

25 Yrs Guardianship

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TWENTY-FIVE YEARS OF THE GUARDIANSHIP

by Hand of the Cause of God Ruhiiyih Khanium

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TWENTY-FIVE years ago the Baha'i world was shaken by a great earthquake, 'Abdu'l-Baha, the Center of the Covenant, the greatest Mystery of God, had suddenly passed away, with no premonitory illness to prepare His friends and followers for this tragic shock. Stunned, the Baha'is of East and West tried to rally their faculties. We knew great tasks lay ahead of us; we believed in this new Faith and in its Manifestation and in the World Order that He had come to establish, but we felt terribly alone and the responsibility for the future lay heavily upon our already grief-filled hearts. Where was the shepherd? The familiar voice, that had spoken with an authority vested in it by the Prophet of God Himself, was stilled. We had the teachings; like a wonderful laboratory, equipped for every purpose, they were there—our priceless treasure. But where was the alchemist who transmuted base metals into gold? Where was the listener who answered our questions and guided us in the use of all that great laboratory possessed?

Then came the reading of the Master's Will, and with an infinite sense of relief we realized that, though the seas of tribulation and separation had risen about us, 'Abdu'l-Baha had not left us alone. He had given us the mighty Ark of His own Covenant which we could enter into in peace secure. With what grateful hearts we turned to the youthful figure that had suddenly been revealed to us in that Will as, our priceless legacy, described by 'Abdu'l-Baha as the fruit of the Twin Lote Trees, the pearl of the Twin Surging Seas, this new creation, vested with a unique function, the hereditary office of Interpreter and Protector of the Faith and life head of the International House of Justice. In many ways the Will of the Master completes and supplements the Aqdas; in it 'Abdu'l-Baha lays down in considerable detail the manner of election and function of the International House of Justice, its powers and jurisdiction; He also fills in a remarkable gap in that mighty book of laws and one which any intelligent commentator on that document must be immediately struck by. Baha'u'llah established in His Most Holy Book a very unique voluntary form of tax, a source of revenue, the great importance of which He adequately defines by giving it the exalted title of "The Right of God" (Huququ'llah) but He never states to whom this revenue is payable, and in view of the fact that the revenues of the International House of Justice are clearly stipulated and this Huququ'llah is not included among them, the question naturally occurs—what person or institution is to receive it? 'Abdu'l-Baha's Will elucidates this riddle and fills in the conspicuous blank left by Baha'u'llah.

It is also interesting to realize that the provisions of the Will and Testament

were not only contemplated by 'Abdu'l-Baha long prior to His ascension, but also carried out. The Will is comprised of three separate documents, written at different times and all sealed and signed by the Master. In perhaps the most dangerous and difficult years of His ministry in 'Akka, when Shoghi Effendi was only a young boy, he was already appointed as the Successor of 'Abdu'l-Baha in the first Will. This decision was later reaffirmed in the third Will, or part of the Will, whichever we choose to call it, and in even stronger terms if possible than before. It was also during practically the babyhood of our first Guardian that the Master revealed that highly significant Tablet about a child having been born who would do great things in the future. When asked by His secretary, Dr. Yunis Khan, whether by this was meant a living child or if it was a symbolical expression, the Master explained a real child was meant and that it would raise the Cause of God to great heights. So we see, that when 'Abdu'l-Baha left us a quarter of a century ago we were not unprovided for. His plans for the Guardianship—the fruition of Baha'u'llah's own scheme—had been made at a very early date, but from the depths of His bitter experience over a period of sixty years, He kept His precious secret carefully guarded, even from His intended successor, and it was not until after His ascension that we began to appreciate the perfection of the system God has, in this most great cycle, given to mankind; a system which has the hand of God constantly laid on it from above in the form of a divinely-guarded Guardianship directly descended from and related to the two Founders of the Faith and, at the same time, exalts the role of Man to a new height in that the freely-elected members of the International House of Justice are, when functioning as a body, promised the inspiration and protection of God upon their deliberations and decisions.

Let us go back for a moment and recall what we were and what Shoghi Effendi was when he first assumed his function as Guardian. Those who remember the passing of the Master and the terrible blow it was to them, the intense unbearable grief it caused them, can best grasp what his feelings were. At that time he was twenty-four years of age, studying at Oxford University in England in order to better prepare himself to serve 'Abdu'l-Baha as an interpreter, and to translate some of the Baha'i literature into English, when news of the ascension reached him. Broken-hearted, so weak from suffering he had to be practically lifted from the train, he returned to Haifa. Then the second blow, as unexpected and in many ways more cruel than the first, fell upon him. The Will and Testament of His Grandfather was read to him and for the first time in his life he became apprised of the Master's great and well-guarded secret: that he, Shoghi Effendi, the beloved, eldest grandson, was His successor and First Guardian of the Cause of God. Saddled with this great weight, crushed by this great blow, he turned his eyes to the Baha'i world. He beheld a widely diversified, loosely organized community, scattered in various parts of the globe, and with members in about twenty countries. These people, loyal, devoted and sincere though they were, were still, to a great extent living in their parent religion's house, so to speak; there were Christian Baha'is, Jewish Baha'is, Muhammadan Baha'is and so on. They believed in the Baha'i Faith but were intimately connected with their former churches. Like fruit on a tree,

they were a new crop but still stuck to the old branch. This was true East and West alike. That was the point to which the Faith had evolved at the time of the Master's ascension.

We, on our part, beheld a young man of only twenty-four standing at the helm of the Cause and some of the friends felt impelled to advise him about what it would be wise for him to do next. It was then that we began to know not only the nature of our first Guardian but the nature of the entire Institution of Guardianship, for we quickly discovered that Shoghi Effendi was "unreachable." Neither relatives, old Baha'is or new Baha'is, well-wishers or ill-wishers could sway his judgment or influence his decisions. We quickly came to realize that he was not only divinely guided but had been endowed by God with just those characteristics needed to build up the Administrative Order, unite the believers in common endeavor, and coordinate their world-wide activities. Shoghi Effendi immediately began to display a genius for organization, for the analysis of problems, for reducing a situation to its component parts and then giving a just and wise solution. He acted vigorously, with unflinching determination, and unbounded zeal. Those who were privileged to meet him were immediately captivated by his eager, frank and cordial attitude, by his consideration, his innate modesty, his spontaneous kindness and charm. The wheels of the Cause which had momentarily stood still at the Master's passing, began to revolve again and at a higher tempo than ever before. Our Father, so patient, so constantly forgiving, whom we had tired and perhaps worried far more than we dreamed of, was gone, and in His stead stood our "true brother," young, determined to see we at last got down to accomplishing the tasks set us by Baha'u'llah and the Master, and not willing to lose any time at all.

With the reading of the Will and the establishment of the Guardianship, came quite naturally and organically a new phase in the development of the Faith. This was typified by one of the first acts of the Guardian: Shoghi Effendi never set foot in the Mosque, whereas 'Abdu'l-Baha had attended it until the last Friday of His life. What local people had suspected—that the Baha'i Cause was really something quite different—became blatantly clear; that which it would have been almost impossible for the Master to do, namely, to sever the intimate bonds which had bound him for so long to the Arab community, particularly the Muhammadan community, of Palestine during many years when it was forbidden to even mention the name Baha'i, the Guardian now did overnight and began to encourage the Baha'is to likewise do in different parts of the world.

There were two major tasks that the Guardian set himself to accomplish immediately after the Master's passing: one was to steer the believers all over the world into working through properly organized administrative channels, as indicated by Baha'u'llah and defined by 'Abdu'l-Baha, and the other was to see that year by year they became more emancipated from the bonds of the past, whether those bonds were close identification with their former religious doctrines and organizations, or the following of the outworn and corrupt patterns of conduct current in the society of their various nations and alien

to the new standards of conduct laid down by the Manifestation of God for the world in this new age.

Between 1923 and 1934, the Guardian, aided by the devoted response of the various Baha'i communities, succeeded in establishing six new National Spiritual Assemblies with all their attendant funds, committees and institutions. Whereas, in the lifetime of 'Abdu'l-Baha, only Persia and America had possessed such bodies and these had, for the most part, functioned more as central Committees, coordinating somewhat the national affairs of the Cause and, in the United States, convening the annual Convention and taking preliminary steps for the erection of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkar, these new National Assemblies, one for the British Isles, one for Germany and 'Iraq respectively, one for Egypt and the Sudan, and one for Australia and New Zealand, now emerged on a sound footing and began, under the constant and direct tutelage of the Guardian, to vigorously administer the affairs of their ever-growing communities.

What the Guardian possesses to an outstanding degree (and no doubt is divinely endowed with) is the vision of the Cause. That which might seem essential to us he would see as a purely secondary issue and what might appear in our eyes as a trivial matter might to him be the pivot of far greater decisions. He is the balance of the Cause; he weighs and classifies the problems, the requirements, the tasks of the hour, and keeps the entire Faith in every part of the world functioning as efficiently and as satisfactorily as our individual frailties and deficiencies will permit.

From the very beginning of his Ministry the Guardian began to correspond at length with the American National Spiritual Assembly as regards the handling of the affairs of the Cause of God in that country. These highly instructive letters were later published under the title of "Baha'i Administration" and formed the directive for all bodies administering the work of the Cause, whether in the East or in the West. He, in conjunction with this process of training us in how to function as a group and as individuals in a coordinated Baha'i Society, also educated us in a concept of the Faith which was the logical conclusion to be drawn from not only statements made by the Bab and Baha'u'llah, but from the Tablets of the Divine Plan revealed for the American Baha'is by the Master; namely, that whereas Persia cradled this new world religion in the last Century, North America was to cradle the Administrative Order which in turn would be the precursor of the new World Commonwealth. Patiently, untiringly, year after year, Shoghi Effendi has labored on the rearing of the Administrative Order, using the American Baha'i Community as the arch pattern to be followed by all other Baha'i Communities. While the American believers struggled to learn what it really means to function as a member of an Order that has rules to be lived up to and not merely read about; while they tried to really submit their wills and conduct to the guidance of bodies conducting their affairs according to the will of the majority, the Guardian never for a moment lost sight of the purpose of his endless insistence on our following the Administrative Principles of our Faith; namely, to produce an

instrument strong enough to enable us to fulfill one of the primary obligations of every believer—to teach the cause of God.

For sixteen years Shoghi Effendi never ceased to broaden our horizons and train us in Baha'i Administration, whether local or National. After that, he suddenly opened a new door. He told us, so to speak, that we were now trained enough to use our laboriously erected Administrative System for a great joint effort, an effort to carry into effect the first stages of the Divine Plan. Prior to 1937 he had already been trying our metal to some extent, and disciplining us as good soldiers, through his repeated insistent appeals for the work of constructing our first Baha'i Temple. This great enterprise we had ourselves inaugurated, encouraged by 'Abdu'l-Baha, Who by His own hand, laid its dedication stone in 1912. But in spite of our good intentions, we had by 1921, only succeeded in producing something that resembled a subdued black oil tank, one story high, on the Temple grounds, and which looked so unprepossessing that the town authorities protested against it. Through the repeated appeals, the stimulation and encouragement of the Guardian and the sacrifice of the Baha'is, and after ten years during which we had been soundly berated for its appearance, we at last completed its superstructure and succeeded in silencing our critics. When the first Seven-Year Plan was given us in 1937 by the Guardian, in it was included, as one of our major tasks, the completing of the exterior ornamentation of the building which comprised the main story and steps, the rest having been laboriously carried out from 1931 to 1935.

In 1919, at the Annual Baha'i Convention in New York, the Tablets revealed by 'Abdu'l-Baha at a time when He was in great danger during the First World War and which have come to be known as the "Vehicles of the Divine Plan" and the "Spiritual Mandate," conferred by Him on the North American Community of Believers, were unveiled. We American Baha'is are all familiar with their remarkable and stirring contents. We were all immensely proud to receive them. No one, however, except Martha Root and a few other venturesome souls, felt moved to do anything drastic about carrying out the instructions contained in them prior to 1936-37. It was then that Shoghi Effendi's teaching, inspiration and advice began to pour into the minds and hearts of the American Baha'is like an incoming tide. He called us to action. For eighteen years, we had basked happily and complacently in the praises and promises 'Abdu'l-Baha had showered upon us in those Tablets, and in many other writings and statements. The Guardian, however, his fingers on our pulse, knew that we were now able to arise for pioneer work, and through the instruments of the Administration he had so carefully assisted us in evolving, carry forward the frontiers of our achievements. He was, thank God, not mistaken in the confidence and trust he reposed in us. He called and America responded. People from every walk of life, business men, stenographers, old ladies, young ladies, people with families, people often frail in health but iron in spirit, began to arise, and what may in future well be viewed as one of the greatest spiritual sagas of the American nation, began to take place. They were called pioneers, and into new cities, into the virgin States of the United States and the virgin Provinces of Canada—virgin as yet to Baha'u'llah's light—these people began to move, at

the cost of great personal sacrifice and inconvenience, inspired by nothing but faith and devotion and love for their fellow men, they started to lay the foundations for new Baha'i communities by establishing new Spiritual Assemblies as a result of their teaching activities. Perhaps one of the most wonderful aspects of this first Seven-Year Plan was the way Baha'is responded to the Guardian's hope that centers would be established, 'Ere its termination, in every single Latin American Republic.' The Guardian, always walking on before a few steps and then calling us over his shoulder to hurry up and follow, led us Seven Years down that mighty pioneer trail which wound over North America, into Alaska, down to Panama, all over Central and South America, across the Andes, and into the West Indies. And wherever his voice called, the Baha'is followed. The first Seven-Year Plan is a very wonderful thing to contemplate. It was the first joint activity on a large scale, nationally organized and flowing into an international field, that the followers of Baha'u'llah had ever undertaken anywhere in the world. Truly formidable obstacles were overcome—obstacles of relatively small numbers of believers to draw upon; a community of very restricted financial means to back such activities (more especially so as the expensive work of completing the Temple ornamentation was steadily going on at the same time); a terrible, unprecedented World War, suddenly engulfing humanity with all its dangers, obligations and restrictions after only two and a half years of the Seven-Year Plan had run their course. But all these barriers were hurdled or thrown down, for we had a prize dear to our hearts just in view, and we were determined to win it. The prize was to succeed in accomplishing all that the Guardian asked of us by May 23, 1944, at which time we were to celebrate our first Baha'i Centennial.

At the Centenary Convention the Baha'is met, radiant with such victories as these: having completed the contracts for the exterior ornamentation of the Temple eighteen months ahead of time; having established Spiritual Assemblies in every single state and province of North America—thus doubling the number in seven years and bringing it up to 136; having not only brought into being a nucleus of the Faith in every Latin American Republic but of having established already in most of them flourishing Spiritual Assemblies and of having the joy of seeing many delegates from these Central and South American countries present at the first great All-America Convention. Beneath the dome of their great Mother Temple of the West, now complete except for its interior ornamentation, they tasted the sweetness of the good pleasure of God, for priceless gifts were given them on that occasion by the Guardian: a beautifully framed copy of the portrait of the Bab and a lock of His hair. So precious and well guarded is this likeness of Him that even the House in Shiraz, one of the two centers of pilgrimage established by Baha'u'llah, does not possess a copy.

Nor should we forget for a moment, in counting our achievements and our blessings, the recent inauguration of the second Seven-Year Plan which has already been enthusiastically embarked upon by the American Baha'is and which, in addition to increasing the number of National Spiritual Assemblies by three—one to be formed in Canada in 1948, and one for Central and one for South America in 1950—is aimed at carrying the Faith to the European

Continent, as part of an organized activity, for the first time. The vision of the future which Shoghi Effendi has revealed to us in his recent communications, is simply stupendous. Beyond each goal stretches another goal, tapering off into an era when we know the Faith will be emancipated and come into its own in the eyes of the whole world. Not only do our teaching activities during the next seven years carry us all over Northern, Western and Southern Europe, but we are given the challenging task of completing, at long last, the interior of our Temple, and of thus setting it before the eyes of men as the first and greatest Baha'i House of Worship in the West.

While the American Baha'is have been absorbed in the two-fold task of learning to understand the purpose of the Baha'i administration, the way it functions and the uses to which it could be put, and in embarking on the first stages of the Divine Plan, their co-workers in other parts of the world were not idle. The progress achieved in the United States was outstanding, but not unique. The work of the Cause went ahead at a rapid pace in other countries in which the Baha'is labored, but under far greater handicaps; in Persia, where the government is the traditional enemy of the Faith; in Egypt, where the Sunni religious doctors have consistently opposed us, cast us out of their ranks and incited the populace against us; in 'Iraq where the Baha'i Community was small and the native people fanatical and reactionary; in Germany, where the Nazi regime consistently frowned upon us from the hour of its rise to power until it finally officially banned the Faith in 1937, confiscated its literature and archives and in a number of cases tried or persecuted its followers; in England, where the believers were few and scattered in an intensely conservative land of strong traditions; in India, where the relatively large Baha'i community struggled against the multiplicity of prejudices and creeds—in all these lands where National Assemblies, firmly founded and buttressed by active committees and national funds, watched over the interests of the believers and worked under the constant guidance of the Guardian, the affairs of the Cause, far from declining, prospered as never before. This was also true of Australasia, which in its freedom from traditional forms and its tolerance, most closely resembles conditions found in North America.