



Rose Petals For Life

THE light rose coloured envelope had an expensive feel to it. My name and address was calligraphed in handsome English script and the stamp was meticulously placed. On the flap side the sender's family name was embossed directly under a decorative Arabic calligraphic seal. A bit surprised at receiving such a letter, it took me almost a whole minute to guess who it had come from. It was a local letter and the only Naqvis I knew were Dr. and Mrs Syed Mujahid Ali.

"This cannot be a wedding invitation, their daughter is too young..., or has it been really so long that I have missed the years go by. No this cannot be so. It was only three years ago that they invited me to their tenth wedding anniversary and ninth birthday of their daughter. Who could forget that evening? I felt like an extra in a lavish Bombay movie set. We were entertained to a large screen showing of selected excerpts from "Gandhi" and a dance by their little Annie with instrumental accompaniment by her teacher, Pandit Harichand. Yes I clearly remember that evening because of our discussion on the social meaning of performing arts.

It was a conspicuously luxurious message. The inside of the envelope was dark, rich burgundy. The fold-out card was wrapped in a silky tissue which added mystery to what was inside. Gently, I pulled the card out and slipped the tissue off. The outer jacket of the card was like the two shutters of an Andalusian mirador. The arabesque and geometric designs were quite authentic and faithfully reproduced. As I opened the "shutters", there on the central panel was yet another floriated arch framing a calligraphic medallion that I immediately recognised as the masterpiece of Ustad Hamid al-Amadi of Istanbul. On the top, just below the crown of the arch was the same seal that I had seen on the outside of the envelope. On the backside of the two shutters was written the message, English on one side and Urdu on the other: "We request you to join us in our

celebrations of the Ameen ceremony of our dear daughter "Annie", Syedda Qurratul-Ain Ali Naqvi. A separate hand written note addressed me in a very flattering manner and requested that I enlighten the gathering by delivering a short speech about the Holy Quran and its importance in the future of Muslims in the West.

I was deeply touched by the beauty of the card. My heart was softened by the pure spiritual glow of the sacred names and the words. I forgot the disappointments of my earlier encounters with my "brothers and sisters" whenever I did try to speak to

I called to congratulate them on the achievement of their daughter. I also thanked them for the invitation and informed them of my eager acceptance of the responsibility they had put on my shoulders. Only after the conversation was finished, I sensed that I perhaps had shown an unexpected and unwarranted degree of enthusiasm. I do remember Mrs. Naqvi saying to me, in her characteristic cultured tone, "I feel a bit hesitant to say this to you, but for this time, please, keep the speech short and sweet. Five minutes or seven at the most."

I found myself in the middle of a mini-festival. There must have been about one hundred men and women and about as many children. The palatial house felt like a beehive except that these bees exhibited no order. The immaculately suited men, holding the sodas in their hands, were talking of anything from the stock market, to the wisdom or absurdity of the partition of India. From some corners one could hear heated positions being taken on the question of war and peace in Islam. I found myself helplessly imprisoned among a group of intellectuals who were quite prepared to produce a revised and abridged version of the Quran. The noise of the children was welcome as it drowned some of the most outrageous arguments against Jihad being puffed out with the sweet-smelling pipe smoke of Dr. Mujahid Naqvi. My legs felt weak, my forehead was moist, my eyes burnt and shoulders drooped as I sensed the burden of a thousand talking corpses.

As we were being asked to gather in the basement, Mrs. Naqvi approached me and in a whispering tone said, "As I am sure you have noticed, there are a number of our

American friends who have also come. They are such open-minded people they want to share our joy in celebrating Annie's finishing of the "Moslem Bible". We do not know exactly what you were going to say but you know these people get bored with pure religious talk. They might think we are some kind of fundamentalists, and you know what that means these days. Mujahid and I felt that it is not very Islamic to risk hurting the feelings of our guests. I hope you don't mind if we skip your speech. I am sure there will be other occasions..." Before I could say anything, she fluttered away ever so generously distributing her charm among the crowd.

On the wall behind the carpet-draped stage hung a framed piece torn from the "Hijab of Kaaba". Flanking this were two huge photographs of the Haramain of Makkah and Madinah. The programme started with a prayer by the resident Imam. The feeble old man recited the second section of Sura Luqman in a hauntingly beautiful voice trained in some Madrassah of Cairo. In his heavily accented and hesitant English, he made a gentle call towards the basic practices of piety, he prayed for the prosperity of his hosts, and ended by making an appeal for the urgent needs needed to save the cracking foundations of the mosque.

Annie was dressed like a little bride. As she walked towards the stage, the anklets made the jingling noise of a temple dancer. She sat in the middle, her mother on one side and father on the other. The Imam unwrapped the heavy brocade covers from the Quran and opened it where a peacock feather had been placed as a book mark. She recited the last Sura of the Quran. There was loud applause from the elders and a shower of rose petals. The children broke up in happy screams.

The Quran had been finished. The parents were free. They had done the duty and cast off their Islamic burden. Annie could now afford to grow into a well-adjusted, normal, happy young American. She ran upstairs with her friends and impatiently switched on the Michael Jackson coming live from Japan.

Her head cover was left behind on the stage. The Imam picked it up and used it as a shroud for the book she had finished for life. ■