

Mírzá Muḥammad-‘Alí, the Afnán

In the days of Bahá’u’lláh, during the worst times in the Most Great Prison, they would not permit any of the friends either to leave the Fortress or to come in from the outside. “Skew-Cap”ⁱ and the Siyyidⁱⁱ lived by the second gate of the city, and watched there at all times, day and night. Whenever they spied a Bahá’í traveler they would hurry away to the Governor and tell him that the traveler was bringing in letters and would carry the answers back. The Governor would then arrest the traveler, seize his papers, jail him, and drive him out. This became an established custom with the authorities and went on for a long time—indeed, for nine years until, little by little, the practice was abandoned.

It was at such a period that the Afnán, Hájí Mírzá Muḥammad-‘Alí—that great bough of the Holy Treeⁱⁱⁱ—journeyed to Akká, coming from India to Egypt, and from Egypt to Marseilles. One day I was up on the roof of the caravanserai. Some of the friends were with me and I was walking up and down. It was sunset. At that moment, glancing at the distant seashore, I observed that a carriage was approaching. “Gentlemen,” I said, “I feel that a holy being is in that carriage.” It was still far away, hardly within sight.

“Let us go to the gate,” I told them. “Although they will not allow us to pass through, we can stand there till he comes.” I took one or two people with me and we left.

At the city gate I called to the guard, privately gave him something and said: “A carriage is coming in and I think it is bringing one of our

friends. When it reaches here, do not hold it up, and do not refer the matter to the Governor.” He put out a chair for me and I sat down.

By this time the sun had set. They had shut the main gate, too, but the little door was open. The gatekeeper stayed outside, the carriage drew up, the gentleman had arrived. What a radiant face he had! He was nothing but light from head to foot. Just to look at that face made one happy; he was so confident, so assured, so rooted in his faith, and his expression so joyous. He was truly a blessed being. He was a man who made progress day by day, who added, every day, to his certitude and faith, his luminous quality, his ardent love. He made extraordinary progress during the few days that he spent in the Most Great Prison. The point is that when his carriage had come only part of the way from Haifa to Akká, one could already perceive his spirit, his light.

After he had received the endless bounties showered on him by Bahá'u'lláh, he was given leave to go, and he traveled to China. There, over a considerable period, he spent his days mindful of God and in a manner conformable to Divine good pleasure. Later he went on to India, where he died.

The other revered Afnán and the friends in India felt it advisable to send his blessed remains to ‘Iráq, ostensibly to Najaf, to be buried near the Holy City; for the Muslims had refused to let him lie in their graveyard, and his body had been lodged in a temporary repository for safekeeping. Áqá Siyyid Asadu’lláh, who was in Bombay at the time, was deputized to transport the remains with all due reverence to ‘Iráq. There were hostile Persians on the steamship and these people, once they reached Búshíhr, reported that the coffin of Mírzá Muḥammad-‘Alí the Bábí was being carried to Najaf for burial in the Vale of Peace, near the sacred precincts of the Shrine, and that such a thing was intolerable. They tried

to take his blessed remains off the ship, but they failed; see what the hidden Divine decrees can bring about.

His body came as far as Baṣrá. And since that was a period when the friends had to remain in concealment, Siyyid Asadu'lláh was obliged to proceed as if he were going on with the burial in Najaf, meanwhile hoping in one way or another to effect the interment near Baghdád. Because, although Najaf is a holy city and always shall be, still the friends had chosen another place. God, therefore, stirred up our enemies to prevent the Najaf burial. They swarmed in, attacking the quarantine station to lay hold of the body and either bury it in Baṣrá or throw it into the sea or out on the desert sands.

The case took on such importance that in the end it proved impossible to bring the remains to Najaf, and Siyyid Asadu'lláh had to carry them on to Baghdád. Here, too, there was no burial place where the Afnán's body would be safe from molestation at enemy hands. Finally the Siyyid decided to carry it to the shrine of Persia's Salmán the Pure,^{iv} about five farsakhs out of Baghdád, and bury it in Ctesiphon, close to the grave of Salmán, beside the palace of the Sásáníyán kings. The body was taken there and that trust of God was, with all reverence, laid down in a safe resting-place by the palace of Nawshíraván.

And this was destiny, that after a lapse of thirteen hundred years, from the time when the throne city of Persia's ancient kings was trampled down, and no trace of it was left, except for rubble and hills of sand, and the very palace roof itself had cracked and split so that half of it toppled to the ground—this edifice should win back the kingly pomp and splendor of its former days. It is indeed a mighty arch. The width of its entry-way is fifty-two paces and it towers very high.

Thus did God's grace and favor encompass the Persians of an age long gone, in order that their ruined capital should be rebuilt and flourish once again. To this end, with the help of God, events were brought about which led to the Afnán's being buried here; and there is no doubt that a proud city will rise up on this site. I wrote many letters about it, until at last the holy dust could be laid to rest in this place. Siyyid Asadu'lláh would write me from Baṣrá and I would answer him. One of the public functionaries there was completely devoted to us, and I directed him to do all he could. Siyyid Asadu'lláh informed me from Baghdád that he was at his wits' end, and had no idea where he could consign this body to the grave. "Wherever I might bury it," he wrote, "they will dig it up again."

At last, praised be God, it was laid down in the very spot to which time and again the Blessed Beauty had repaired; in that place honored by His footsteps, where He had revealed Tablets, where the believers of Baghdád had been in His company; that very place where the Most Great Name was wont to stroll. How did this come about? It was due to the Afnán's purity of heart. Lacking this, all those ways and means could never have been brought to bear. Verily, God is the Mover of heaven and earth.

I loved the Afnán very much. Because of him, I rejoiced. I wrote a long Visitation Tablet for him and sent it with other papers to Persia. His burial site is one of the holy places where a magnificent Mashriqu'l-Adhkár must be raised up. If possible, the actual arch of the royal palace should be restored and become the House of Worship. The auxiliary buildings of the House of Worship should likewise be erected there: the hospital, the schools and university, the elementary school, the refuge for the poor and indigent; also the haven for orphans and the helpless, and the travelers' hospice.

Gracious God! That royal edifice was once splendidly decked forth and fair. But there are spiders' webs today, where hung the curtains of gold brocade, and where the king's drums beat and his musicians played, the only sound is the harsh cries of kites and crows. "This is verily the capital of the owl's realm, where thou wilt hear no sound, save only the echo of his repeated calls." That is how the barracks were, when we came to Akká. There were a few trees inside the walls, and on their branches, as well as up on the battlements, the owls cried all night long. How disquieting is the hoot of an owl; how it saddens the heart.

From earliest youth until he grew helpless and old, that sacred bough of the Holy Tree, with his smiling face, shone out like a lamp in the midst of all. Then he leapt and soared to undying glory, and plunged into the ocean of light. Upon him be the breathings of his Lord, the All-Merciful. Upon him, lapped in the waters of grace and forgiveness, be the mercy and favor of God.

ⁱÁqá Ján. Cf. Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. 189.

ⁱⁱSiyyid Muḥammad, the Antichrist of the Bahá'í Revelation. Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 164 and 189.

ⁱⁱⁱThe Afnán are the kindred of the Báb. *Ibid.*, pp. 239; 328.

^{iv}Herald of the Prophet Muḥammad.