

(Hadhrat Abbas,the Standard Bearer of Hossein (A.S

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The shifting sand dunes of Karbala were smeared with blood. Near one of wash dunes, on the bank of Alkoma, lay the prostrate figure of a youth with blood gushing out from innumerable wounds. The crimson life-tide was ebbing fast. Even so, it seemed as if he was anxiously expecting somebody to come to him, to be near him before he breathed his last. Through his starched throat he was feebly calling somebody. Yes, Abbas was anxiously expecting his master to come to him before he parted with his life, as he had come to the side of all his devoted friends who had laid down their dear lives for him and in espousing his cause.

It is said that before a man's death all the past events of his life pass before his mind's eye in a flash-back. In his last moments Abbas was experiencing this. He was seeing himself as a child in Medina following Hossein with a devotion which was considered unique even for a brother. He was seeing the events of that hot and sultry day in Kufa when his illustrious father Ali was addressing a congregation in the mosque and he, as a child, with his characteristic devotion, was looking at the face of his beloved brother watching him intently so that he could attend to his wishes on an instant command. Seeing from the parched lips of Hossein that he was feeling extremely thirsty, how he had darted out from the mosque and returned with a tumbler full of cool, refreshing water and in the hurry to carry the water as quickly as possible to quench the consuming thirst of his dearest brother, how he had spilled water on his own clothes.

He was recalling how this incident had made his illustrious father stop in the midst of his speech, with tears rolling down his cheeks at the sight of his young son all wet with water. He was remembering his father's reply to the queries from his faithful followers as to what had brought tears in his eyes, that Abbas who had wetted his body with water in the process of quenching Hossein's thirst would in the not too distant future wet his body with his own blood in attempting to quench the thirst of his young children. He was vividly seeing the scene on the 21st Ramazan, way back in 40 Hijra, when his father mortally wounded, was lying on his death-bed and entrusting his children and dependents to the care of the his eldest brother, Hassan - all except him. Seeing that his father had commended all but him to the care of Hassan - how he, a child of 12, had burst out into uncontrollable tears.

His father, on hearing him sobbing, had called him to his side and given his hand in Hossein's hand with the words:

Hossein , this child I am entrusting to you. He will represent me on the day of your supreme sacrifice and lay down his life in defending you and your dear ones, much as I would have done if alive on that day.

How his father had turned to him and affectionately told him: Abbas, my child, I know your unbounded love for Hossein. Though you are too young to be told about it, when that day dawns, consider no sacrifice too great for Hossein and his children. He saw before his mind's eye that parting with his aged mother Fatima in Medina. How she had affectionately embraced him and reminded him of the dying desire of his father to lay down his life in the defense of Hossein and his dear ones.

A faint smile of satisfaction flickered for a brief moment on his parched lips a smile of satisfaction that he had fulfilled his father's wish; that he had performed his duty for which he was brought up. It just flitted for a moment and vanished as other scenes came before his mind's eye. He was re- living the events of the night before. He was seeing Shimr stealthily coming to him; and talking to him about his ties of relationship; about the protection he had been promised for Abbas by the Commander of Yazid's forces, only if he would leave Hossein and go over to Yazid's camp; about the promises of riches and rewards that he would get; how he had spurned the suggestion of Shimr with the utmost disdain to the chagrin of that servile minion who had sold his soul for a mess of pottage. How he had scared away that coward by his scathing rage saying:

You worshipper of Mammon, do not think that Abbas will be lured by your tempting offer of power and pelf. If I die in fending my master, Hossein, I shall consider myself the luckiest person. O coward, remember that valiants die but once. Nobody is born to live eternally. By betraying my master, you have betrayed the Prophet, whose religion you profess to follow. On the Day of Judgement you will be doomed to eternal perdition. I am ashamed to own any relationship with you. Had it not been for the fact that you have come here unarmed, I would have given you the chastisement you deserve for your impudence in asking me to become a turncoat.

How that wretch had scampered from there seeing him roaring like an enraged lion. The thought of that unpleasant interlude contracted his brows. Or was it the excruciating pain he was suffering on account of the deep gashes he had all over his body?

Yet another scene passed before Abbas's eyes - Sakina leading 42 children, each with a dry water-bag. The children were shouting as if in chorus Thirst, consuming thirst, is killing us.

Sakina coming to him and putting her dry water-bag at his feet and saying to him: O uncle, I know you will do something to get water for us. Even if you can bring one bag full of

water, we can wet our parched throats.

He could see that thirst, aggravated by the scorching heat of the desert, was squeezing their young lives out of them. The sight of these youngsters had moved him more than any other soul-stirring events of that faithful day. How he had picked up the water-bag with assurance to

Sakina that he would go and bring water - God Willing.

How he had taken Hossein's permission and marched out of the camp with a sword in one hand, the flag in the other, and the bag on his shoulder, with the children following him in a group up to the outer perimeter of the camp. How Hossein had repeatedly requested him to

avoid fighting as much as possible and confine himself to the task of bringing water!

His thoughts switched over to the events that had preceded his fall from the horse. With the object of procuring water for his dear little Sakina, he had charged on the enemy who held the river banks.

He had run through the enemy ranks like a knife through butter. Again this surging onslaught the cowards could not stand and had run helter-skelter shouting for protection. For a moment it seemed as if Ali, the Lion of God, had descended from heaven. In no time Abbas was near the rivulet. He had jumped down from the horse and bent to fill the water-bag. When it was filled to the brim, he had taken some water in his cupped hand to drink and satisfy his killing thirst. But, on second thoughts, he had thrown the water away. How could he drink water when Sakina and the children were still withering without it? How could he be so callous as to forget that his master Hossein had not had a drop of water since the last three days. He had turned to his horse which had been let loose so that it could satisfy its thirst. The animal had been

intently looking at its master as if to say:

I too am aware that, so long as our master and his children remain without water, our thirst cannot be quenched.

With the water-bag filled he had jumped into the saddle with one thought uppermost in his mind, to get the water to the anxiously waiting children as quickly as possible. Seeing him galloping towards the camp of Hossein, the enemy had turned. Somebody had shouted from the enemy ranks that if Hossein and his people got water, it would be difficult to fight them on the battlefield. Though it was an uneven fight, he fought them with valour which was so characteristic of his fathers. Though he was thirsty and hungry, he charged on them and scattered them. The mercenaries of Yazid were running like lambs in a fold when charged by a lion. Seeing that a frontal assault on a man so brave was not possible, they had resorted to a barrage of arrows. When arrows were coming from all sides, Abbas had only one thought in his mind, how to protect the water-bag than his life. Seeing that Abbas was preoccupied with this

thought, one treacherous foe, hiding behind a sand-dune, had rushed out and dealt a blow on his right hand and cut it off. In a flash Abbas had transferred his sword to his left hand and the standard he was bearing he had hugged to his chest. Now that the Lion of Ali was crippled, the foes had found courage to surround him. A blow from an enemy's sword severed his left arm. The odds were now mounting against him. He held the bag with his teeth and protected the flag with his chest pressed on the horse's back.

Now the paramount thought in his mind was to reach the camp somehow or the other. A silent prayer had escaped his lips:

Merciful Allah, spare me long enough to fulfill my mission.

But that was not to be. An arrow had pierced the water-bag and water had started gushing out of it. Was it water that was flowing out of that bag or the hopes of Abbas? All his efforts had been in vain. After all Sakina's thirst would remain unsatisfied and all her hopes would be frustrated. The enemies who had made bold to surround him, now seeing his helpless condition, were now gathering thick round him. One of them came near him and struck mortal blow with an iron mace. He reeled over and fell from the horse.

He tossed on the burning sand with excruciating pain. He felt that life was fast ebbing out but his wish to see his master had remained unfulfilled. With one last effort, with all the strength that was left in him, he shouted:

O my master, do come to me before I die.

As it in answer to his prayers he felt some footsteps near him, Yes, his instinct told him that it was his lord. His one eye had been blinded by an arrow and the other filled with blood and so he could not see. But he felt his master kneeling down beside him, lifting his head and taking it into his lap. Not a word was said for a few seconds because both were choked with emotion. At last he heard Hossein's voice, a half-sob, half-muffled cry: Abbas, my brother, what have they done to you? If Abbas could see, would he have recognized his master? With back bent and beard turned white and hoary, on hearing the parting cry of his beloved brother, Hossein's plight was such that nobody could have recognized him - such was his transformation.

Abbas was now feeling the loving touch of his master's hand. With effort he muttered: You have come at last, my Master. I thought I was not destined to have a last farewell with you but, thank God, you are here.

With these words he put his head on the sand. Tenderly Hossein lifted his head and again put it on his lap, inquiring why he had removed it from there.

My Master, replied Abbas, the thought that when you will be breathing your last, nobody will be there to put your head in a lap and to comfort you, makes me feel that it would be better if my

head lies on the sand when I die, just as yours would be. Besides, I am your slave and you are my master. It is too much for me to put my head on your lap. Hossein burst into uncontrollable tears. The sight of his brother, whose name was to become a byword for devotion and unflinching faithfulness, laying down his dear life in his arms, was heart-rending.

Abbas was heard to whisper softly: My master, I have some last wishes to express. When I was born, I had my first look at your face and it is my last desire that when I die, my gaze may be on it, too. My one eye is pierced by an arrow and the other is filled with blood. If you will clear the blood from my one eye, I'll be able to see you and fulfill my last dying desire. My second wish is that when I die you may not carry my body to the camp. I had promised to bring water to Sakina and, since I have failed in my attempt to bring her water, I cannot face her even in death. Besides, I know that the blows that you have received since morning have all but crushed you and carrying my body to the camp will be heart breaking work for you. And my third wish is that Sakina may not be brought here to see my plight. I know with what love and affection she was devoted to me. The sight of my dead body lying here will kill her.

Hossein sobbingly promised him that he would carry out his last wishes added: Abbas, I too have a wish to be fulfilled. Since childhood you have always called me master. For once at least call me brother with your dying breath. The blood was cleared from the eye, one brother looked at the other with a longing lingering look. Abbas was heard to whisper:

My brother, my brother and with these words he surrendered his soul to his Maker: Hossein fell unconscious on the dead body of Abbas with a cry:

O Abbas, who is left to protect me and Sakina after you? The flow of Furat became dark as winter and a murmur arose from the flowing water as if to protest against the killing of a thirsty water-bearer on its banks