

Martyrdom of Tahirih (Dawnbreakers)

Those days of unceasing turmoil witnessed the martyrdom of yet another eminent disciple of the Bab. A woman, no less great and heroic than Tahirih herself, was engulfed in the storm that was then raging with undiminished violence throughout the capital. What I now begin to relate regarding the circumstances of her martyrdom has been obtained from trustworthy informants, some of whom were themselves witnesses of the events I am attempting to describe. Her stay in Tihran was marked by many proofs of the warm affection and high esteem in which she was held by the leading women of the capital. She had reached, indeed, in those days, the high-water mark of her popularity.¹ The house where she was confined was besieged by her women admirers, who thronged her doors, eager to enter her presence and to seek the benefit of her knowledge.² Among these ladies, the wife of

¹ "She remained in Tihran a long time receiving numerous visitors both men and women. She aroused the women by showing them the abject role which Islam assigned to them and she won them over to the new religion by showing them the freedom and respect which it would bestow upon them. Many domestic disputes followed, not always to the advantage and credit of the husband. These discussions might have continued at length, if Mirza Aqa Khan-i-Nuri had not been appointed Sadr-i-A'zam. The premier ordered Haji Mulla Muhammad Andirmani and Haji Mulla Ali Kini to call on her in order to examine into her belief. They held seven conferences with her in which she argued with much feeling and affirmed that the Bab was the promised and expected Imam. Her adversaries called her attention to the fact that, in accordance with the prophecies, the promised Imam was to come from Jabulqa and Jabulsa. She retorted feelingly that those prophecies were false and forged by false traditionalists and, as these two cities never existed, they could only be the superstitions of diseased brains. She expounded the new doctrine, bringing out its truth, but always encountered the same argument of Jabulqa. Exasperated, she finally told them: 'Your reasoning is that of an ignorant and stupid child; how long will you cling to these follies and lies? When will you lift your eyes towards the Sun of Truth?' Shocked by such blasphemy, Haji Mulla Ali rose up and led his friend away saying, 'Why prolong our discussion with an infidel?' They returned home and wrote out the sentence which established her apostasy and her refusal to retract, and condemned her to death in the name of the Qur'an!" (A. L. M. Nicolas' "Siyyid Ali-Muhammad dit le Bab," pp. 446-447.)

² "While a prisoner in the house of the Kalantar, the marriage of the son of the family took place. Naturally, the wives of all the prominent men were invited; but,

Kalantar³ distinguished herself by the extreme reverence she showed to Tahirih. Acting as her hostess, she introduced into her presence the flower of womanhood in Tihran, served her with extraordinary enthusiasm, and never failed to contribute her share in deepening her influence among her womenfolk. Persons with whom the wife of Kalantar was intimately connected have heard her relate the following: "One night, whilst Tahirih was staying in my home, I was summoned to her presence and found her fully adorned, dressed in a gown of snow-white silk. Her room was redolent with the choicest perfume. I expressed to her my surprise at so unusual a sight. 'I am preparing to meet my Beloved,' she said, 'and wish to free you from the cares and anxieties of my imprisonment.' I was much startled at first, and wept at the thought of separation from her. 'Weep not, she sought to reassure me. 'The time of your lamentation is not yet come. I wish to share with you my last wishes, for the hour when I shall be arrested and condemned to suffer martyrdom is fast approaching. I would request you to allow your son to accompany me to the scene of my death and to ensure that the guards and executioner into whose hands I shall be delivered will not compel me to divest myself of this attire. It is also my wish that my body be thrown into a pit, and that that pit be filled with earth and stones. Three days after my death a woman will come and visit you, to whom you will give this package which I now deliver into your hands. My last request is that you permit no one henceforth to enter my chamber. From now until the time when I shall be summoned to leave this house, let no one be allowed to disturb my devotions. This day I intend to fast— a fast which I shall not break until I am brought face to face with my Beloved.' She bade me, with these words, lock the door of her chamber and not open it until the hour of her departure should strike. She also urged me to keep secret the tidings of her death until such time as her enemies should themselves disclose

although the host had gone to a great deal of expense to provide the customary entertainment, the women loudly demanded that Qurratu'l-Ayn be brought before the company. She had hardly appeared and begun to speak when the musicians and dancers were dismissed. The ladies, forgetful of the sweets of which they were so fond, had eyes only for Qurratu'l-Ayn." (Ibid., p. 448.)

³ Mahmud Khan-i-Kalantar, in whose custody she was placed.

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"The great love I cherished for her in my heart, alone enabled me to abide by her instructions. But for the compelling desire I felt to fulfil her wishes, I would never have consented to deprive myself of one moment of her presence. I locked the door of her chamber and retired to my own, in a state of uncontrollable sorrow. I lay sleepless and disconsolate upon my bed. The thought of her approaching martyrdom lacerated my soul. 'Lord, Lord,' I prayed in my despair, 'turn from her, if it be Thy wish, the cup which her lips desire to drink.' That day and night, I several times, unable to contain myself, arose and stole away to the threshold of that room and stood silently at her door, eager to listen to whatever might be falling from her lips. I was enchanted by the melody of that voice which intoned the praise of her Beloved. I could hardly remain standing upon my feet, so great was my agitation. Four hours after sunset, I heard a knocking at the door. I hastened immediately to my son, and acquainted him with the wishes of Tahirih. He pledged his word that he would fulfil every instruction she had given me. It chanced that night that my husband was absent. My son, who opened the door, informed me that the farrashes⁴ of Aziz Khan-i-Sardar were standing at the gate, demanding that Tahirih be immediately delivered into their hands. I was struck with terror by the news, and, as I tottered to her door and with trembling hands unlocked it, found her veiled and prepared to leave her apartment. She was pacing the floor when I entered, and was chanting a litany expressive of both grief and triumph. As soon as she saw me, she approached and kissed me. She placed in my hand the key to her chest, in which she said she had left for me a few trivial things as a remembrance of her stay in my house. Whenever you open this chest,' she said, 'and behold the things it contains, you will, I hope, remember me and rejoice in my gladness.'

"With these words she bade me her last farewell, and, accompanied by my son, disappeared from before my eyes. What pangs of anguish I felt that moment, as I beheld her beauteous form gradually fade away in the distance! She mounted the steed which the Sardar had sent for her, and, escorted by my son and a number of attendants, who marched on each side of her, rode out to the garden that was to be the scene of her

martyrdom.

"Three hours later my son returned, his face drenched with tears, hurling imprecations at the Sardar and his abject lieutenants. I tried to calm his agitation, and, seating him beside me, asked him to relate as fully as he could the circumstances of her death. 'Mother,' he sobbingly replied, 'I can scarcely attempt to describe what my eyes have beheld. We straightway proceeded to the Ilkhani garden,⁵ outside the gate of the city. There I found, to my horror, the Sardar and his lieutenants absorbed in acts of debauchery and shame, flushed with wine and roaring with laughter. Arriving at the gate, Tahirih dismounted and, calling me to her, asked me to act as her intermediary with the Sardar, whom she said she was disinclined to address in the midst of his revelry. 'They apparently wish to strangle me,' she said. 'I set aside, long ago, a silken kerchief which I hoped would be used for this purpose. I deliver it into your hands and wish you to induce that dissolute drunkard to use it as a means whereby he can take my life.'

"When I went to the Sardar, I found him in a state of wretched intoxication. 'Interrupt not the gaiety of our festival!' I heard him shout as I approached him. 'Let that miserable wretch be strangled and her body be thrown into a pit!' I was greatly surprised at such an order. Believing it unnecessary to venture any request from him, I went to two of his attendants, with whom I was already acquainted, and gave them the kerchief with which Tahirih had entrusted me. They consented to grant her request. That same kerchief was wound round her neck and was made the instrument of her martyrdom. I hastened immediately afterwards to the gardener and asked him whether he could suggest a place where I could conceal the body. He directed me, to my great delight, to a well that had been dug recently and left unfinished. With the help of a few others, I lowered her into her grave and filled

⁵ "Across from the English Legation and the Turkish Embassy stretched a rather vast square which since 1893 has disappeared. Toward the center of this square, but in line with the street, stood five or six trees which marked the spot where the Babi heroine had died, for in those days the garden of Ilkhani extended that far. On my return in 1898 the square had entirely disappeared overrun by modern buildings and I do not know whether the present owner has saved those trees which pious hands had planted." (A. L. M. Nicolas' "Siyyid Ali-Muhammad dit le Bab," p. 452.)

⁴ See Glossary.

the well with earth and stones in the manner she herself had wished. Those who saw her in her last moments were profoundly affected. With downcast eyes and rapt in silence, they mournfully dispersed, leaving their victim, who had shed so imperishable a lustre upon their country, buried beneath a mass of stones which they, with their own hands, had heaped upon her.

I wept hot tears as my son unfolded to my eyes that tragic tale. I was so overcome with emotion that I fell prostrate and unconscious upon the ground. When I had recovered, I found my son a prey to an agony no less severe than my own. He lay upon his couch, weeping in a passion of devotion. Beholding my plight, he approached and comforted me. 'Your tears,' he said, 'will betray you in the eyes of my father. Considerations of rank and position will, no doubt, induce him to forsake us and sever whatever ties bind him to this home. He will, if we fail to repress our tears, accuse us before Nasiri'd-Din Shah, as victims of the charm of a hateful enemy. He will obtain the sovereign's consent to our death, and will probably, with his own hands, proceed to slay us. Why should we, who have never embraced that Cause, allow ourselves to suffer such a fate at his hands? All we should do is to defend her against those who denounce her as the very negation of chastity and honour. We should ever treasure her love in our hearts and maintain in the face of a slanderous enemy the integrity of that life.'

"His words allayed my inner agitation. I went to her chest and, with the key she had placed in my hand, opened it. I found a small vial of the choicest perfume, beside which lay a rosary, a coral necklace, and three rings, mounted with turquoise, cornelian, and ruby stones. As I gazed upon her earthly belongings, I mused over the circumstances of her eventful life, and recalled, with a throb of wonder, her intrepid courage, her zeal, her high sense of duty and unquestioning devotion. I was reminded of her literary attainments, and brooded over the imprisonments, the shame, and the calumny which she had faced with a fortitude such as no other woman in her land could manifest. I pictured to myself that winsome face which now, alas, lay buried beneath a mass of earth and stones. The memory of her passionate eloquence warmed my heart, as I repeated to myself the words that had so often dropped from her lips. The consciousness of the vastness of her knowledge, and her mastery of the sacred

Scriptures of Islam, flashed through my mind with a suddenness that disconcerted me. Above all, her passionate loyalty to the Faith she had embraced, her fervour as she pleaded its cause, the services she rendered it, the woes and tribulations she endured for its sake, the example she had given to its followers, the impetus she had lent to its advancement the name she had carved for herself in the hearts of her fellow-countrymen, all these I remembered as I stood beside her chest, wondering what could have induced so great a woman to forsake all the riches and honours with which she had been surrounded and to identify herself with the cause of an obscure youth from Shiraz. What could have been the secret, I thought to myself, of the power that tore her away from her home and kindred, that sustained her throughout her stormy career, and eventually carried her to her grave? Could that force, I pondered, be of God? Could the hand of the Almighty have guided her destiny and steered her course amidst the perils of her life?

"On the third day after her martyrdom,⁶ the woman whose coming she had promised arrived. I enquired her name, and, finding it to be the same as the one Tahirih had told me, delivered into her hands the package with which I had been entrusted. I had never before met that woman, nor did I ever see her again."⁷

The name of that immortal woman was Fatimih, a name which her father had bestowed upon her. She was surnamed Umm-i-Salmih by her family and kindred, who also designated her as Zakiyyih. She was born in the year 1233 A.H.,⁸ the very year which witnessed the birth of Baha'u'llah. She was thirty-six years of age when she suffered martyrdom in Tihran. May future generations be enabled to present a worthy account of a life which her contemporaries have failed adequately to recognize. May future historians perceive the full measure of her influence, and record the unique services this great woman has rendered to her land and its people. May the followers of the Faith which she served so well strive to follow her example, recount her deeds, collect her writings, unfold the secret of her talents, and establish her, for all time, in the memory and affections of the

⁶ August, 1852 A.D.

⁷ See Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, 1889, article 6, p. 492.

⁸ 1817-18 A.D.

⁹ "Beauty and the female see also lent their consecration to the new creed and the heroism of the lovely but ill-fated poetess of Qazvin, Zarrin-Taj (Crown of Gold; or Qurratu'l-'Ayn (Solace of the Eyes), who, throwing off the veil, carried the missionary torch far and wide, is one of the most affecting episodes in modern history." (Lord Curzon's "Persia and the Persian Question," vol. 1, p. 497, note 2.) "No memory is more deeply venerated or kindles greater enthusiasm than hers, and the influence which she wielded in her lifetime still inures to her sex." (Valentine Chirol's "The Middle Eastern Question," p. 124.) "The appearance of such a woman as Qurratu'l-'Ayn is in any country and any age a rare phenomenon, but in such a country as Persia it is a prodigy--nay, almost a miracle. Alike in virtue of her marvellous beauty, her rare intellectual gifts, her fervid eloquence her fearless devotion, and her glorious martyrdom, she stands forth incomparable and immortal amidst her countrywomen. Had the Babi religion no other claim to greatness, this were sufficient--that it produced a heroine like Qurratu'l-'Ayn." ("A Traveller's Narrative," Note Q, p. 213.) "Almost the most remarkable figure in the whole movement was the poetess Qurratu'l-'Ayn. She was known for her virtue, piety, and learning, and had been finally converted on reading some of the verses and exhortations of the Bab. So strong in her faith did she become that although she was both rich and noble she gave up wealth, child, name and position for her Master's service and set herself to proclaim and establish his doctrine... The beauty of her speech was such as to draw guests from a marriage feast rather than listen to the music provided by the host. And her verses were among the most stirring in the Persian language." (Sir Francis Younghusband's "The Gleam," pp. 202-3.) "Looking back on the short career of Qurratu'l-'Ayn, one is chiefly struck by her fiery enthusiasm and by her absolute unworldliness. This world was, in fact, to her, as it was said to be to Quddus, a mere handful of dust. She was also an eloquent speaker and experienced in the intricate measures of Persian poetry. One of her few Poems which have thus far been made known is of special interest, because of the belief which it expresses in the divine-human character of some one (here called Lord), whose claims, when once adduced, would receive general recognition. Who was this Personage? It appears that Qurratu'l-'Ayn thought Him slow in bringing forward these claims. Is there any one who can be thought of but Baha'u'llah? The poetess was a true Baha'i." (Dr. T. K. Cheyne's "The Reconciliation of Races and Religions," pp. 114, 115.) "The harvest sown in Islamic lands by Qurratu'l-'Ayn is now beginning to appear. A letter addressed to the "Christian Commonwealth" last June informs us that forty Turkish suffragettes are being deported from Constantinople to Akka (so long the prison of Baha'u'llah): 'During the last few years suffrage ideas have been spreading quietly behind in the harems. The men were ignorant of it; everybody was ignorant of it; and now suddenly the

floodgate is opened and the men of Constantinople have thought it necessary to resort to drastic measures. Suffrage clubs have been organised, intelligent memorials incorporating the women's demands have been drafted and circulated; women's journals and magazines have sprung up, publishing excellent articles; and public meetings were held. Then one day the members of these clubs--four hundred of them--cast away their veils. The staid, fossilised class of society were shocked, the good Muslims were alarmed, and the Government forced into action. These four hundred liberty-loving women were divided into several groups. One group composed of forty have been exiled to Akka, and will arrive in a few days. Everybody is talking about it, and it is really surprising to see how numerous are those in favour of removing the veils from the faces of the women. Many men with whom I have talked think the custom not only archaic, but thought-stifling. The Turkish authorities, thinking to extinguish this light of liberty, have greatly added to its flame, and their high-handed action has materially assisted the creation of a wider public opinion and a better understanding of this crucial problem." (Ibid., pp. 115-16.) "The other missionary, the woman to whom I refer, had come to Qazvin. She was without doubt, at the same time, the object of the Babis highest veneration and one of the most strikingly fascinating manifestations of that religion." (Comte de Gobineau's "Les Religions et les Philosophies dans l'Asie Centrale," p. 136.) "Many who have known her and heard her at different times have stated that, for a person so learned and so well read, the outstanding characteristic of her discourse was an amazing simplicity and still, when she spoke, her audience was deeply stirred and filled with admiration, often in tears." (Ibid., p. 150.) "Although the Muhammadans and Babis speak in the highest terms of the beauty of 'Consolation of the Eyes,' it is beyond dispute that the intelligence and character of this young woman were even more remarkable than has been related. Having heard, almost daily, learned conversations, it seems that, at an early age, she had taken a deep interest in them; hence it came about that she was perfectly able to follow the subtle arguments of her father, her uncle, her cousin and now her husband, and even to debate with them and frequently to astonish them with the power and keenness of her mind. In Persia, one does not frequently see women engaged in intellectual pursuits but, nevertheless, it does sometimes occur. What is really extraordinary is to find a woman of the ability of Qurratu'l-'Ayn. Not only did she carry her knowledge of Arabic to an unusual degree of perfection, but she became also outstanding in the knowledge of the traditions of Islam and of the varied interpretations of the disputed passages of the Qur'an and of the great writers. In Qazvin, she was rightly considered a prodigy." (Ibid., p. 137.)