it the messenger of Hajj Sahib?"

"No, it was Hajj Sahib himself. He said that he had been looking for someone to manage his business and heard about our situation and my past experience. Allah used him as the way to save us from despair and to give us hope, as Allah promised to the patient believers. Hajj Sahib said to me, 'You are now cleaner and purer than all of us. You are now as one newly born.'"

THE LOST DIARY

It was by chance that Tuqa found a small diary lying on the ground outside the public library. When she picked it up and opened it to the first page, she read the following lines:

4.8.87

"Am I strong enough to hold onto these tiny threads of hope? Can I continue in spite of these difficulties and reach the source of light behind these clouds? Who can give me a helping hand so that I can endure this cruel life? Oh God, what darkness surrounds me!" Tuqa read another page:

26.8.87

"Again I resort to my diary to complain about my suffering. I feel as if my nerves are about to shatter ... I have no one to talk to; no one at all. Oh, why can't I sleep? The moon and the stars gaze upon me as if mocking my dreams." Tuqa looked for an address in the diary but she could only find a name-Huda Najafi. She went into the library and asked to see the list of book borrowers of the past week. Finally, she found the name she was looking for. Huda's address was written next to her name, so Tuqa decided to pay her a visit to return the diary and see if she could help this troubled sister.

The next day, Tuqa went to Huda's house. As she rang the bell, she wondered if she was doing the right thing. But since she knew that her intention was pure, she was at ease. A young girl opened the door, and Tuqa asked to see Huda. The girl asked her to enter and showed her to Huda's room. Huda was surprised to see an unknown visitor, but she welcomed Tuqa with a warm smile. They shook hands and sat down. Tuqa took the diary out of her purse and gave it to Huda, who was very

happy to see it. She held it close and said, "Thanks God I have it -at last! Thank you for bringing it to me!"

Tuqa introduced herself and said, "Please excuse me for reading a few pages of your diary. I found it yesterday on the ground, near the library."

"There is nothing to apologize for! I have suffered greatly since I lost it. I was nearly heart-broken when I realized that my diary was missing." "Why should you be so upset at the loss of a few pages?" asked Tuqa.

"These words reflect my innermost feelings; they are like a part of my soul," replied Huda.

"But such reflections are but a small part of a person's thoughts, since life is an enormous theatre comprised of countless images. Life is like a wild garden wherein various kinds of flowers fill the air with their fresh scent. Yet there are also trees and thorny weeds in the garden, which may hurt a person. The earth from which flowers emerge nourishes weeds as well."

Huda listened attentively, and then said, "Thorns cause one to bleed, and weeds hinder the growth of blossoms." "It isn't always so," replied Tuqa. "Hopes and disappointments follow each other in turn. This is a natural law of life. However, great one's sufferings are, one still hopes for the dawn which follows even the darkest night."

In a weary voice, Huda said, "But this dark night may be so long that it causes one to lose hope." "You can counter feelings of hopelessness by having true faith in Allah's help and guidance. A life of hardship is of no value if one forgets about Allah and His Compassion. Master yourself, and you can direct your thoughts and actions towards the right path." "But some things are beyond a person's control and cause pain and disappointment," Huda persisted.

"Still", said Tuqa, "Disappointment is not in itself evil. If a believer has strong faith, a new door opens when another is closed. Never give up hope."

Tears formed in Huda's eyes and she said, "I don't know. Perhaps Allah has sent you to save me from my despair."

Tuqa recited a verse from the Holy Qur'an:

"... and despair not of Allah's Mercy; surely none despairs of Allah's Mercy except the unbelievers" (Yusuf, 87)

Then Tuqa stood up, saying it was time for her to leave in order to reach home and perform the evening prayer. Huda begged her to stay a little longer and suggested that they pray together. After praying, they resumed their discussion and Tuqa reminded Huda of the Qur'anic verse:

Do people think they will be left alone saying: We believe, and not be tried? And certainly we tried those before them so Allah will certainly know who are true and He will certainly know the liars. (al-Ankabut, 2 & 3)

Tuqa added, "I all that we experience during our brief lifetimes prepares our soul to control itself through using good will. Some losses are considered to be disasters while, in fact, they are disguised blessings. A calamity which disrupts a happy life may be a means to crystallize thoughts and can direct a person towards faith in Allah and obedience to His orders."

"My dear friend Tuqa, I thought that I was a good believer in Almighty Allah, but I was about to fall apart."

Tuqa firmly stated, "Faith will defeat earthly concerns through submission to Allah and acceptance of His Will. Failures can teach us many useful lessons. Hardships can make a person wise if they stand firm."

Thinking that she had given enough advice for one afternoon, Tuqa tried to change the subject, "Aren't you going to ask me how I found your home?" Huda replied, "I believe Allah sent you to me, no matter how you found you way."

It was time for Tuqa to leave, and Huda made her promise to visit again soon. The next meeting between Tuqa and Huda took place a few days later. This time, Tuqa decided it was better to let Huda do most of the talking. Huda talked about her younger sister, whom she said had a great desire for learning. Huda said, "She studies continuously, but I fear that she may one day give up her studies."

Tuqa asked, "What makes you think so? I think that she may become even more interested in acquiring knowledge as she gets older." "But life is not generous enough to help one achieve one's dreams and wishes,"

Huda replied. "Pessimism should not dominate anyone's thoughts. If evil has an effect on a person's life, goodness is still more effective. Rays of sunlight can penetrate the thickest clouds," Tuqa said. She felt that her friend still needed encouragement, so she added, "Muslims know the origin of life, the story of creation. Almighty Allah gave all human beings the opportunity to perform good deeds in this life and has given them

the chance to worship Him. This worshipping of Allah gives us the opportunity to evolve into more, which will benefit us in the next life, the Hereafter. Therefore, if one comprehends the aim behind this worldly life, the death of a dear one can be tolerated.

"As for suffering due to material poverty, a wise person should know that true poverty is embodied in spiritual shortcomings, which can bring about various illnesses," Tuqa concluded." Nevertheless, poverty can cause one to be ashamed,"

Huda said, "There is nothing shameful about poverty,"

Tuqa told her. "One should be ashamed to be rich and dishonest. A poor man who remains virtuous and rejects dishonest means of living enjoys self-respect. Poverty not only is not a source of shame, it is an aspect of the lives of righteous believers. As Allah states:

And We will most certainly try you with something of fear and hunger and loss of property and lives and fruits,' and give good news to the patient. (al-Baqarah, 155)

Tuqa continued, "A Muslim is not envious of another's good fortune. He feels optimistic that he will have his r turn one day. A wise believer has a strong will, and if he is betrayed by a friend he will not regret the loss of such a person. Perhaps such an experience will cause him to choose his friends more carefully."

"But one can be hurt by ingratitude or even aggression when one tries to help another."

Tuqa answered, "This is not the case with a true Muslim who does not trade his good deeds. He is ready to help purely based on his good faith and expects nothing from anyone but Allah. It s better that good deeds be rewarded in the Hereafter."

"What you're saying is true. You have been so kind and helpful to me that I can hardly find a way to express my gratitude", Huda said.

Tuqa told her, "There is a narration from our Prophet (s) 'If one cares for a fellow believer, one should manifest one's concern.' The best thing you can do is to respond to Islamic ideals and think over my words. As material concerns bring about unhappiness, so do spiritual values lead to happiness. Imam Ali (a) says: 'If a man behaves properly in matters concerning himself and Allah, Allah keeps proper the matters between him and other people; and if a man keeps proper his affairs for the next life, than Allah keeps proper for him his affairs of this world... ' " (Nahjul Balagha)

Feeling much better, Huda said, "Due to your helpful words, I feel optimistic about the future. I shall never feel hopeless again. I will use my faith like a weapon to confront hopelessness and to strengthen my will."

Tuqa happily replied, "Faith produces security and calmness. Faith itself is obedience to Allah's commandments. Through faith, earthly concerns are shaped and invested with various meanings. Hence, sickness can alleviate sins and disappointment can lead to victory. The Qur'an says:

Surely We have made whatever is on earth an embellishment for it, so that we may try them (as to) which of them is best in work. (al- Kahaf, 7)

"We are tested by Allah throughout our lives. Now that you have helped me out of my difficulties, will you remain my friend?"

Huda asked. "Of course! Our common faith has sealed our friendship. The best sort of friendship is based on spiritual harmony and righteous ideals. Such a foundation is unshakeable. The faith that floods a believer's heart is enough to flood the entire universe with mercy and compassion."

"Have you noticed how few establish relations based on faith and common ideals?" asked Huda.

"Yes that is precisely why the majority fail and friendship so often turns into enmity. But since we are inspired by faith and we have good intentions to reform society, Allah will surely help us."

Chapter 9

INGRATITUDE

Waiting is often a source of annoyance. The longer the wait, the greater the feelings of hopelessness. Aminah was waiting for her friend. Huda, who had promised to visit her that day. It was nearly nine o'clock in the evening, and Huda still hadn't arrived. Aminah could not stop worrying. She knew that something important had kept her friend at home. She tried reading a book, but couldn't concentrate. At half past nine, the telephone rang. Aminah rushed to answer it, and Huda was on the line, apologizing for not coming. She promised to come the following day. The next day, Aminah was so happy to see Huda that she hardly noticed her paleness. They sat together to talk, and Aminah noticed the lack of warmth and animation that was usually evident in Huda's voice. She was saddened by her friend's unspoken distress. Huda was not only a sister in faith for Aminah; she was also a torch that lit the darkness for her. Huda's strong belief and worthy ideals attracted the admiration of others. She was calm and wise when she advised her Muslim sisters.

Hoping to discover what was wrong, Aminah asked her friend, "Now, what prevented you from showing up yesterday?"

"Sometimes I am unable to keep my promises," Huda replied, sighing.

"That is not unusual," Aminah told her. "Various reasons can prevent a person from carrying out his plans sometimes."

Aminah saw that Huda was too upset to even speak. "Are you crying?", she asked. Tears should be shed for the sake of Allah. What is important enough to make you so upset?" Do you imagine that I would cry for any reason other than His cause? In fact, my sadness is for the sake of Allah."

Aminah tried to reassure her friend, "Then you have no reason to be upset, because you are on the right path. You should find comfort and solace in your faith. Shouldn't a Muslim feel happiness knowing that she is hastening towards Allah with a clear conscience? Such a person

hearkens to the Prophet's (s) words: "How I long to meet them-the true believers."

"That is exactly the source of my sorrow," Huda replied. "I am afraid that I may stop in the middle of the road and that I will fall to meet the Seal of the Prophets with an unblemished record." "Do you feel that you are performing your religious duties inadequately?", asked Aminah.

"Oh no, I always do my best. But, sometimes one is forced to ... ", Huda broke off her sentence." Forced to disobey religious' commandments?" I would never do such a thing, even if the world pressured me to do so!", asserted Huda. "My discomfort arises from the thought that I cannot increase my Islamic activities so that I may reach a higher stage. I sometimes feel depressed when I think that I'll never reach perfection."

Aminah admonished her friend," How can you feel depressed? Don't you know that it is unbelievers who despair of Allah's Mercy and Forgiveness?"

Huda replied, "Of course, I do not despair of Allah's Mercy, but when I encounter ingratitude or unfair treatment, I feel that it is due to my inadequateness or to a lack of faith on my part. Hence, I feel at a loss and do not know what to do. I fear that such self-doubt may endanger my spiritual strength."

"All aspects of a Muslim's life are based upon adhering to religious principles. One should recognize one's faults and weaknesses and work to correct them. Strive to increase

your Islamic activities and efforts, " advised Aminah. "I have thought deeply about this matter", said Huda, "but I have come to no conclusion. This is why I have confided in you. A Muslim is like a mirror, which can reflect a fellow believer's faults and also show how they can be corrected."

"But I haven't seen any faults in you," Aminah answered. "So I can only advise you to continue on the right path; the one which you are on now. You have the ability to plant seeds in every sort of soil. If anyone doubts or mocks your good intentions, another person will benefit from the fruits of your knowledge. An important aspect of a believer's life is suffering which brings him or her closer to Allah. When one has a divine aim, the negative reactions of others are not of any value. For Allah, a good deed will be rewarded tenfold. Such efforts will inspire others. Please don't allow any pessimistic thoughts to dominate your thoughts. You are young and active, so don't lay down your weapon or leave the field. Have confidence in yourself and you will surely overcome all difficulties."

"Thank you so much!" Huda exclaimed, embracing her friend." Your words have brought me tremendous relief. I feel sure now that I will continue on the correct path and that Allah will help me to do so."

Chapter 10

INNER DEBATE

As Samia was anxiously waiting for her favorite television program to begin, unusual feelings were dominating her thoughts. Although her eyes were fixed on the T.V. screen, her mind was elsewhere. She was not feeling quite like her old self. She was disturbed and felt uneasy and the lively music of the television did not cheer her up as it normally did. Samia said to herself, "They were only few words yet they have spoiled my evening. Why should I take the matter so seriously?" She tried to concentrate on the program, but the words still echoed in her mind. She listened to the music, but she heard a voice telling her, "This is the real loss and the ultimate weakness. Why should one let a song or a show influence one's life? One should be affected by a good deed or a wise saying. A useful word can elevate the spirit of its recipient."

Samia was troubled by this inner dialogue. It conflicted with her usual thoughts. She told herself, "This discomfort is the result of Sana's words, which are still ringing in my head. Why should I care about what she said? I have been living such a life since my childhood. I like to dance and listen to music." She moved to a different chair and settled closer to the television.

Samia tried her best to forget Sana's words and to enjoy the program, but tears involuntarily came to her eyes. Again the inner voice whispered to her "What weakness! A few minutes ago, you were laughing for no reason. You were happily enjoying the music. Now you are crying. What is this? Are you living in a world of illusions? or is it some gloomy sadness which causes you to cry for no special reason?" She recalled the unlikely source of her uneasiness. She was not used to hearing such an inner dialogue.

Could it be the result of Sana's words, which might be truth and guidance? The music on the T.V. ended and Samia still felt an inner struggle. She tried to forget her friend's words and keep to her usual behavior, yet

the word *haram* kept echoing in her mind. What could *haram* mean? Disobedience? Allah's displeasure? Hell?

Oh, yes. She remembered Sana's recitation of some particular Qur'anic verses:

... then be on your guard against the fire of which men and stones are the fuel, it is prepared for the unbelievers. (al-Baqarah, 24)

Most surely the righteous shall be in bliss; on thrones they shall gaze; you will recognize on their faces the brightness of bliss. (al-Mutaffifin, 22-24)

Oh, you who believe! save yourselves and your families from the fire whose fuel is men and stone. (al-Tahreem, 6)

Samia seriously thought about how she had been spending her time in un-Islamic activities and concluded that such practices would displease Almighty Allah, and that she would eventually suffer for her actions. She might suffer the following day or years later. She remembered how much it hurt when her finger accidentally touched the bottom of a hot iron and how she ran to find relief. Would there be a remedy in Hell?

Again she recalled some verses from the Qur'an:

... And as to him who is given his book behind his back, he shall call for perdition, and enter into the burning fire, surely he thought that he would never return. Yea! Surely his Lord does ever see him. (al-Inshiqaq, 10-15)

Samia left the living room and returned to her bedroom. She felt as if someone was mocking her innermost feelings.

"How shameful for one to enjoy this worldly life and forget the everlasting one! It is a sign of the utmost weakness to allow desire and fun to dominate one's life without the least consideration for Allah's instructions" the voice told her.

Confused, Samia sat down and thought seriously about the various thoughts filling her mind. Sana could advise and guide her towards the right path. She made up her mind to see her soon. She suddenly felt great comfort and relief at this idea. She fell asleep dreaming of the next day's meeting and the meaning of true repentance.

Chapter 11

SOCIAL MEASURES

The lady of the house, dressed in the latest fashion, was waiting impatiently for her daughter Zaynab to get dressed for the wedding party. The lady was impatient, and walked up and down the room. Now and then she stopped in front of a mirror to have a look at her image. Her daughter was a bit late, so she rang a bell and a pretty maid came in the room. She was wearing a short dress and had her hair done.

The woman admired the attractive maid and said, "I see, Samia, you have finished before your little lady. Go and tell her to hurry up. We have no time to spare.. It takes an hour to reach the bride's house."

The maid replied, "Yes, my lady." Samia left the room and soon returned, saying that Zaynab would be getting ready now. Zaynab's mother became angry and exclaimed, "What has she been doing all this time?"

The maid answered, "She has been praying."

"Praying?! Oh, what an abnormal girl she is! Go again and tell her to hurry up."

The maid went out and came back to announce that Zaynab was coming.

The mother said, "What did you say? How could she get ready in such a short time? Surely she will bring disgrace to me at this party. How I pity her. She is spoiling her beauty by negligence and indifference." Admiring herself again in the mirror, she saw her daughter enter with a smile on her angelic face.

The daughter said, "Here I am mother, quite ready."

Her mother gave her a sharp look, and said ironically, "Of course you are ready! What is this? Are you going in this long dress? Where is your make-up? Is there a girl of your age who does not know how to color her lips or put on eyeliner except you? I have been waiting all this time while you did nothing but pray. Now you say you are ready!"

Zaynab waited for her mother to finish, then she said politely, "Yes, I have performed my prayers since it is my religious duty, and I cannot pray at the party which will end after prayer time. My dress is not that long, but it certainly is not a mini. My hair is tidy, with no need to waste my time at a hairdresser to be polluted with chemicals. As for the make-up, of course, I know how to color my eyes and my lips, but I feel this is not necessary. I like to show myself as I am, with no mask on my face. "

Her mother turned her head away, disapproving of her daughter's logic. She said, "Let us leave before you get on the pulpit and give us a long sermon, as is your habit. But I feel bitterness when I see the maid exceeds you in her good appearance."

Zaynab replied, "If such measures are the true criterion, I agree that she does exceed me." The mother stated, "In fact, I don't know how you are going to face the famous people there. You will appear so poor and humble among the men and women."

"The party is not for both sexes," Zaynab replied.

"Had it been like that, I would not have agreed to go. In any case, there will not be any singers or music of any kind."

The mother laughed in a mocking tone and said,

"Then the party is for giving a religious speech on the decency of hijab."

Zaynab answered quietly, "No! There is no religious speech. It is only a formal farewell party to a bride starting her honeymoon."

The mother feared delay, so she said to her daughter, "Come on; tell me the details on our way to the party." Zaynab put on a long black coat and a scarf on her head as she always did. They got into their car, with the maid carrying a box of her mistress's cosmetics.

While they were driving, Zaynab's mother asked her daughter, "How do you know that the party is not for both sexes?" Zaynab answered, "It was supposed to take place at one of the clubs, according to the bride's mother. But my friend, the bride, is a good believer, as you know. Thus she refused to have her wedding party according to western values, or in defiance of religious morals. Quarrels started between the mother and daughter. But the groom took the side of the bride, and my friend insisted on canceling the celebration. Finally her mother gave in and agreed to have a simple farewell party."

Zaynab's mother was astonished and asked, "Does the groom have the same reactionary beliefs as the bride?" Zaynab tried to smile at her mother's cruel words.

She said, "Of course he has the same beliefs, and he is of equal moderation. Otherwise, she would not have agreed to marry him. A good believer does not marry a playboy who is totally different in beliefs and ideals. Disputes in such matters are a serious threat to a marriage. How can you brand such ideals 'reactionary' while they are the essence of our religion? They are clearly elaborated in the Holy Qur'an. Our belief is the right path, while the non-Islamic way is the reactionary one, since it goes back to the primitive stage of humanity when there were no Divine creeds or human values."

Her mother was affected by the argument and she said, "You are right, but civilization requires something different."

Zaynab replied, "Oh, mother! What civilization is this? Tragedies and disasters are under the surface. Bright masks hide devilish motives and inhuman desires. Oh, mother! We should not be fooled by this civilization."

The mother spoke in a sorrowful tone, "This is the general attitude of the day and the social measures that count."

"We shall try to defeat such perceptions," Zaynab said. "We will prove that in a society, a young girl can show herself through her real personality -not by her make-up or her fashionable clothing. When she has an independent personality, she will taste the sweetness of victory. It is contrary to woman's true nature to expose herself in a framework of fashion or make-up, which is only a means for public exposure."

They arrived at the house of the bride. The mother tapped her daughter on the shoulder and said, "May Allah bless you. I wish I could have your strong faith and self-confidence."

Chapter 12

THE RED ALERT

When Ahmad returned home, his wife Maryam was still out. He sat down next to his children and joined them in their game. Afterwards, he picked up a book and passed the time reading. Finally at 10 o'clock that evening his wife returned home. She did not even allow Ahmad to greet her, but quickly rushed passed him to her room and took off the mask that transfigured her natural form. She looked less beautiful but more gentle. From her behavior, Ahmad knew that she had something to tell him.

As soon as the children went to bed, she said to her husband, "Oh, Ahmad, you have not asked me about my visiting today."

Ahmad smiled and said, "I hope you have enjoyed yourself."

Maryam said, "...I had a wonderful time! The house and the garden were magnificent, and their table was rich with delicious foods. My friend, Hana, had the most beautiful wig. Dr. Iram's wife wore an expensive suit. It was quite beautiful."

Her husband smiled ironically and asked, "The suit or the Dr.'s wife?"

"Oh, the suit was wonderful! But I was too embarrassed to enjoy the visit," she added. Ahmad silently beseeched Allah to give him patience and said to himself, "This is just the beginning; Allah will help me in the end." He did not answer his wife's remarks. She continued, "It seems as if you do not care for me. Am I nothing to you? You do not ask the reason for my uneasiness. You regard me as if I were a stranger."

Maryam seemed truly upset, so her husband said to himself, "I place my affairs before Allah. If I do not ask her the reason, she will cry."

He gently asked her, "Why do you think such a thing? You are my dear wife and the mother of my children. Why are you upset? Were you embarrassed by your clothing?"

"Oh no, although it was not as beautiful as the Dr.'s wife's suit. I can buy a better one in the future. The source of my uneasiness has been in my failing to ask my friends to visit me. It has been a long time since I last invited them to my home. How would they account for such delay? Surely they will think it is due to some financial hardship, or that you are a miser or ignorant of social formalities. Such ideas hurt me, since I know you are an excellent husband and a good father."

"Thank you for the compliment. Now what exactly do you want?"

Maryam replied, "Today is the fifth of the month. I can fix a day for their visit as long as we can afford to spend some money."

"You talk as if the event is a victorious battle in need of great preparation," Ahmad said. His wife laughed, "No. it is not like that, but it does cost... ."

Ahmad said, "But how can we manage until the end of the month if your party will be expensive? We are already in debt. Now you want to make matters worse." "You can borrow some money from your friends," his wife suggested. "You know I have borrowed from many of them. How can I ask for more?"

"Oh, how miserable I am! I was brought up in a rich family and lived a luxurious life. Now I cannot even afford to invite my friends over for an afternoon. Oh, what a shame! How am I to face them? Can I show myself in society? This means I must isolate myself and give up all of my friends." Maryam started crying, while her husband tried to convince her of his viewpoint. She never listened to him, but said, "Oh, surely I shall suffer from sickness. If I stay two days at home, I shall suffer a nervous breakdown and lose my appetite."

Finally, Ahmad gave in and agreed to his wife's demand. His wife arranged everything for the special day. She asked her sisters to help her arrange the rooms for the occasion. She would have never imagined that the outcome of her party could be the destruction of her family life. On the day of the party, Maryam asked her husband to stay out until a late hour and she sent her children to her mother's house. She got herself ready for her guests, who arrived shortly before sunset. They were all dressed in the latest fashion and with full makeup. The home was soon filled, and gossip and idle speculation dominated the conversation. Each was criticized by the other. One's dress was not to the taste of the other; and this hairdo was not nice as another's. Silly talk and jokes filled the air.

At 8 o'clock, Maryam called her guests to dinner. Suddenly the phone rang and one of the guests was called. As soon as this lady put down the phone, she came to Maryam and apologized for having to leave at once. Her husband had warned of a red alert and she had to reach home before the lights went out. Upon hearing this news, the other guests rushed towards the door. They left without even a good-bye. Maryam emerged from the kitchen to see that her guests had all disappeared. She was shocked and dismayed to see her party come to such an end, especially when she thought about all the trouble she had gone to and the dispute with her husband about the matter. She had hoped to make a good impression on her friends. She sat down and wept bitterly. She wished her husband would come home early, before the red alert sounded. She waited to hear its wailing but there was none.

At 10 o'clock Ahmad came and was surprised to see the house empty. His wife told him the whole story. She feared that he would be angry, but he was quite at ease. He said, "It may be a lie. There is no need for an alert since there are no impending raids. Anyway, I hope you have learned a lesson."

The wife said, "Indeed, I have. I won't undergo such an experience again."

The next day, Maryam's friend phoned and apologized for the previous evening. Her husband had lied to her in order to get her home early since her child had been crying for his mother.

Maryam told her friend that it had been a silly joke, but a good lesson too.

Chapter 13

STRUGGLING WITH CONFLICT

As Fatimah walked along the tree-lined street, thoughts filled her head and mocked her sensitive emotions and delicate feelings. She hurried to reach the source of pleasure, security and light in her life. She wished she could overcome this nagging doubt, but she was weak, and in need of support. She told herself, "I will tell her everything. I will explain all of my difficulties to her. I will confess to her my fears." When Fatimah reached her friend's home, she knocked anxiously at the door. She feared disappointment; not finding her friend Aminah at home. Aminah came forward to welcome her, they shook hands warmly and then entered a room where they settled to talk. Aminah chided her friend gently, saying, "Oh, I have missed you. Welcome again, dear friend." Upon hearing her friend's warm voice Fatimah felt at ease and nearly forgot the aim of her visit. She remained silent, so Aminah gave her a smile of encouragement and said, "You do not look like your usual self, Fatimah. Tell me what is bothering you." Her question helped Fatimah to speak. With a trembling voice she said, "Oh sister, something is very wrong with me. My courage has failed me. I thought I was well protected against Satan and whatever troubles in my way to reach my goal. But... " Fatimah silently thought of the right words to express her suffering, but Aminah was quick to understand her pain. Aminah asked, "But what, Fatimah?" Fatimah replied, "I have lost courage; I can no longer endure these difficulties I am facing as a religious instructor."

"What difficulties are these, Fatimah? Tell me about them. I am your sister in faith."

Fatimah told her, "Being a Muslim, I believe in our responsibilities towards our beloved religion, Islam. I have tried my best to guide misled Muslim girls; to save them from our deviated society. But society, Oh, Aminah...."

"What about society?" asked her friend.

"It is a corrupted one, with no morals. Everything is measured with materialistic values. Living in this society has made me feel a bitterness I never dreamed I could feel."

Aminah admonished Fatimah, "Did you think that the road of religious guidance was strewn with flowers and empty of obstacles? We should not deny these difficulties. But we are told not to worry about troubles and hardships as long as we are on the right path for the sake of Allah. Haven't you heard the words of one Muslim woman believer: 'Whatever difficulty we encounter in the way of Islam is not a difficulty, and whatever bitterness we may feel is not a bitterness.' Now tell me Fatimah, what specifically has happened to upset you?"

Fatimah sighed, "It is not anyone particular incident."

Then Aminah told her, "So you feel cowardice in front of deviated currents, and you fear harmful ideologies."

When Fatimah heard these words she cried, "No, I am never afraid of such things. It is only troubles and obstacles that have shaken my faith in myself, as well as my lack of experience and understanding."

"What else bothers you, Fatimah? Tell me everything so that I can be of help to you."

Fatimah said, "From the beginning, I had a strong desire to serve my religion by all means and at all levels. I believed also that Islam knows no limits...." Fatimah stopped, as if not knowing what to say. Aminah explained, "That is why it hurts you so much to find that society is still under the yoke of false measures. That a person is judged through a materialistic view point and within a frame of pseudo-measures. But had society been a Utopia believing in Islamic values, considering an individual through realistic measures, then our cause (Islamic guidance), our responsibility would not have purified our souls and increased our determination to surmount any difficulties. Had we been struggling in a virtuous society, guiding our fellow Muslims in an ideal environment, flowing with the tide instead of having to oppose it as we do today, then we would not have been among those referred to in the Holy Qur'an as patient men and women:

Surely men and women who submit, and the believing men and the believing women, the truthful men and the truthful women, and the patient men and patient women... Allah has prepared for them forgiveness and a mighty reward. (al-Ahzab, 35).

"Fatimah then said, "But Aminah, our enemies rejoice, they mock us when we are distressed or are facing hardships." Aminah smiled and asked, "Haven't you read the Qur'anic verse:

You shall certainly be tried respecting your wealth and souls... surely this is one of the affairs determined upon. and the verse: Don't think of those who rejoice for what they have done... and they shall have a painful chastisement. (Aale-Imran, 185-187)

"The Holy Qur'an has clearly revealed everything. It has lined the path with thorns and obstacles, but the aftermath with bounties and blessings. We must be sure of ourselves, in order to stand firm and avoid collapsing in the face of difficulties. We must always remember the early days of the Message of Islam and all the hardships that faced the great Messenger of Allah (s) when he called on people to give up the worship of their idols and to worship Allah. The One, the Almighty." Aminah continued, "The Prophet toiled to prune a primitive nation which was overgrown with wild traditions such as unprovoked attacks, the plundering of properties, murder, the drinking of alcohol and the committing of adultery as well as other indecencies. He planted and nurtured Divine values and morals in the people in order to make them the best nation ever found among nations. We should remember Muhammad, son of Abdullah, the offspring of the best family in the Arab Peninsula and he noblest member of the Quraysh tribe. All of the people, young and old, high and low in society, agreed that he was a truthful, honest person. We should try to imagine the responsibility this great man assumed when he was chosen by Allah to carry His Message. All of the tribes rose against him and joined forces opposing him. They threatened him and barred any trading with him. Standing firm, he neither relinquished his divine duty nor stopped calling on the people to worship Allah. He and his followers were isolated, as if he was a deviated person. He endured every kind of insult and mockery. They called him a wizard while he was the Prophet, and called him a liar while he was the most truthful honest person in their midst. They said he had been taught (by someone) while his knowledge had been revealed to him by Heaven. They accused him of madness while he had the greatest prophetic wisdom."

"We should keep all this in mind, and remember as well the Prophet's Dua (words of prayer) to Allah when he was in the village of Al-Taif calling people to worship God. The people of that village sent their sons to throw stones at him, make fun of and insult him. He took refuge by a wall and stretched out his hands towards the sky, praying to Allah, 'Oh,

God to you I complain my weakness, my lack of means and the scorn of my people. Oh God of the oppressed and of mine, to whom do you leave me? To a wrathful relative or to a foe, to whom you gave control over me? If You are not angry at me, I don't care whatever happens to me; Your compassion is great enough for me. ' "

Aminah went on, "Fatimah, we must remember the Prophet's words after his painful suffering. As long as we are certain that our ideas are right and our belief is true, we should not be daunted by falsehood and fear. Fatimah, remember the honorable Zaynab (a), the daughter of the Leader of the Faithful, Imam Ali (a), when she stood near the body of her slain brother Imam Husayn (a) on the Day of Ashura. He was to her not only a brother, but a supporter and a defender, yet she put up her hands and said: 'Oh, God, accept from us this sacrifice.' Yes, Fatimah, we must remember all this in order to remain devoted to Allah."

As soon as Aminah stopped speaking, Fatimah cried and said, "Oh my dear friend Aminah, may Allah never deprive me of your friendship. You are a guiding light for me. Your words have revived my spirit, which I nearly lost. You have helped my faith to remain firm and steadfast. How stupid I was to have lost all hope!",

Aminah told her, "No Fatimah, you are neither stupid nor had you lost hope. These are feelings that arise as result of many reasons. The best evidence of your sincerity is your firm stand and faith. You have come directly to me to help you overcome obstacles which are the result of this deviated society and which you have no hand in producing. Oh Fatimah, have you abandoned reading as you have abandoned visiting me?"

"I never abandoned you; I was trying to solve an inner conflict (of feelings) and I was afraid."

Aminah said, "You were afraid to speak frankly to me, but you did not fear the serious results of remaining silent?"

She smiled at Fatimah, who said, "You should be quite sure that I will never feel weak again, and I will always admit my fears and my hopes to you. You will be my guiding angel as you have always been."

Aminah embraced her, saying, "Oh Fatimah, I am not an angel. I am only a loving, advising sister to you and to all Muslim girls."

Chapter 14

FIRM STAND

As the first rays of dawn shone on the horizon, Sumayah awoke. She had spent the previous night in tears. Sumayah felt certain that the dawn had come to dispel her bitter suffering and open the door of hope, through prayer, to her; a door which would direct her towards her Creator. She hurried to get ready to pray, as if she were on her way to meet a loved one. Forgetting the suffering and pain she had experienced for many years, Sumayah merged with her prayer, giving all of her attention to Him.

Sumayah finished her prayer and thought once more about the two paths open to her—one leading to happiness in this temporary life; the other ending in spiritual happiness in eternal life. She was well-aware that true peace could only be found by remaining a faithful Muslim and adhering to Islamic principles, thus avoiding any deviation from Islam.

The first path would take her to a world of luxury filled with misleading comforts and illusionary happiness. The other road would guide her along the path of Islamic guidance. By following this path, she would taste victory and be crowned with the laurel of firm belief and determination. Since she was a Muslim, naturally she rejected the first, misleading road. But still, Sumayah sometimes felt weak in the face of threats and temptation.

Sumayah silently beseeched God: “Oh God, You know I am an orphan who lost her parents at an early age. My only brother is studying abroad. Europe, with its so-called civilization, has trapped him. He has forgotten me and is busy running after amusements. God, Your blessings caused my soul to be flooded with the light of Islam. My conscience is clear. You have armed me with the weapon of strong faith, which enables me to remain steady and have a pure heart neither stained by pseudo-civilization nor attracted to the glittering results of false progress.

I am not fooled by any poisonous, imported ideologies. Oh God, help me to be content. Help me to find joy in assisting misguided Muslim girls so that I forget my own unhappiness and the painful loss of my parents. Such happiness, the result of helping others, can compensate for my uncle's cruelty."

Sumayah's troubles had begun when a stranger a young man, had become acquainted with her uncle, who was her guardian. The young man was wealthy and fascinated Sumayah's uncle with his fast cars and various properties.

This man had made life hell for Sumayah ever since he had become attracted to her and had asked her to marry him. Sumayah never let herself to be influenced by his wealth. She avoided his company because he was careless and wild. Her uncle was trying to pressure her into marrying the young man by describing how happy she would be with every imaginable earthly comfort. He built palaces for her based on his wishes and hopes.

Sumayah's uncle ignored her objections, and she was afraid that if she gave in to her uncle's demands, she would be deviated from Islam. Would my brother take my uncle's side if he was here?' she wondered. She thought about how much she needed to see her brother. She always remembered him in her prayers, and asked Allah to guide him.

Sumayah's uncle had locked her in her room for two days in his attempts to pressure her. As she sat in the room, she said to God, "O God I am afraid of what may happen, but I will stand firm. I shall keep on struggling until you help me by Your mercy." Her prayer put her at ease. She reasoned that only real submission to God could cause her to feel such calmness and then she slept, exhausted from the previous sleepless night.

Suddenly her uncle's sharp voice awoke her. He was knocking loudly on the door, saying, "Are you still asleep, you woman from the Middle Ages?" Sumayah sat up, shaking, and answered meekly, "Yes, I had been asleep."

Her uncle opened the door and tried to speak in a friendly tone, "You look happy this morning, Sumayah. I'm certain that you have returned to reality and have given up your impossible dreams."

"Uncle, I have always lived in reality."

"Yes", he replied. "The reality of ancient times. Now were living in the twentieth century, and if you give up your old ideas, I will keep the door unlocked."

Sumayah told him, "Oh uncle, I don't want you to open a door for me which leads to worldly pleasures and close the door to God's blessings and forgiveness. Please be kind enough to let me manage my own affairs."

Her uncle angrily retorted, "I won't let this opportunity pass by. I don't want you to stay hidden in your room constantly reading and writing. You have disappointed me greatly."

Sumayah answered him quietly, "I will always be as I have been and am now."

"Then you must leave my home. I won't let you trouble me."

"Are you serious?" Sumayah anxiously asked.

"Yes!", replied her uncle. "Either agree to marry this man or leave my house and never return. We shall see how much you will gain from your belief in Islam."

Sumayah said after a short while, "I have made up my mind."

"Then you will marry the rich man?"

"No. I will never exchange my principles for temporary gains."

Her uncle, greatly vexed, rushed to open the front door of his home. "Then leave. You have no place here, you ungrateful girl. I regret all that I have done for you. Go to your Islam, or to your brother, who has forgotten you. Leave quickly! I cannot stand your presence here any longer."

Sumayah had gathered her few belongings while her uncle was speaking. She only owned a gold bracelet, a Qur'an and some books. She turned to her uncle and said, "Uncle, you may regret this."

"Never. Go find your brother. There is no hope for you."

Sumayah walked out the door, saying, "I am leaving, and I am happy. God has given me strength. Farewell."

She thought that her uncle would change his mind, but he continued to ridicule her until she disappeared around the corner.

As she walked along, Sumayah felt lost. Where could she go now? She detested the corrupt society she lived in, and it, in turn, hated her attempts to reform it. Feelings of despair started to overwhelm her. Suddenly she heard the Qur'anic verse: *Or did you think that you would*

enter the garden while yet... when will the help of Allah come? Now surely the help of Allah is near! (al-Baqarah, 214)

Sumayah felt as if she was being addressed. The verse renewed her hope and she felt victorious. She calmly thought about where to go. With an uplifted spirit, she recalled her friend Maryam. Maryam's brother was a friend of her brother, and she thought that he could surely help her contact her brother and ask him to return.

She walked to Maryam's house filled with hope. When she knocked on the door, Maryam opened it and welcomed her warmly. Maryam then congratulated Sumayah and said, "God knows how happy I am for you."

Surprised by her words, Sumayah asked, "What on earth are you congratulating me for?"

"Hasn't your brother written to you?" Maryam replied. "He is on his way home, and should be here today or tomorrow."

This unexpected news was too much for Sumayah and she nearly lost her balance. "Are you sure he is coming?" she asked.

Maryam took her into the house, where she regained her strength. Sumayah soon began to feel nervous, however, as she imagined how her brother might have changed and that perhaps he was just like her uncle, who had kicked her out of his home only an hour earlier. With a serious expression, she turned to Maryam and said, "How do you know this? What has caused him to return?"

Maryam understood her friend's fears and told her, "He recently wrote a letter to my brother. He said in the letter that he could no longer endure being so far away from you. He experienced western civilization and rejects its values. Here is his letter; read it!"

Sumayah was so overcome with joy that she could not read it. She knew that Allah had answered her prayers. Her religion, as she had always hoped, had strengthened her and brought back her brother to her.

She asked Maryam to read the letter for her. Maryam read, "Oh, dear friend, I have been misled for some time, thinking this loose life is the way to happiness. This western culture has caused me forget my responsibility towards myself and my sister. I confess, my friend, that I forgot myself. Now I have realized the truth. These great buildings where people drink until morning and these night-clubs which are full of indecency are all means to fool and mislead youths and will eventually

endanger their future. This generation of women, who are proud of equality with men, is nothing but a mere commodity within the reach of all men for exposure and exploitation. This boredom and this running after whatever is called civilization and progress, contains hidden sufferings and great problems, which are flooding western society. As a result, I have regained my awareness. Now, I fear for my sister, who is a young girl. I fear she may suffer a similar fate and be caught up in the deviated currents in many Islamic countries under the false names of civilization and progress. I have decided to come home to be with her... We will both find true happiness in the instructions of Islam... "

Chapter 15

HAD I BUT KNOWN

Anfal, a rich young girl, sat waiting impatiently at the doctor's clinic to get the results of a medical test. She was in a hurry to attend a party and feared she might be late for her appointment with the hairdresser. She never thought the result would be anything important. It was just a precaution insisted upon by her family. She had never suffered any serious illness, apart from the odd ache in her limbs. Then, it was her turn to see the doctor. She hurried inside to get it over with as quickly as possible. She was surprised to see the doctor look sad and concerned as he asked, "Is this yours?"

She answered, "No, it is my daughter's."

She wanted to know the truth and thought that perhaps he would hide the truth, if she told him it was her own. He asked her to have a seat, so she sat feeling somewhat afraid. She looked at him anxiously, as he said, "Why did not you send a man to get the results?"

Anfal said, "It was on my way so there was no need to send someone else."

The doctor looked sadly at her and said, "You seem to be an educated girl. You understand the nature of life."

He stopped talking, and she began to tremble.

She asked, "What do you mean doctor?"

The doctor said, "The result indicates that there is a blood disease." He looked down at his papers and remained silent. Anfal had to ask him to give her more information. She cried in fear, "Is it cancer?"

He did not look at her, but a cloud of sadness covered his face. It was as if he was sentencing her to death.

She said in a broken voice, "I am finished then." The doctor knew then that she had lied, but it was too late to hide the truth. He looked kindly

at her and said, "I am sorry for you. Why did you lie? Anyway life and death are matters within Allah's power. Many sick people live long and many healthy ones die."

Anfal felt as if she were drowning, as if a hard fist was cruelly squeezing her heart. She tried hard to regain her strength and said, "I do apologize. Thank you doctor."

The doctor encouraged her saying, "Be strong and optimistic. Medical science is constantly progressing. Some of today's incurable sicknesses can be cured tomorrow I still have hope. Leave me your telephone number." She repeated the number automatically without knowing what she was saying. Feeling great shock and bitterness, she again thanked the doctor and left.

At home she kept the truth to herself. She did not know how to share it. Anyway, everyone was busy, getting ready for the party. Her mother asked, "Have you been to the doctor? Why did not you go to the hairdresser?" It was just a by-the-way question, needing no answer. She briefly said, "I am not going to the party !"

She went upstairs into her room and locked the door.

She stretched out on her bed fully clothed and listened to her family's voices, as if they were coming from a far away place. The wind seemed to her to be a funeral sad tune, lamenting her approaching death. The bedroom seemed strange to her as she would be leaving it soon. What about the house? It would not remember her. She was just a guest. Others would take her room and soon forget her. She tried to cry but tears did not help. She looked around her in pain. Those curtains that she had tried so hard to get, would stay after her. It would not have mattered if they had been made of the roughest fabric, she would leave them for others. She wished she had not troubled herself for such things. She wished she had saved her time and money for more useful things, which could have been helpful to her in her difficulty.

She wondered, "What is useful to me?" She was young, beautiful and rich with everything her heart could desire. Could anything help her and save her from death? She had always longed for an official job with a good salary. She had it, but could it save her from death?

An idea struck her. She hurried to the phone while everyone was away. She dialed the doctor's number and asked eagerly, "If I travel abroad can I find a cure?"

He said, "There is nothing new abroad. It is a waste of money."

She put the phone down and sat on a nearby chair.

Her salary would not change matters. She walked through the house's rooms as if saying her farewells. She paced the small garden and looked at the trees. She whispered, "I wish these trees knew I am leaving them, those stones, walls... I wish these doors knew my hands will soon no longer open them. I wish those flowers, that I planted and watered knew. How often the thorns and hard stones tore my hands! How often I watered those dying flowers with my tears when there was no water. I wish they knew the meaning of my departure. These fruiting trees were tiny when I planted them. I did my best to help them flourish until they grew up healthy and fruitful. Will they know I am soon leaving? Will they remember my days in their company? What about these seats, I used to rest on. Will they miss my presence? Will they be ready for someone else to settle on them? My writing desk felt my writing in tears and in smiles; does it know I am leaving? Will it miss my pen and papers in its drawers? I wish they all knew I am leaving. I wish I had known I was leaving, and then I would not have cared so much for this life. I would not have felt proud and arrogant..."

Had I known I were a guest in this world I would not have been cheated or tempted by its luxuries...

Had I known this I would have been aware that leaving a simple life is easier than leaving a luxurious one...

Had I lived a simple life, I would not have found it difficult to cross from this world to the next. My family is now enjoying the party...how often I longed for such parties, how much I cared for fashion and hairstyles! Can they help me now?"

Anfal threw herself down on the nearest chair as if she had realized a truth previously unknown to her.

She said, "What shall I take with me? Nothing but the coffin and my deeds. What kind of deeds will go with me on my long journey? Nothing! Yes, nothing!" She remembered her friend Sarah, who used to advise her and guide her to the right path of Allah. She used to remind her of the Qur'anic verse: ... *and make provision, for the provision is the guarding of oneself.* (al-Baqarah, 239)

She had never considered the importance of good deeds. Now she was in need of such deeds to present to Allah. She would stand to give her account, but what would she say? How could she expect Allah's mercy when she disobeyed His orders? How could she ask for forgiveness when she never even thought of obeying Him in her life's affairs? She wished she had read the Holy Qur'an instead of all those cheap novels. She wished she had gained some knowledge of her religion instead of reading film-star magazines. She continued wishing she had done few things, and not done other things. She wished she had not angered this person or that, and had never lied or gossiped about anyone. She wished she had not been proud and despised the poor.

She said, "I wish I could start my life all over again to make-up for my errors and to obey Allah's orders. I worshipped my desires and ignored my Creator. I wish I could live for a while to make up for my sins."

She remembered a Qur'anic verse, her grandfather used to recite: *Until when death overtakes one of them he says: Send me back, my Lord. Haply I may do good in that which I have left. By no means! It is a mere word that he speaks, and before them is a barrier until the day they are raised.* (al-Muminoon, 99)

Here she said, "Oh God, I do mean it... " Tears burst from her eyes. She cried bitterly in repentance, not pain. She decided to obey Allah in all His orders if she lived a bit longer. The phone rang and she walked towards it lazily. Tears in her eyes she said, "Yes?"

Someone said, "Can I speak to Miss Anfal?" She knew the speaker. It was her doctor. She said, "Yes, speaking."

The doctor said cheerfully, "Congratulations my daughter! There is nothing wrong with you. Thank God!"

She was stunned with surprise. She did not know what to say. "No disease? How? You are joking, doctor!"

The doctor said, "May Allah protect me I am not joking. I have just got an apology from the analyst. He explained that there was a mix-up with the names. Your name was written instead of someone else. I have your medical report here in front of me. You are quite well. Be thankful to Allah my daughter."

Excitedly she said, "Thanks be to Allah, Thank you doctor."

She put the phone down, feeling as if she was new born. She knew she was safe for a while, but death would certainly come one day. She had no time to waste. However long she lived she was a guest. The first thing she did was to perform her prayer, which she had neglected for a long time. She promised Allah to obey His orders to pray, fast, and stick to wearing decent clothes. She would also give up whatever Allah had forbidden. In order not to forget this, she wrote the Qur'anic verse on a placard and hung it on the wall. On the other side she wrote a wise saying:

"Repent the day before you die. Because you do not know when you will die, then always be repentant."

Chapter 16

THE DANGEROUS GAME

Asia sat waiting for her friend Baidah who was coming to visit her. She was surprised at her friend's demand for a private meeting. Asia thought Baidah must have a serious problem, so she was anxious to see her friend, when she arrived a few minutes late. Asia waited for her to start talking while Baidah tried to appear composed.

Then she said, "Can I ask you a question!"

"Yes, with pleasure!" said Asia.

Baidah said, "I want you to answer frankly."

"Now you know I am always frank!" Asia assured her.

"Why did you refuse Foad's proposal of marriage!" burst out Baidah.

Asia was taken aback by the question. She was silent for a while, and said, "Can I also ask you a question!"

"Of course, you can," said Baidah.

"Why do you ask me a question that might upset me? You know he is my relative and I have refused him for certain reasons."

Hesitantly Baidah said, "Well, he has proposed to me. That's why I want to know your reasons for refusing him."

"Oh, I see!" said Asia, and went silent. Then Baidah began to plead with her saying, "I must know. I am your friend, am not I! Don't you care for me?"

"Yes, you are my friend and I do care for you, so I will tell you the reason. But first of all, what do you know about him?" Asia asked Baidah.

"I know that he is a handsome, gentleman, educated, and well mannered with a good social position."

"That's right," said Asia. "He is also wealthy. But is that enough?"

Baidah, pale faced, murmured, "He is not a committed Muslim!"

"You know this and yet you still ask me my reason for refusing him?"

"I know that religion is very important, but he might change", said Baidah.

"How?" asked Asia.

"Have you ever thought that he might be guided to the right path?" proffered Baidah.

"Is this what you think?" said Asia.

"I think," began Baidah, "that refusing him is a kind of cowardice. I think we can bring Foad and the likes of him back to religion, and that we should strive for that."

"O.K., but how are you going to do it?" Asia said.

"I have means" said Baidah. "Anyway why should I refuse him when he has all these good qualifications?"

"If I leave him, he may marry someone who will increase his disregard for religion. If I accept him, I may bring him back to faith."

"That's your opinion" said Asia. "I won't impose mine on you. However, it is a very dangerous game, or marriage at risk."

"Oh, please do not exaggerate so Asia. Marriage is an adventure. I feel I can tolerate the experience."

"You are quite wrong! Experience does not make a fool wise. There is a great difference between marriage to a committed believer, who is careful of his religious duties which protect him from deviation, and a non-committed Muslim, who cares for nothing but earthly pleasures that change with the times."

"It is a risk" said Baidah, "But if I succeed it would be in the best interests of religion."

"You say: 'If I succeed', this 'if' indicates your doubts. Marriage should start on a firm foundation." Asia told her.

Baidah looked down as if in inner conflict. Then she said, "What is your opinion?"

"I don't know what to say" said Asia. "I am afraid you will suffer as a result of such an experience. It is a dangerous game. A husband does not usually accept his wife's opinion and he may even make her accept his. Then the wife may find herself standing at a crossroad leading either to the failure of her marriage or the loss of her religion. You know both are terribly hard to tolerate."

Asia stopped for a while and waited for Baidah to speak.

When she did it was in a choked voice, "What then?"

"I think you can spare yourself such trouble!" said Asia kindly.

"Suppose I am forced into doing it. What should I do then ? "

"That's for you to decide Baidah. No one can impose their will on you, whoever they are!"

Baidah was silent, then said challengingly, "I shall take the risk. I hope that I will be successful."

Asia looked at her and said coldly, "You are free to do what you like. I hope you won't be sorry afterwards." Baidah got up saying, "I apologize for having taking up your time."

Asia, "Nothing to apologize for, I feel sorry for you! "

They shook hands and Baidah left the house. Asia felt she had just lost a friend.

A few weeks later, Baidah sat, waiting anxiously for her husband. It was nearly 11 p.m. and she was very worried. She looked at the clock every other minute, and at half past eleven she heard the door open and close softly. She got up and saw her husband enter. Her face became bright with happiness. She said, "Oh Foad, you are late!" She was scared when she saw he looked disappointed. He said, "Why haven't you gone to bed yet?"

"How can I sleep when you are still out? " asked Baidah.

While he was taking off his suit and putting on his pajama, he murmured, "That will cause you a lot of worry."

"How? " asked Baidah.

"Because I shall often be late. There is no need for you to stay awake and alone."

She was disturbed at his answer and could not believe her ears. So instead she said, "Your supper is ready." Smiling he said,

"I ate out. Some friends invited me to a club. They held a party in my honour."

"I hope you enjoyed it. But why didn't you tell me about it before?" asked Baidah.

"There was no need to tell you, as you won't go with me to such places," said Foad.

"Well, at least I wouldn't have got so worried."

Foad said, "You should have known that I was at a social engagement. I live amongst educated liberals, and cannot be isolated at home with a woman... " he uttered the last words in a sharp tone and then said, "Now, go and have your supper."

With tears in her eyes, she sadly said, "I am not hungry."

Foad said, "Then let's go to bed."

Baidah said, "I expect you've already done your prayer?"

Coldly, Foad said, "It is after mid-night. Prayer time is over."

"No", said Baidah, "It is not yet mid-night. Anyway it must be done even if it is late."

"You don't know how tired and sleepy I am!" said Foad.

"Fatigue doesn't exempt one from one's religious duty."

Mockingly he said, "Allah will accept my excuse."

"No matter-if you love me you must do your prayer." Angrily, Foad got up saying, "Please do not mix up my love with praying and fasting. Let me love you in my way not yours. Anyway, I will not allow you to call me to account about my prayer every night!"

He threw himself on the bed and fell asleep leaving Baidah shocked at his words. She recalled Asia's words which had apparently come true.

She hurried to the Holy Qur'an to seek comfort and refuge. She opened it at random and read the first verse of the page which said: ... *We did them no injustice, but they were unjust to themselves. (al-Nahal, 118)*

Days and weeks passed. Baidah could find no way of getting Foad to come to her way of thinking. Whenever she talked about religion, he either mocked her or turned a deaf ear. She tried her best to give him comfort and happiness at home, but she found him more and more interested in spending his time outside. One night she waited long time for him to come home, and when he did he seemed happy, so she thought it would be a good time for her to talk to him.

She said gently, "Don't you see that I am unhappy?"

Foad surprised said, "You are unhappy? Why? Haven't I provided you with all the means for your comfort?"

"Yes, I must admit you have! Anyway, happiness is what matters; without it, there is no comfort."

"Why aren't you happy then ? " asked Foad.

Baidah said, "How can I be happy when you are so physically, spiritually and emotionally far away from me?"

"That's partly true," conceded Foad, "but I love you so I do not completely agree with what you say."

"If you loved me you would please me. You know I am not happy about your behaviour."

"Have I hurt you in any way?" asked Foad, much surprised.

"You have not hurt me physically, but you have hurt me mentally by your disregard for the belief that you promised to respect. You are not careful enough about religion, to bring us closer to each other."

"Well, I am afraid I cannot change my life style. I cannot give up my friends or my social life. I cannot be cut off from others just to spend my life behind these walls. I cannot perform my prayer in a mosque just to please you. Faith stems from personal satisfaction. It would be nothing but hypocrisy if I worshipped Allah just for you. You know that I am an honest, straightforward person, both in my personal and business dealings. What more do you want? "

Baidah listened, while her heart sank. She said in broken voice, "What about me? Have I no place at all in your life?"

"You are my beloved wife. I love no one but you. Come closer to my heart and you will know real happiness."

"What do you mean?" said Baidah.

"I mean give up ideas that keep you from enjoying life's pleasures. Turn to me whole-heartedly, and I will make you taste a life that you are still unaware of. You are at cross-roads, either you put your hand in mine and I'll take you into a world of happiness, or you stay a prisoner in your house, content with it."

"Isn't there a third choice?" she asked. Foad was silent for a while and then said, "Yes, there is. We can separate; and though it would be hard for me, it would be less harmful than if you decided to refuse my suggestion."

Baidah was silent. She wanted to scream and run away, but she was helpless. She spent a long sleepless night, feeling as if she was between two fires both of which could burn her. She was about to choose a divorce, but then thought of the tiny creature moving in her womb.

This innocent creature tied her both to the house and her husband. She was soon to be a mother. She felt dizzy with thinking and, throwing her head on to her hand, she went into a dreamless sleep. When she woke up her husband said, "Baidah, why didn't you sleep in your bed?"

She opened her eyes to see him standing near her with a cheerful face as if he was ignorant of the reason why she hadn't gone to bed. She looked at him silently.

Anxiously, he said, "Why are you pale? Are you sick?" He put his hand round her and sat nearby.

She said, "Do you really not know why I am sad?"

He laughed gently saying, "Even if I know, what can I do about it? I have offered you my heart, so is it my fault if you reject it? By the way, today I have some visitors, so be ready for the occasion."

"Who are they?" said Baidah.

"Just some friends with their wives." He was silent waiting for his wife's reaction.

She said, "Will it be a mixed meeting for men and women?"

"Of course, you do not really expect me to stick to the old tradition of having a separate room for women, do you?"

"What about me then?" asked Baidah.

"You are free to do what you like," said Foad.

She was silent for a while; then, wishing to compromise and thus show some understanding, she said, "O.K, I shall be present."

Her husband was happy-he kissed her warmly saying, "Do you mean it? How happy I am. I shall be the happiest husband. I shall be so proud of your beauty. You are the sun that will outshine their dim lights."

"What has my beauty to do with anything? To please you, I have decided to be present but I will wear hijab."

Foad drew back in disgust, "In decent hijab? No! I do not want you to be mocked. Just prepare dinner and leave the house. That will be better. I can find some excuse to explain your absence."

Baidah could not tolerate such an insult. She got up saying, "It is better if I leave the house at once."

"What about the guests?" asked Foad.

"You can take them to a club".

"When will you come back?" asked Foad.

"I may never come back!" retorted Baidah.

"What about my child?" asked Foad, calmly and deliberately. Those words were strong enough to remind her of the bitter reality, the great dilemma she was in.

She despairingly murmured, "Oh, what a fool I was! How right Asia was!"

When he heard Asia's name, he said laughingly, "Oh, that snob! I proposed to her just to crush her pride and religious vanity. Now you remember her; what has she or her advice ever done for you? You are on the verge of destroying your marriage and your family life is about to fail because of this backward Asia!"

Baidah angrily said, "No, I won't allow you to speak ill of her. Had I listened to her advice I would have spared myself such an experience. Anyway, it is my own fault. I must bear the consequences."

Two years later, Asia sat thinking of her friend Baidah. She had heard a lot about her that she found difficult to believe. She could not believe that after a bitter struggle Baidah had given in to her husband. She had heard she no longer cared for Islamic hijab but accompanied her husband to parties and nightclubs. She had given birth to a boy, Farid and they said she was always sad and hardly ever smiled. Asia heard such rumours and wished she could see Baidah and learn the truth from her.

That morning the doorbell rang and Asia hurried to open it. She was surprised to see Baidah herself standing in front of her. She was pale and unhappy. Asia welcomed her and led her into the living room. Baidah sat silently, not knowing what to say.

Asia said "Oh, Baidah, how I hoped I'd see you; I've heard so much about you, but I was anxious to hear from you yourself."

Baidah cried bitterly saying, "I have no news except of disgrace and shame! I have been the victim of foolishness and self-deceit. Anyway I am not worthy of your friendship. I have fallen to the bottom of the abyss and am hopeless, may Allah forgive me!"

Asia felt great pity for her and kindly said, "You are still my sister and I must help you, to overcome this awful experience. Now, please tell me everything frankly as you did in the past."

Baidah said, "Well, you know that I never listened to your advice. I believed in a dream and ran to get it; I tried hard to get Foad to come round to my way of thinking but ailed. He never accepted my religious commitment, and treated me cruelly, humiliating me often. Sometimes, he was gentle and kind and sometimes he was frightening. I thought about divorce, but my son caused me to give up that idea, so I gave in, and obeyed him meekly. He exploited my weakness and increased his domination over me, drawing me ever deeper into disgrace. I accepted everything just as a prisoner accepts his sentence. Now, you see me here!"

Asia could not blame her seeing her as she did and asked, "What's the problem now then?"

"He divorced me a week ago, because he blamed me for the death of our son", said Baidah. "Why?" asked Asia incredulously.

"Because I fasted in the month of Ramadhan."

Asia asked, "Did your son die of hunger?"

Baidah replied, "Of course not. He was both breast-fed as well bottle-fed. He died after an illness." Asia was greatly moved and felt sorry for the bereaved mother who had suffered humiliation and disgrace. So you see, I have lost everything," continued Baidah.

Asia hugged her warmly and said, "You have not lost everything. You still have your religion calling you back through repentance, and I am still your loving friend.

You still have the broad road of the future ahead of you. Perhaps this experience will help you to make a new righteous start; a future that is built on firm foundations. Don't despair, "*... surely none despair of Allah's mercy except the unbelieving people.*" (Yousef, 87)

Chapter 17

SPIRITUAL SURGERY

Ikhlaas considered her sister-in-faith, Wafa, to be a real help to her in understanding life as being a righteous attempt towards achieving perfection. She could never be out of her company for even a short time, and Wafa was always nearby to support her in times of crisis. She would remind Ikhlaas of her duties, if ever she forgot, and was, to her, like a mirror, gently reflecting any defect or weakness in her character. In fact Ikhlaas felt uneasy and suffered spiritually, whenever Wafa did not call or turn up at meetings. Waiting would cost her a lot; therefore she rushed anxiously to enquire about her friend's absence but could get no news of her. There was nothing for it but to go herself. Wafa, looked rather pale, but welcomed her friend with a smile. Ikhlaas kissed her saying, "Oh dear sister I why haven't you come recently? I hope there is nothing wrong?" Gently Wafa said, "Nothing, but a little surgery." Shocked, Ikhlaas said, "Oh dear, surgery? Where? When? Why? ... " Calmly Wafa said, "Oh sister, you have raised many questions that cannot be answered all at once. Let us answer the first question, 'Where?', the answer is here at home!"

Ikhlaas wondered, "Here? At home? 'Who was the doctor, who performed the operation? Where is the pain? You look, quite well, thank God!"

Wafa said, "You have again raised many questions, I shall therefore, follow your style in my answer. As for the doctor, it has been myself, as for the wound, it is unseen."

Ikhlaas thought Wafa was joking; she said, "When did you become a surgeon? We know you as our spiritual guide." Wafa spoke in a serious calm tone. She said, "Every person should be his own surgeon. A sick man is ready to resort to the doctors to rid him of a tumour or a rotten limb. Why does he do that? Why does he risk his life at the hands of someone else? Of course to be saved from a disease which is eating up

his body. As for spiritual diseases, the case is different. When a person feels such diseases keeping him from happiness he should do something to cure himself. Surgery with a difference is necessary, in this case. He himself must be the doctor. By means of faith he can perform the operation, and hence the house replaces the hospital. So I was not joking when I referred to the reason for my absence."

Ikhlaas was excited at this. She was about to cry out of fear for her friend. She anxiously said, "How do you feel now dear sister? Shall I congratulate you on your recovery?" Wafa did not answer, but was silent for a while. Ikhlaas was greatly concerned. It was not easy for her to see her best friend suffer such a dangerous disease and she was relieved when Wafa said, "I think I am quite well again."

Ikhlaas wanted to learn something from her friend, so she asked, "How do you know that you are safe, sister?"

Wafa said, "Life's incidents have helped me to recognize the disease and its cure. Don't you see that these incidents are the experimental tools which operate upon the human personality?"

Ikhlaas said, "So I see, but still one should not forget the other surgeon's knife." Wafa nodded saying, "That's a fact. Physical treatment is as important as spiritual."

Chapter 18

THE GIFT

She spent an uncomfortable day anxiously waiting for, she knew not what. Her beloved husband had left her shortly after their marriage. She was waiting for the gift he had promised her, before he went into death's eternal sleep; into the bright world of heaven. His gift, (whatever it was) would be dear to her. It would be a token, a symbol of the love, emotion and harmony that filled their life together. Yet it was a unique gift; one prepared by the husband to be given to his wife in the wake of his death. It would be one of the most precious presents he had ever given her, and she was anxious to know what it was. She wondered who could tell her something about it. He had mentioned it first during his arms training, whilst preparing to fight for the rights and the dignity of his people, to either achieve victory or enjoy martyrdom. He did not give it her then but left her, waiting for his sake return. But he never returned. How could he come back? Those who rush to fight against the satanic enemy do not come back. They always expect victory or martyrdom. They desire either death, to vex the enemy, or life that pleases the friends. There are many who come and go... , but can a life of compromise and weakness, be considered a real life? It is really only death. Her husband achieved martyrdom in the battle of Al-Karamah (a village in the occupied Palestine). He fell whilst defending his homeland that had been seized by the Zionists. They did not even celebrate one wedding anniversary as he left during the early days of their married life. Her beloved husband knew that someone's precious life, was worth sacrificing for a noble cause. He left her and joined the combatants in the battlefield, promising her his gift. He was away often and for long periods of time, but she got news of his struggle. She prayed to Allah to give him strength, patience and fortitude with which to face the brutal enemy... then, she was awaiting his return. But now she no longer waited. He had enjoyed martyrdom in the battle of dignity and justice and she would never forget his promised gift. His bright figure was etched deep into her

heart and his martyrdom had increased that brightness. He was her love whether dead or alive, and she lived with him and for him. She was proud of, and happy with, him. She had a right to anxiously await his gift. At last, after waiting for what seemed ages, but was really only a few days, the gift was brought to her.

She looked at it as if she were looking at his angelic luminous shadow. She remembered him when he was her hope in life, the man of her dreams. He went for the sake of her and every oppressed wife, every unhappy child, every lost young man... He went in order to liberate his country, for her and for all the people. He sacrificed himself for the sake of the country that was invaded by imperialists and strangers. He was worthy of her love and high respect. She got the gift. She was both happy and sad. She looked at it. It was balm for her wounded heart.

What could it be? It was a green board on which was fixed in big letters, the following Qur'anic verse : "*... who when a misfortune befalls them say: surely we are Allah's and to Him we shall return...* " (*al-Baqarah, 156*)

She hung it on the wall where she could see it every morning, when she opened her eyes and every evening when she went to sleep. She looked at it and promised Allah the Almighty, and her martyred husband that she would tread the road of struggle till the banner of justice could be raised in Palestine. Whenever she longed for her husband she read the Qur'anic verse and a feeling of calm crept through her.

Chapter 19

A BAD BARGAIN

Early on in their engagement, he sat near his fiancée saying, "Oh, how I love you... in fact I adore you, you are my life... " He uttered words of love that she vainly enjoyed listening to. He told her that he could hardly wait for their wedding day, as life away from her was meaningless to him. He wondered how he had managed to live before knowing her. He assured her that she was the source of happiness in his life. He was sure to rent a great house that would match his feelings. They would spend their honeymoon abroad, in one of the western capitals.

He carried on talking, repeating words of love, while his girl was lost in her daydreams, which had at last come true. Suddenly she was aware of her hair dropping across her forehead. She raised her hand to put it in place and said flirtatiously, "You were in such a hurry that you did not even give me time to have my hair done."

He said, "Your hair is lovely anyway, and you are quite beautiful."

She smiled, proudly encouraging him to praise her still more. She said, "You did not even wait for me to get my new dress from the tailor."

He said, "Have not I said that this does not matter. I never worry about such things as my real aim has been reached."

She eagerly said, "Are you quite sure?" He said,

"Yes. I swear by my love, that I mean every word."

She said, "I am very happy. I have always hoped to get a husband who does not care for material things... "

He said, "I am just like that, you can be sure."

She went on, "You know that money is something that comes and goes. I don't care much for it. In fact, I give all of my salary to my father who suffers financial difficulties."

At first he did not answer, then he said: "It is nice that you help your father. Financial problems cannot be tolerated. Then I suppose we can't rent a big house!"

She said, "Whether big or small, it does not matter .It should at least be comfortable."

He said, "Yes, there should be all the necessary amenities: a refrigerator, a cooler, a washing machine... "

She interrupted him saying, "Such items can be bought one by one. At first we can start a simple life. You know that at present my father cannot help us."

He was silent again. He looked at his watch and then said, "Simplicity is nice. I think we should not go abroad! "

She answered, "Yes, that is much better. You know I must pay back my debts!"

No longer he could conceal his disappointment, so he said sharply, "Then, your salary is already spent in advance!"

She said, "Nearly!"

He moved in discomfort saying, "I, myself am in debt, so, I'd better not marry at present."

Standing up he said, "We may not meet again. I wish you good luck!"

He left quickly as if running away from a monster! Only few minutes before he had spoken words of love and claimed that he could not live without her. The waiter came to her with the bill that the young man had not paid.

Amused she said to herself, "I guessed right! I was right to lie about my wealth. How stupid he is! He never thought I was testing him. My bank balance is good and I am not in debt to anyone! Anyway, it was a good experience for me, even if it was a bad bargain."

Chapter 20

THE LAST DAYS

In despair Sarah wept saying, "Oh! I didn't know that those were her last days or that that was to be our last meeting with her! Had I only known... ", her tears choked her. Saliha, the friend who had brought her the sad news, was brave enough to have carried the message. She offered condolences to her friend and stretched her cold and shaking hand in comfort, to Sara. She said, "It would not have made any difference. She kept it to herself and suffered in silence, patiently awaiting her end. She tolerated the horrors of waiting death. What could you have done, had you known?"

Sarah said, "I would have learnt much from her, I would have learned lessons that would have helped me to find my way in life. I would have said farewell to her, and have assured her of my undying love and respect. Oh! I am lost since her departure..."

Saliha said, "She knew how much you appreciated her friendship that is why she left you her writing."

Sarah dried her tears and said wonderingly, "Her writing?"

Saliha said, "It seems to be her diary ... I've come to give you this precious trust."

She opened her handbag and got out the diary. Sarah took it and noticed on the cover the Holy Qur'anic verse: *We are Allah's and to Him we shall return.* (al-Baqarah, 156)

On the first page she read:

... So, my life will come to an end soon. It is a matter of just a few days. Only yesterday was I informed of this fact. Anyway, it is the end, but I am not thinking of the end so much, as I am thinking of the beginning, and the incidents that have filled the space between the beginning and the end. Those incidents will strongly affect the end.

They indicate the end, as it says in the Qur'anic verse:

Allah is the Guardian of those who believe. He brings them out of the darkness into the light... (al-Baqarah, 257)

Thus, I must review my past deeds and call myself to account, in order to know what is awaiting me. Light or Darkness, joy or sadness, chains or freedom...

In fact, I am seriously thinking of the beginning. What was the beginning? When and where should I start? Should I start at my childhood? Oh, no. I don't want to write my life story that takes the time of whoever reads it. I shall express the feelings of one who stands at the crossroads of this life and the hereafter. My childhood has nothing to do with that. It has nothing to do with what is waiting for me now! Childhood is a break in man's life, before he is required to perform his responsibilities. Yet, childhood signifies many meanings. I have heard and read about childhood. They say it is the happy joyful world of hopes and wishes. They say it is the time when a child gains the necessities for a life that will give him satisfaction. They say this and more. Though I have read about childhood, I have never realized the meaning of my childhood as defined by others. My childhood was a stage in life; I crossed it with no weapons of knowledge or faith. Hence I suffered a lot and was bewildered at the conflict between my inner self and the tiny body, between my great responsibility, which was ahead of me, and the limited range of my thinking. Childhood means nothing to me but a fruitless expanse of frozen time. So I won't put those days of childhood on trial. I will start with the early days of youth and girlhood. What is youth to me? It is a film full of images; some are dull and heavy, some are light and bright. It is a theatre where one's story is told; the story of someone searching for perfection; one who looked all around for the thread that would lead to it. I tried to understand life. I was never satisfied with its outward face. I dived deeper to reach my aim. I came to understand, through this universe, that there is a mighty Power with firm laws that regulates its movements. That is why it is so wonderful, so magnificent. I strived to understand people, but faced amazement, hesitation and disappointment most of the time. How often I returned home crying and broken-hearted; but, it was not always like that. Thank God! Through experience I gained more knowledge and more understanding of human nature and personal habits. I persisted in the pursuit of knowledge and understanding. Where did I find it? It was in Islam, in my Qur'an that is the message from Heaven. I felt so thirsty that I hurried to this spring. This was my early youth which I intend to record in this diary... ' shall write down its hours whether of happiness or sadness, satisfaction or disappointment. I will consider my life's course and whether or not it

was on the right path. I must tell the truth, whatever that may be. I am now standing at the doors of other world. What was my reaction to incidents and events in those past days? What was my reaction to faith and belief in Allah the Almighty? Hiding, or running away from the truth won't help. I am on my way to stand in front of a Just Judge. There is no room for denial or lying. The Qur'anic verse says:

On the day when their tongues and their hands and their feet shall bear witness against them as to what they did... (al-Nur, 24)

I need to be frank and put myself on trial. I must be serious in calling myself to account, for haven't I known that death is the certain end of every human being? It is written on every person clearly as a necklace on a young girl's neck. Did I not hear that Imam Ali (a) said, "**Oh people! you are chased by death... !?**" Then it is not only I who should call myself frankly to account. Everyone should know that he is created to achieve perfection through the worship of Allah the Almighty. When one dies, one will reap what one has sown. Oh, you who think you are safe, be careful! You will not be spared.

Chapter 21

HARD TIMES

I must admit that I suffered poverty in my early youth. There was nothing to eat or drink, no home no clothing! Poverty is a cruel situation. It brings all kinds of misery and pain. How did it affect my life? Did it destroy me? Was I strong enough to pass the experience successfully? In fact, it was an experience that caused me to learn the importance of faith in the human life. It made me understand the great Prophet's (s) saying: **"Whoever does not comprehend the Qur'an is not among my followers."**

Anyone can undergo the experience of poverty and financial difficulty and if one lacks tolerance and self-control, one may suffer an unimaginable situation. Tolerance and self-control stem from faith that can help man to successfully overcome difficulties. It teaches him to be master of himself and of others. Whatever earthly pleasures a man gets, will soon come to an end. It is no wonder that I was content with the little I had. I never thought poverty meant disappointment or failure. On the contrary, I tried to benefit from my spiritual strength and make use of it in fruitful deeds. I lacked the material necessities to help me carry on in life. Hence it was necessary for me to stand on the firm ground of constructive and creative values and ethics which help one to form a character completely aware of the dimensions of one's existence. I came to understand the real meaning of poverty and richness. I came to know that a poor person is one whose social worth depends on his wealth. It is high when one's bank balance is high, and low, when it is low. He needs money to prove his social existence, property to make people point at him, and luxuries to make others gather around him. He considers money as being the pivot of his existence and his dignity. He is careful to keep it because its disappearance means his own non-existence. I never let such thoughts about poverty poison my life with weakness and gullibility. I never allowed it to make me look at life with feelings of deprivation. I was happy despite my poverty. I was carefree, busy gaining religious

knowledge that could shape my personality. The very little knowledge that I gained gave me so much pleasure and self-contentment that it gave success its real meaning. I was, thank God, happy with the little I had. It is a Divine Blessing in a believer's life.

Chapter 22

IDLENESS

This was a period of inactivity. Thank God, it did not last long. Now that I see my end approaching, before the fulfillment of my aim, which is to worship for the sake of Allah, I feel sad about that period of idleness. Man's life is worthless, unless it is devoted to work for the sake of Allah, the Almighty. How despicable idleness is! How strange that man is careless of his religious duties and neglects religious rituals! Now, I feel those past days blame me for neglecting them. They are sorry for having passed by without the performance of anything but the ordinary duties. Nothing more has been recorded in the pages of good deeds. Those days are ashamed to demand Allah's pleasure, on the Day of Judgment. What can I do? Whatever passed away won't come back. I should have made up for those days later. I know that one's days are counted. I wonder if I did my best. Only Allah the Almighty knows that.

A NEW START

However, because of Allah's mercy, my idleness did not last long. Something happened to shock me and inject new life into me. It caused me to understand my responsibilities more fully. Usually one gains experience through hardships and difficulties. Thank God, such hardships caused me to understand the importance of faith in my life.

Thus, I thank God, for His trying man with troubles and hardships that must be considered as some of His bounties. Such hardships and difficulties must not be considered in terms of their cruel appearance alone, but rather through whatever good lessons are gained from them. We should consider them spiritual benefits and face such situations with strength and determination.

I recall such an experience and how deeply it affected me. Its effect was so great that I was on the verge of hopelessness. All that time I dragged myself from the house and strolled the streets, as if to escape the barbs of that experience. I found that I was wrong. The house had nothing to do with that difficulty. Leaving the house did not make any difference. I was defeated and at a loss as to where to go or what to do. Then suddenly I listened to the Qur'anic words that came from a distance, as if I was hearing them for the first time:

Until when the apostles despaired and the people became I sure that they were indeed told a lie, Our help came to them and whom We pleased was delivered and Our punishment is not averted from the guilty people. (Yousef,110)

On hearing those words I was made aware again, I woke up as if from a sleep that could make me despair. I remembered that Allah, the Almighty never leaves His faithful believers in trouble. Those troubles are nothing but a means or a method towards perfection. To a human being they are the same as a laboratory where the real nature of man is analyzed so that he can learn things about himself that he ignores and discover his weaknesses and defects. After that experience I continued my life amid hopes and pains, flowers and thorns. Thorns are only found near flowers. Hope comes from pain. Hence I found myself in harmony with various roles and incidents. Good things did not tempt me, neither did bad things lead me into despair. I waited for the relief after hardships and expected darker times after happy days, as if those happy days warned of what might follow. The years passed on and I enjoyed Allah's mercy in full. I felt I was too unworthy to receive such mercy and compassion. I belittled whatever I did for the sake of Allah. My pains increased due to my shortcomings in serving Him. Such shortcomings seemed the result of weakness or laziness. I felt uneasy in my surroundings as if I were an intruder. I tried to keep away. How hard it is for one to feel handicapped in the performance of one's duties. I was overwhelmed with sorrow and pain that tarnished my spiritual pleasure in serving Allah the Almighty... it was Allah's mercy that engulfed my inner self and helped me to overcome the obstacles in life. Thanks are due to Him Who keeps the doors open for His worshippers.

Chapter 23

THE LAST HOURS

Now I must write about the last hours, which have been imposed, on me. There is no way out; death spares no one. The Holy Qur'an says,

Wherever you are, death will overtake you though you be in lofty towers... (al-Nisa, 78)

Is there any escape from Allah's order? The Divine narration says, **Whoever rejects My rule, should leave My Earth and Heaven.** Every believer should accept death willingly; with whatever pleases Allah, the Almighty. Am I sorry to be leaving this world? The answer is: Yes and No. I am sorry at leaving it because it is the way that leads to Allah's pleasure and mercy. Its days are trials offered to man in which to make his choice. Had I to live longer I might achieve a better level in the worship of Allah. There is another reason for my sorrow. My friends and relatives will feel sad and miss me; but this is the nature of life. I am not sorry, because it is not worth a feather, as a poet says, ... One should be careful of its plots. Divorce is thrice (three times in the Islamic Religion) yet I divorced it a thousand times... Its changes are fearful, its promises are false and its hopes are worn out. I wonder how some hold onto such a hope Don't they know, good deeds are the best provisions and that the final settlement is in graves? ... Oh, how sorry one feels when the last hours draw near. How regretful one is for past errors! How one wishes for a new chance to make-up for them! One is ready to give whatever one has, to make-up for those sins. How wonderful it is for one to call oneself to account. How wise it is for one to consider the result of each step one takes in life, so that one may not feel sorry at the last hours. The Holy Qur'an says,... *most surely (one's) self is wont to command evil except such as my Lord had mercy on, surely my Lord is Forgiving, Merciful. (Yousef, 53)*

Oh God, I do love Thee, the same as I fear Thee... Oh God, grant me Your mercy and forgiveness, deprive me not of Your pleasure... Oh

Mighty God, how happy I am to be released of the chains and concerns of this world. I am happy to becoming free of its evils and sins. Oh God, grant those who loved me patience and double their reward. Oh God, keep them on the right path, so that they can continue their good deeds through which I may survive... Oh God, grant me mercy... surely Thou art the most liberal Giver....(Aale-Imran, 8)

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