The White Silk Dress

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Marzieh Gail
published in Bahá'í WorldVol. 9 (1940-1944)

New York: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1945
original date

1944-04-21

The body lies crushed into a well, with rocks over it, somewhere near the center of Tihrán. Buildings have gone up around it, and traffic passes along the road near where the garden was. Bushes push donkeys to one side, automobiles from across the world graze the camels’ packs, carriages rock by. Toward sunset men scoop up water from a stream and fling it into the road to lay the dust. And the body is there, crushed into the ground, and men come and go, and think it is hidden and forgotten.

Beauty in women is a relative thing. Take Laylí, for instance, whose lover Majnún had to go away into the desert when she left him, because he could no longer bear the faces of others; whereupon the animals came, and sat around him in a circle, and mourned with him, as any number of poets and painters will tell you—even Laylí was not beautiful. Sa’dí describes how one of the kings of Arabia reasoned with Majnún in vain, and how finally “It came into the king’s heart to look upon the beauty of Laylí, that he might see the face that had wrought such ruin. He bade them seek through the tribes of Arabia and they found her and brought her to stand in the courtyard before him. The king looked at her; he saw a woman dark of skin and slight of body, and he thought little of her, for the meanest servant in his harem was fairer than she. Majnún read the king’s mind, and he said, ‘O king, you must look upon Laylí through the eyes of Majnún, till the inner beauty of her may be manifest.’ ” Beauty depends on the eyes that see it. At all events we know that Táhirih was beautiful according to the thought of her time.

Perhaps she opened her mirror-case one day—the eight-sided case with a lacquer nightingale singing on it to a lacquer rose—and looked inside, and thought how no record of her features had been made to send into the future. She probably knew that age would never scrawl over the face, to cancel the beauty of it, because she was one of those who die young. But perhaps, kneeling

on the floor by the long window, her book laid aside, the mirror before her she thought how her face would vanish, just as Laylí's had, and Shírín's, and all the others. So that she slid open her pen-case, and took out the reed pen, and holding the paper in her palm, wrote the brief self-portrait that we have of her: "Small black mole at the edge of the lip—A black lock of hair by either cheek-" she wrote; and the wooden pen creaked as she drove it over the paper.

Táhirih loved pretty clothes, and perfumes, and she loved to eat. She could eat sweets all day long. Once, years after Táhirih had gone, an American woman traveled to 'Akká and sat at 'Abdu'l-Bahá's table; the food was good, and she ate plentifully, and then asked the Master's forgiveness for eating so much. He answered: Virtue and excellence consist in true faith in God, not in having a small or a large appetite for food. … Jinab-i-Táhirih had a good appetite. When asked concerning it, she would answer, "It is recorded in the Holy Traditions that one of the attributes of the people of paradise is 'partaking of food, continually.' "

When she was a child, instead of playing games, she would listen to the theological discussion of her father and uncle, who were great ecclesiastics in Qazvín. Soon she could teach Islam down to the last hadíth! Her brother said, "We, all of us, her brothers, her cousins, did not dare to speak in her presence, so much did her knowledge intimidate us." This from a Persian brother, who comes first in everything, and whose sisters wait upon him. As she grew, she attended the courses given by her father and uncle; she sat in the same hall with two or three hundred men students, but hidden behind a curtain, and more than once refuted what the two old men were expounding. In time some of the haughtiest 'ulamás consented to certain of her views.

Táhirih married her cousin and gave birth to children. It must have been the usual Persian marriage, where the couple hardly met before the ceremony, and where indeed the suitor was allowed only a brief glimpse of the girl's face unveiled. Love marriages were thought shameful, and this must have been pre-arranged in the proper way. No, if she ever cared for anyone with a human love, we like to think it was Quddús, whom she was to know in later years; Quddús, who was a descendant of the Imám Hasan, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad. People loved him very easily, they could hardly turn their eyes away from him. He was one of the first to be persecuted for his Master's Faith on Persian soil—in Shíráz, when they tortured him and led him through the streets by a halter. Later on, it was Quddús who commanded the besieged men at Shaykh Tabarsí, and when the Fort had fallen through the enemy's treachery, and been demolished, he was given over to the mob, in his home city of Bárfurúsh. He was led through the marketplace in chains, while the crowds attacked him. They fouled his clothing and slashed him with knives, and in the end they hacked his body apart and burned what was left. Quddús had never married; for years his mother had lived in the hope of seeing his wedding day; as he walked to his death, he remembered her and cried out, "Would that my mother were with me, and could see with her own eyes the splendor of my

nuptials!”

So Táhirih lived in Qazvín, the honey colored city of sunbaked brick, with her slim, tinkling poplars, and the bands of blue water along the yellow dust of the roads. She lived in a honey colored house round a courtyard, cool like the inside of an earthen jar, and there were niches in the whitewashed walls of the rooms, where she set her lamp, and kept her books, wrapped up in hand-blocked cotton cloth. But where other women would have been content with what she had, she could not rest; her mind harried her; and at last she broke away and went over the mountains out of Persia, to the domed city of Karbilá, looking for the Truth.

Then one night she had a dream. She saw a young man standing in the sky; He had a book in His hands and He read verses out of it. Táhirih wakened and wrote down the verses to remember them, and later, when she found the same lines again in a commentary written by the Báb, she believed in Him. At once she spoke out. She broadcast her conversion to the Faith of the Báb, and the result was open scandal. Her husband, her father, her brothers, begged her to give up the madness; in reply she proclaimed her belief. She denounced her generation, the ways of her people, polygamy, the veiling of women, the corruption in high places, the evil of the clergy. She was not one of those who temporize and walk softly. She spoke out; she cried out for a revolution in all men’s ways; when at last she died it was by the words of her own mouth, and she knew it.

Nicolas tells us that she had “an ardent temperament, a just, clear intelligence, remarkable poise, untameable courage.” Gobineau says, “The chief characteristic of her speech was an almost shocking plainness, and yet when she spoke … you were stirred to the bottom of your soul, and filled with admiration, and tears came from your eyes.” Nabíl says that “None could resist her charm; few could escape the contagion of her belief. All testified to the extraordinary traits of her character, marveled at her amazing personality, and were convinced of the sincerity of her conviction.”

Most significant is the memory of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá . When He was a child, Táhirih held Him on her lap while she conversed with the great Siyyid Yahyá-i-Dárábí, who sat outside the door. He was a man of immense learning. For example, he knew thirty thousand Islamic traditions by heart; and he knew the depths of the Qur’án, and would quote from the Holy Text to prove the truth of the Báb. Táhirih called out to him, “Oh Siyyid! If you are a man of action, do some great deed!” He listened, and for the first time he understood; he saw that it was not enough to prove the claim of the Báb, but that he must sacrifice himself to spread the Faith. He rose and went out, and traveled and taught, and in the end he laid down his life in the red streets of Nayríz. They cut off his head, and stuffed it with straw, and paraded it from city to city.

Táhirih never saw the Báb. She sent Him a message, telling her love for Him:

The effulgence of Thy face flashed forth and the rays of Thy visage arose on high;

Then speak the word “Am I not your Lord” and “Thou art, Thou art,” we will all reply.

The trumpet-call “Am I not” to greet how loud the drums of affliction beat!

At the gates of my heart there tramp the feet and camp the hosts of calamity …

She set about translating into Persian the Báb’s Commentary on the Súrih of Joseph. And He made her one of the undying company, the Letters of the Living.

We see her there in Karbilá, in the plains where more than a thousand years before, Imám Husayn, grandson of the Prophet, had fallen of thirst and wounds. We see her on the anniversary of his death, when all the town was wailing for him and all had put on black in his memory, decked out in holiday clothing to celebrate the birthday of the Báb. This was a new day, she told them; the old agonies were spent. Then she traveled in her howdah, a sort of curtained cage balanced on a horse, to Baghdád and continued her teaching. Here the leaders of the Shí’ih and Sunní, the Christian and Jewish communities sought her out to convince her of her folly; but she astounded them and routed them and in the end she was ordered out of Turkish territory, and she traveled toward Persia, gathering disciples for the Báb. Everywhere princes, ‘ulamás, government officials crowded to see her; she was praised from a number of pulpits; one said, “Our highest attainments are but a drop compared to the immensity of her knowledge.” This of a woman, in a country of silent, shadow-women, who lived their quiet cycle behind the veil: marriage and sickness and childbirth, stirring the rice and baking the flaps of bread, embroidering a leaf on a strip of velvet, dying without a name.

Karbilá, Baghdád, Kirmánsháh, Hamadán. Then her father summoned her home to Qazvín, and once she was back in his house, her husband, the mujtahid, sent for her to return and live with him. This was her answer: “Say to my presumptuous and arrogant kinsman … ‘If your desire had really been to be a faithful mate and companion to me, you would have hastened to meet me in Karbilá and would on foot have guided my howdah all the way to Qazvín. I would … have aroused you from your sleep of heedlessness and would have shown you the way of truth. But this was not to be. … Neither in this world nor in the next can I ever be associated with you. I have cast you out of my life forever.’ ” Then her uncle and her husband pronounced her a heretic, and set about working against her night and day.

One day a mullá was walking through Qazvín, when he saw a gang of ruffians dragging a man along the street; they had tied the man’s turban around his neck for a halter, and were torturing him. The bystanders said that this man had spoken in praise of two beings, heralds of the Báb; and for that, Táhirih’s uncle was banishing him. The mullá was troubled in his mind. He was not a Bábí, but he loved the two heralds of the Báb. He went to the

bazar of the swordmakers, and bought a dagger and a spearhead of the finest steel, and bided his time. One dawn in the mosque, an old woman hobbled in and spread down a rug. Then Táhirih's uncle entered alone, to pray on it. He was prostrating himself when the mullá ran up and plunged the spearhead into his neck; he cried out, the mullá flung him on his back, drove the dagger deep into his mouth and left him bleeding on the mosque floor.

Qazvín went wild over the murder. Although the mullá confessed, and was identified by his dying victim, many innocent people were accused and made prisoner. In Tihrán, Bahá'u'lláh suffered His first affliction—some days' imprisonment—because He sent them food and money and interceded for them. The heirs now put to death an innocent man, Shaykh Sálih, an Arab from Karbílá. This admirer of Táhirih was the first to die on Persian soil for the Cause of God; they killed him in Tihrán; he greeted his executioner like a well-loved friend, and his last words were, "I discarded . … the hopes and beliefs of men from the moment I recognized Thee, Thou Who art my hope and my belief!"

The remaining prisoners were later massacred, and it is said that no fragments were left of their bodies to bury.

But still the heirs were not content. They accused Táhirih. They had her shut up in her father's house and made ready to take her life; however, her hour was not yet come. It was then that a beggar-woman stood at the door and whined for bread; but she was no beggar-woman—she brought word that one sent by Bahá'u'lláh, was waiting with three horses near the Qazvín gate. Táhirih went away with the woman, and by daybreak she had ridden to Tihrán, to the house of Bahá'u'lláh. All night long, they searched Qazvín for her, but she had vanished.

The scene shifts to the gardens of Badasht. Mud walls enclosing the jade orchards, a stream spread over the desert, and beyond, the sharp mountains cutting into the sky. The Báb was in His prison at Chihríq — "The Grievous Mountain." He had two short years to live.

And now Bahá'u'lláh came to Badasht, with eighty-one leading Babís as His companions. His destiny was still unguessed. He, the Promised One of the Báb—of Muhammad, of Christ, of Zoroaster, and beyond Them of prophet after prophet down into the centuries—was still unknown. How could they tell, at Badasht, that His name would soon be loved around the world? How could they hear it called upon, in cities across the earth; strange, unheard of places: San Francisco, Buenos Aires, Adelaide? How could they see the unguessed men and women that would arise to serve that name? But Táhirih saw. "Behold," she wrote, "the souls of His lovers dancing like motes in the light that has flashed from His face!"

It was in this village of Badasht that the old laws were broken. Up to these days, the Babís had thought that their Master was come to enforce Islám; but here one by one they saw the old laws go. And their confusion mounted, and their trouble, and some held to the old ways and could not go forward into the

new.

Then one day, as they sat with Bahá'u'lláh in the garden, an unbearable thing came to pass. Táhirih suddenly appeared before them, and she stood in their presence with her face unveiled. Táhirih so holy; Táhirih, whose very shadow a man would turn his eyes from; Táhirih, the most venerated woman of her time, had stripped the veil from her face, and stood before them like a dancing girl ready for their pleasure. They saw her flashing skin, and the eyebrows joined together, like two swords, over the blazing eyes. And they could not look. Some hid their faces in their hands, some threw their garments over their heads. One cut his throat and fled shrieking and covered with blood.

Then she spoke out in a loud voice to those who were left, and they say her speech came like the words of the Qur'án. "This day," she said, "this day is the day on which the fetters of the past are burst asunder—I am the Word which the Qá'im is to utter, the Word which shall put to flight the chiefs and nobles of the earth!" And she told them of the old order, yielding to the new, and ended with a prophetic verse from the Holy Book: "Verily, amid gardens and rivers shall the pious dwell in the seat of truth, in the presence of the potent King."

Táhirih was born in the same year as Bahá'u'lláh, and she was thirty-six when they took her life. European scholars have known her for a long time, under one of her names, Qurratu'l-'Ayn, which means "Solace of the Eyes." The Persians sing her poems, which are still waiting for a translator. Women in many countries are hearing of her, getting courage from her. Many have paid tribute to her. Gobineau says, after dwelling on her beauty, "(but) the mind and the character of this young woman were much more remarkable." And Sir Francis Younghusband: " … she gave up wealth, child, name and position for her Master's service. … And her verses were among the most stirring in the Persian language." And T. K. Cheyne, " … one is chiefly struck by her fiery enthusiasm and by her absolute unworldliness. This world was, in fact, to her, as it was … to Quddús, a mere handful of dust."

We see her now at a wedding in the Mayor's house in Tihrán. Her curls are short around her forehead, and she wears a flowered kerchief reaching cape-wise to her shoulders and pinned under her chin. The tight-waisted dress flows to the ground; it is handwoven, trimmed with brocade and figured with the tree-of-life design. Her little slippers curl up at the toes. A soft, perfumed crowd of women pushes and rustles around her. They have left their tables, with the pyramids of sweets in silver dishes. They have forgotten the dancers, hired to stamp and jerk and snap their fingers for the wedding feast. The guests are listening to Táhirih, she who is a prisoner here in the Mayor's house. She is telling them of the new Faith, of the new way of living it will bring, and they forget the dancers and the sweets.

This Mayor, Mahmúd Khán, whose house was Táhirih's prison, came to a strange end. Gobineau tells us that he was kind to Táhirih and tried to give her hope, during those days when she waited in his house for the sentence of

death. He adds that she did not need hope. That whenever Mahmúd Khán would speak of her imprisonment, she would interrupt, and tell him of her Faith; of the true and the false; of what was real, and what was illusion. Then one morning, Mahmúd Khán brought her good news; a message from the Prime Minister; she had only to deny the Báb, and although they would not believe her, they would let her go.

"Do not hope," she answered, "that I would deny my Faith … for so feeble a reason as to keep this inconstant, worthless form a few days longer. … You, Mahmúd Khán, listen now to what I am saying. … The master you serve will not repay your zeal; on the contrary, you shall perish, cruelly, at his command. Try, before your death, to raise your soul up to knowledge of the Truth."1Gobineau, Comte de, Les Religions et les Philosophies dans l'Asie Centrale, p. 242. He went from the room, not believing. But her words were fulfilled in 1861, during the famine, when the people of Tihrán rioted for bread.

Here is an eye-witness' account of the bread riots of those days; and of death of Mahmúd Khán: "The distress in Tihrán was now culminating, and, the roads being almost impassable, supplies of corn could not reach the city. … As soon as a European showed himself in the streets he was surrounded by famishing women, supplicating assistance … on the 1st of March … the chief Persian secretary came in, pale and trembling, and said there was an émeute, and that the Kalántar, or mayor of the city, had just been put to death, and that they were dragging his body stark naked through the bazars. Presently we heard a great tumult, and on going to the windows saw the streets filled with thousands of people, in a very excited state, surrounding the corpse, which was being dragged to the place of execution, where it was hung up by the heels, naked, for three days.

"On inquiry we learned that on the 28th of February, the Sháh, on coming in from hunting, was surrounded by a mob of several thousand women, yelling for bread, who gutted the bakers' shops of their contents, under the very eyes of the king. … Next day, the 1st of March … the Shah had ascended the tower, from which Hajji Baba's Zainab was thrown, and was watching the riots with a telescope. The Kalántar … splendidly dressed, with a long retinue of servants, went up to the tower and stood by the Sháh who reproached him for suffering such a tumult to have arisen. On this the Kalántar declared he would soon put down the riot, and going amongst the women with his servants, he himself struck several of them furiously with a large stick. … On the women vociferously calling for justice, and showing their wounds, the Shah summoned the Kalántar and said, 'If thou art thus cruel to my subjects before my eyes, what must be thy secret misdeeds!' Then turning to his attendants, the king said, — 'Bastinado him, and cut off his beard.' And again, while this sentence was being executed, the Shah uttered that terrible word, Tanáb! 'Rope! Strangle him!'"

One night Táhirih called the Kalántar's wife into her room. She was wearing a dress of shining white silk; her hair gleamed, her cheeks were

delicately whitened. She had put on perfume and the room was fragrant with it.

“I am preparing to meet my Beloved,” she said. “… the hour when I shall be arrested and condemned to suffer martyrdom is fast approaching.”

After that, she paced in her locked room, and chanted prayers. The Kalántar’s wife stood at the door, and listened to the voice rising and falling, and wept. “Lord, Lord,” she cried, “turn from her … the cup which her lips desire to drink.” We cannot force the locked door and enter. We can only guess what those last hours were. Not a time of distributing property, of saying good-bye to friends, but rather of communion with the Lord of all peoples, the One alone Beloved of all men. And His chosen ones, His saints and His Messengers, They all were there; They are present at such hours; she was already with Them, beyond the flesh.

She was waiting, veiled and ready, when they came to take her. “Remember me,” she said as she went, “and rejoice in my gladness.” She mounted a horse they had brought and rode away through the Persian night. The starlight was heavy on the trees, and nightingales rustled. Camel-bells tinkled from somewhere. The horses’ hooves thudded in the dust of the road.

And then bursts of laughter from the drunken officers in the garden. Candles shone on their heavy faces, on the disordered banquet-cloth, the wine spilling over. When Táhirih stood near them, their chief hardly raised his head. “Leave us!” he shouted. “Strangle her!” And he went back to his wine.

She had brought a silk handkerchief with her; she had saved it for this from long ago. Now she gave it to them. They twisted it round her throat, and wrenched it till the blood spurted. They waited till her body was quiet, then they took it up and laid it in an unfinished well in the garden. They covered it over and went away, their eyes on the earth, afraid to look at each other.

Many seasons have passed over Tihrán since that hour. In winter the mountains to the north have blazed with their snows, shaken like a million mirrors in the sun. And springs came on, with pear blossoms crowding the gardens, and blue swallows flashing. Summertimes, the city lay under a dust-cloud, and people went up to the moist rocks, the green clefts in the hills. And autumns, when the boughs were stripped, the dizzy space of plains and sky circled the town again. Much time has passed, almost a hundred years since that night.

But today there are a thousand voices where there was one voice then. Words in many tongues, books in many scripts, and temples rising. The love she died for caught and spread, till there are a thousand hearts offered now, for one heart then. She is not silent, there in the earth. Her lips are dust, but they speak.

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