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XIV

THE BABIS

654. Bab, the Founder. — His name—for Bab is a title—was Ali Mohammed, and he is said to have been a Seyyid, or descendant of the family of the Prophet. He was born in 1819 at Shiraz, where his father was a merchant. Ali at first engaged in trade himself, but in 1840 he began to preach his new doctrine, declaring himself to be the Bab, i.e. Door of Truth , the Mahdi. In 1843 he made the

pilgrimage to Mecca, but on his return was arrested by order of the Shah, and from 1844 to 1849 kept in semi captivity at Ispahan and Tauris, at which latter place he was sentenced to be shot. He was suspended by cords from the walls of the citadel, and a dozen soldiers were ordered to fire at him . When the smoke from their discharges was dispelled the Bab had disappeared — a cleverly -managed manœuvre to establish a miracle. But he was soon after reapprehended, and again condemned to death. The details of his execution are not known ; it is reported that he was shot. His long captivity and mysterious death were favourable to the spreading of his doctrine, as also the fact that during his life he was subject to occasional fits of frenzy, and in the East — and sometimes in the West-- a madman is considered to be inspired. And the Bah, like all prophets, did not disdain availing himself of mundane means to propagate his new doctrines ; he was greatly assisted therein by the eloquence, combined with marvellous personal beauty, of Kurratu'l 'Ayn, a young lady of good family, who early embraced Babism, and suffered martyrdom for it (655). The Bab was examined as to his teaching in 1848 by Nasreddin, then Crown Prince of Persia, afterwards Shah , and a number of Mullahs, the result of which inquiry was that he was sentenced to the bastinado, in consequence of which it is

1 Bab in Arabic and Chaldean means door, gate, or court ; hence we have Babylon , the court of Bel ; Babel-Mandeb, the gate of sorrow, probably so called on account of its dangerous navigation and rocky environs.

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said he recanted and revoked all his claims ; but as we have none but Mussulman historians—his enemies—to rely on, as the examination was held with closed doors, we may doubt this statement .

655. Progress of Babism . — The Bab's teaching had not only theological, but also political aims. Persian rulers have always been conservative, but Babism was reformatory, and the common people readily embraced it, as it seemed favourable to the breaking down of the despotic powers exercised by provincial governors, by whom the country was fearfully oppressed. When, therefore, the Babis considered themselves strong enough they seized Mazanderan , about fourteen miles south - east of Barfurush ; but the Shah's troops having cut off all supplies, they had to surrender, and were all slain.

This was in 1847. In 1848, on the accession of the late }
 Shah a thousand Babis rose against him ; they, however,
 were defeated by Mehdi Kouli Mirza, uncle of the new Shah,
 and the three hundred survivors who surrendered cruelly

slaughtered , though they had been promised their lives. Moulla Mohammed Ali, a Bab leader, in 1849 converted seven thousand of the twelve thousand inhabitants of Zanjan, seized the town , and drove the governor from the citadel ; eighteen thousand royal soldiers were sent against him , and more than eight thousand of the combatants killed , and the surviving Babis had to surrender, and were put to death with horrible tortures. In 1850 a follower of Bab, ambitious rather than fanatical, Sayid Yahya Darabi, preached Babism at Niriz, and gathered round him two thousand followers, with whose help he hoped to hold the town. But the Shah's troops attacked him ; he was assassinated by being strangled with his own girdle ; the starved -out Babis had to yield, and were all cruelly butchered . In 1852 some Babis attempted to murder the Shah ; the inquiry following thereon proved that at Ispahan and in all the great towns of Persia there was a vast association of Babis and Loûtis, whose object was the overthrow of the reigning dynasty. All convicted of Babism were seized, and executed openly or in secret ; terrible scenes were enacted by the Shah's orders in many towns of Persia during a reign of terror, which lasted nearly two years. The Shah's anger at the attempt, but especially his alarm , was so great, that to test the loyalty of his subjects he devised the "devilish scheme," as one writer calls it, of making all classes of society share in the revenge he took on the Babis. Thus the man who had fired the shot which wounded the king was killed by the farrashes_literally, the

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carpet -spreaders, but officially, the lictors of Eastern rulers. They first tortured him by the insertion of lighted candles in incisions made in his body. When the candles were burnt down to the flesh , the fire was for some time fed by that. In the end he was sawn in two. The Master of the Horse and the attendants of the royal stables showed their loyalty by nailing red -hot horse-shoes to the feet of the victim handed over to them, and finally « broke up his head and body with clubs and nails." Another Babi had his eyes plucked out by the artillerymen, and was then blown from a gun. Another Babi was killed by the merchants and shop keepers of Teheran, every one of whom inflicted a wound on him until he died . Vambéry, in his " Wanderings and Experiences in Persia ," mentions one Kasim of Niriz, who was shod with red-hot horse-shoes, had burning candles inserted in his body, all his teeth torn out, and was eventually killed by having his skull smashed in with a club. These are but a few specimens of the cruelties inflicted by order of the amiable gentleman who, on his visits to this country, was

so loudly cheered by the assembled crowds. Among the victims of that persecution was Kurratu'l 'Ayn (the Consolation of Eyes), a beautiful and accomplished woman, who professed and preached Babism. The manner of her death is uncertain ; some say she was burnt, others that she was strangled. Dr. Polak, who actually witnessed her execution , in his " Persia, the Land and Its Inhabitants," simply says, " I was a witness to the execution of Kurratu'l 'Ayn , which was performed by the Minister of War and his adjutants ; the beautiful woman underwent her slow death with super human fortitude." He gives no details as to the manner of it. In spite of this persecution, or rather, in consequence of it, Babism spread with astonishing rapidity throughout Persia, even penetrating into India . Not only the lower classes, but persons of education and wealth have joined the sect. The only portion of the Persian population not affected by its doctrines appear to be the Nuseiriyeh and the Christians.

656. Babi Doctrine. — It is contained in the Biyyan , the " Expositor," attributed to the Bab himself, and consisting of three parts written at different periods. It is to a great extent rhapsodical, frequently unintelligible. It abounds with mysticism, degenerate Platonism , beliefs borrowed from the Guebres, vestiges of Magism, and in many places displays the influence of a transformed Christianity and French philosophy of the last century, propagated as far

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as Persia through masonic lodges, though they were never tolerated in Persia. We shall see further on how one recently established came to grief. The Babi Koran inculcates, among other superstitions, the wearing of amulets, men in the form of a star, women in that of a circle ; the cornelian is particularly recommended to be put on the fingers of the dead, all which implies a return to Aramean Paganism . The book maintains the divinity of the Bab ; he and his disciples are incarnations of superior powers; forty days after death they reappear in other forms. " God ," says the Biyyan, " created the world by His Will ; the Will was expressed in words, but words are composed of letters ; letters, therefore, possess divine properties. In giving their numerical value to the letters forming the words expressing God, they always produce the same total, viz. 19. Hence the ecclesiastical system of the Babis ; their colleges are always composed of 19 priests; the year is divided into 19 months, of 19 days each ; the fast of the Ramadan lasts 19 instead of 30 days. During his life Ali

Mohammed chose eighteen disciples, called "Letters of the Living," who, together with himself, the "Point" (the Point of Revelation, or "First Point," from which all are created, and unto which all return), constituted the sacred hierarchy of nineteen, called the "First Unity." Now, Mirza Yahya held the fourth place in this hierarchy, and on the death of the "Point," which occurred, as already stated, in 1849, and the first two "Letters," rose to be chief of the sect; but Beha, whose proper name is Mirza Huseyn Ali of Nur, was also included in this unity, and he asserted that he was the one by whom God shall, as Bab had prophesied, make His final revelation; for, be it observed, the Babi-Koran, which at present consists of eleven parts only, shall, when complete, contain nineteen, and when that revelation is made, Babism will be finished, and with it will come the end of this present world; for, according to the belief of his followers, the Bab was the forerunner of Saheb-ez-Zeman, the Lord of Ages, who resides in the air, and will not be seen till the day of resurrection. In consequence of the claim of Beha the sect was split up into two divisions, the Behais and the followers of Mirza Yahya Subh-i-Ezel (the Morning of Eternity), and after him called Ezelis. The majority of the sect are Behais, and the exiled chief Yahya lives at Famagusta, I find this mentioned by one writer only, Professor de Filippi, in his *Viaggio in Persia nel 1862*, published in the Italian periodical *Politecnico*, vol. xxii. p. 252, where there is a lengthy account of the Babis.

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in Cyprus, where Mr. Browne, the translator of the work OF

"A Traveller's Narrative," visited him in 1890, as he also visited Beha, at Acre, shortly after. The Babis are so far in ut

advance of their Eastern brethren that they wish to raise the status of woman, maintaining that she is entitled to the same civil rights as man; and one of their first endeavours to attain that end is that of abolishing the veil. Various charges, as against all new sects, are made against them; they are accused of being communists, of allowing nine husbands to a woman, of drinking wine, and of other unlawful practices; but proofs are wanting. It is said that Jena they have special modes of salutation, and wear a ring of peculiar form, by which they recognise one another. They arrange their hair in a characteristic manner, and, as a rule, are clothed in white, all which practices, on the part of people who have to conceal their opinions, appears very strange to outsiders. The Bab forbade the use of tobacco, of the but the prohibition was withdrawn by Beha. Though only

half a century old, the sect already possesses a mass of controversial writings on points of faith — for in all ages men have disputed most on what they understood least. The ated Babis may yet become a great power in the East; in the care meantime they afford us an excellent opportunity of watching within our own day the genesis and development of a new religious creed, in which vast power and authority is conferred on the priests, greatly overshadowing that of the

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king himself, unless he is a member of the sect, which, in fact, if the creed becomes paramount, he must be to preserve his dignity; for, according to the teaching of the founder, he who is not a Babi has no right to any possession, has no civil status. To enhance the influence of the nica priests, divine service is to be performed with the utmost pomp; the temples are to be adorned with the costliest productions of nature and art.

But it is certain the doctrines of the Babis suit neither the Sunnites nor the Shiites, the latter of whom are the dominant religious party in Persia, and who particularly objected to the Bab's claim of being the promised Mahdi, Biche whose advent was to be ushered in by prodigious signs, di tahun which, however, were not witnessed in the Bab's case. The Eter

latter also was opposed by the new Sheykhi school. Early According to the doctrine of the Sunnites, the Imamate, or vice regency of the prophet, is a matter to be determined by the choice and election of his followers; according to the Shiites, it is a matter altogether spiritual, having nothing to do with popular choice or approval.

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in this century Sheykh Ahmad of Ahsa preached a new doctrine, considered heterodox by true believers; still he found many adherents, and on his death, about the year 1827, was succeeded by his disciple Haji Seyyid Kazim of Resht. He died in 1844, prophesying the coming of one greater than himself. Then Mirza Ali Mahammad, who came in contact with some disciples of the deceased Seyyid Kazim, saw his opportunity, and proclaimed himself the Bab; the old Sheykhi party strongly supported him. But some of the followers of Seyyid Kazim did not accept the new prophet, and became, as the new Sheykhi party, his most violent persecutors. The Bab consequently called the leader of the latter party the

“ Quintessence of Hell-fire ,” whilst he, in his turn, wrote a treatise against the Bab, entitled, “ The Crushing of False hood .” From such mutual courtesies the transition to mutual recrimination and accusation of objectionable teaching and practice is easy, and consequently quite usual, and therefore not to be too readily believed.

657. Recent History of Babism . The fearful reprisals the late Shah in 1852 took on the sect of the Babis , whatever may be thought of their moral aspect, appear to have had the desired political effect. From that day till the recent assassination of the Shah , the outcome of old grievances, and of an uncalled - for renewal of a fierce persecution , they have committed no overt act of hostility against the Persian Government or people, though their number and strength are now double what they were in 1852. But this has not softened the feeling of the Shah or of the Mullahs against them . This was clearly shown in 1863. In that year a Persian who had travelled in Europe suggested to the Shah the establishment of a masonic lodge, with himself as the grand master, whereby he would have a moral guarantee of the fidelity of his subjects, since all persons of importance and influence would no doubt become members, and masonic oaths cannot be broken . The Shah granted permission, without, however, being initiated himself; a lodge, called the Feramush -Khanek , the “ House of Oblivion ” since on leaving the lodge the member was supposed to forget all he had seen in it — was speedily opened , and the Shah urged all his courtiers to join it. He then questioned them as to what they had seen in it, but their answers were unsatisfactory ; they had listened to some moral discourse, drunk tea, and smoked. The Shah could not understand that the terrible mysteries of Freemasonry, of which he had heard so much , could amount to no more than this ; he therefore surmised

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en die that a great deal was withheld from him, and became dissatisfied. This dissatisfaction was taken advantage of by some of his friends who disliked the innovation, and they suggested to him that the lodge was probably the home of the grossest debauchery, and, finally, that it was a meeting place of Babis. Debauchery the Shah might have winked at, but Babism could not be tolerated. The lodge was immediately ordered to be closed, and the author of its establishment banished from Persia. In quite recent times the Babis have undergone grievous persecutions. In 1888 Seyyid Hasan and Seyyid Huseyn were put to death by order of the then Shah's eldest son, Prince Zillu's Sultan, for refusing to abjure Babism . When dead their bodies were dragged

by the feet through the street and bazaars of Ispahan , and cast out of the gate beyond the city walls. In the month of October of the same year Aga Mirza Ashraf of Abade was murdered for his religion, and the Mullas mutilated the poor body in the most savage manner. In 1890 the Babi inhabitants of a district called Seh-deh were attacked by a mob, and seven or eight of them killed, and their bodies burnt

with oil. But it appears that on various occasions the Shah restrained the fanaticism of would-be persecutors of the Babis ; it did not, however, save him from the vengeance sworn against him by the sect for former persecutions. On Park

the 1st May 1896 Nasreddin Shah, the Defender of the Faith, was shot in the mosque of Shah Abdul Azim, near Teheran, and died immediately after he was brought back to the city. The assassin , who was at once arrested, was Mirza Mahomed Reza of Kirman, a follower of Jemal-ed-din, who was exiled for an attempt at dethroning the Shah in 1891 . After Jemal's departure Mahomed Reza was imprisoned ; after some time he was set free, but continuing to speak against the Persian Government, he was again imprisoned, but some time after obtained his release, and even a pension from the Shah. He confessed that he was chosen to kill the Shah, and that he bought a revolver for the purpose, but had to wait two months for a favourable opportunity. His execution, some months after the deed - has it inspired the Babis with sufficient dread to deter them from similar attempts in the future ?

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