

Táhirih

A woman chaste and holy, a sign and token of surpassing beauty, a burning brand of the love of God, a lamp of His bestowal, was Jináb-i-Táhirih.ⁱ She was called Umm-Salmá; she was the daughter of Hájí Mullá Šálih, a mujtahid of Qazvín, and her paternal uncle was Mullá Taqí, the Imám-Jum'ih or leader of prayers in the cathedral mosque of that city. They married her to Mullá Muḥammad, the son of Mullá Taqí, and she gave birth to three children, two sons and a daughter; all three were bereft of the grace that encompassed their mother, and all failed to recognize the truth of the Cause.

When she was still a child her father selected a teacher for her and she studied various branches of knowledge and the arts, achieving remarkable ability in literary pursuits. Such was the degree of her scholarship and attainments that her father would often express his regret, saying, “Would that she had been a boy, for he would have shed illumination upon my household, and would have succeeded me!”ⁱⁱ

One day she was a guest in the home of Mullá Javád, a cousin on her mother's side, and there in her cousin's library she came upon some of the writings of Shaykh Aḥmad-i-Ahsá'í.ⁱⁱⁱ Delighted with what he had to say, Táhirih asked to borrow the writings and take them home. Mullá Javád violently objected, telling her: “Your father is an enemy of the Twin Luminous Lights, Shaykh Aḥmad and Siyyid Kázim. If he should even dream that any words of those two great beings, any fragrance from the garden of those realities, had come your way, he would make an attempt against my life, and you too would become the target of his wrath.” Táhirih answered: “For a long time now, I have thirsted after

this; I have yearned for these explanations, these inner truths. Give me whatever you have of these books. Never mind if it angers my father.” Accordingly, Mullá Javád sent over the writings of the Shaykh and the Siyyid.

One night, Táhirih sought out her father in his library, and began to speak of Shaykh Aḥmad’s teachings. The very moment he learned that his daughter knew of the Shaykhí doctrines, Mullá Ṣálih’s denunciations rang out, and he cried: “Javád has made you a lost soul!” Táhirih answered, “The late Shaykh was a true scholar of God, and I have learned an infinity of spiritual truths from reading his books. Furthermore, he bases whatever he says on the traditions of the Holy Imáms. You call yourself a mystic knower and a man of God, you consider your respected uncle to be a scholar as well, and most pious—yet in neither of you do I find a trace of those qualities!”

For some time, she carried on heated discussions with her father, debating such questions as the Resurrection and the Day of Judgment, the Night-Ascent of Muḥammad to Heaven, the Promise and the Threat, and the Advent of the Promised One.^{iv} Lacking arguments, her father would resort to curses and abuse. Then one night, in support of her contention, Táhirih quoted a holy tradition from the Imám Ja’far-i-Ṣádiq;^v and since it confirmed what she was saying, her father burst out laughing, mocking the tradition. Táhirih said, “Oh my father, these are the words of the Holy Imám. How can you mock and deny them?”

From that time on, she ceased to debate and contend with her father. Meanwhile she entered into secret correspondence with Siyyid Kázim, regarding the solution of complex theological problems, and thus it came about that the Siyyid conferred on her the name “Solace of the Eyes” (Qurratu’l-‘Ayn); as for the title Táhirih (“The Pure One”), it was first

associated with her in Badasht, and was subsequently approved by the Báb, and recorded in Tablets.

Táhirih had caught fire. She set out for Karbilá, hoping to meet Siyyid Kázim, but she arrived too late: ten days before she reached that city, he passed away. Not long before his death the Siyyid had shared with his disciples the good news that the promised Advent was at hand. “Go forth,” he repeatedly told them, “and seek out your Lord.” Thus the most distinguished of his followers gathered for retirement and prayer, for fasts and vigils, in the Masjid-i-Kúfih, while some awaited the Advent in Karbilá. Among these was Táhirih, fasting by day, practicing religious disciplines, and spending the night in vigils, and chanting prayers. One night when it was getting along toward dawn she laid her head on her pillow, lost all awareness of this earthly life, and dreamed a dream; in her vision a youth, a Siyyid, wearing a black cloak and a green turban, appeared to her in the heavens; he was standing in the air, reciting verses and praying with his hands upraised. At once, she memorized one of those verses, and wrote it down in her notebook when she awoke. After the Báb had declared His mission, and His first book, “The Best of Stories,”^{vi} was circulated, Táhirih was reading a section of the text one day, and she came upon that same verse, which she had noted down from the dream. Instantly offering thanks, she fell to her knees and bowed her forehead to the ground, convinced that the Báb’s message was truth.

This good news reached her in Karbilá and she at once began to teach. She translated and expounded “The Best of Stories,” also writing in Persian and Arabic, composing odes and lyrics, and humbly practicing her devotions, performing even those that were optional and supernumerary. When the evil ‘ulamás in Karbilá got wind of all this, and learned that a woman was summoning the people to a new religion

and had already influenced a considerable number, they went to the Governor and lodged a complaint. Their charges, to be brief, led to violent attacks on Táhirih, and sufferings, which she accepted and for which she offered praise and thanks. When the authorities came hunting for her they first assaulted Shamsu'd-Duḥá, mistaking her for Táhirih. As soon, however, as they heard that Táhirih had been arrested they let Shams go—for Táhirih had sent a message to the Governor saying, “I am at your disposal. Do not harm any other.”

The Governor set guards over her house and shut her away, writing Baghdád for instructions as to how he should proceed. For three months, she lived in a state of siege, completely isolated, with the guards surrounding her house. Since the local authorities had still received no reply from Baghdád, Táhirih referred her case to the Governor, saying: “No word has come from either Baghdád or Constantinople. Accordingly, we will ourselves proceed to Baghdád and await the answer there.” The Governor gave her leave to go, and she set out, accompanied by Shamsu'd-Duḥá and the Leaf of Paradise (the sister of Mullá Ḥusayn) and her mother. In Baghdád she stayed first in the house of Shaykh Muḥammad, the distinguished father of Áqá Muḥammad-Muṣṭafá. But so great was the press of people around her that she transferred her residence to another quarter, engaged night and day in spreading the Faith, and freely associated with the inhabitants of Baghdád. She thus became celebrated throughout the city and there was a great uproar.

Táhirih also maintained a correspondence with the ‘ulamás of Kazímayn; she presented them with unanswerable proofs, and when one or another appeared before her she offered him convincing arguments. Finally she sent a message to the Shí’ih divines, saying to them: “If you are not satisfied with these conclusive proofs, I challenge you to a trial

by ordeal.”^{vii} Then there was a great outcry from the divines, and the Governor was obliged to send Táhirih and her women companions to the house of Ibn-i-Álúsí, who was muftí of Baghdád. Here she remained about three months, waiting for word and directions from Constantinople. Ibn-i-Álúsí would engage her in learned dialogues, questions would be asked and answers given, and he would not deny what she had to say.

On a certain day the muftí related one of his dreams, and asked her to tell him what it meant. He said: “In my dream I saw the Shí’ih ‘ulamás arriving at the holy tomb of Imám Husayn, the Prince of Martyrs. They took away the barrier that encloses the tomb, and they broke open the resplendent grave, so that the immaculate body lay revealed to their gaze. They sought to take up the holy form, but I cast myself down on the corpse and I warded them off.” Táhirih answered: “This is the meaning of your dream: you are about to deliver me from the hands of the Shí’ih divines.” “I too had interpreted it thus,” said Ibn-i-Álúsí.

Since he had discovered that she was well versed in learned questions and in sacred commentaries and Texts, the two often carried on debates; she would speak on such themes as the Day of Resurrection, the Balance, and the Şirat,^{viii} and he would not turn away.

Then came a night when the father of Ibn-i-Álúsí called at the house of his son. He had a meeting with Táhirih and abruptly, without asking a single question, began to curse, mock and revile her. Embarrassed at his father’s behavior, Ibn-i-Álúsí apologized. Then he said: “The answer has come from Constantinople. The King has commanded that you be set free, but only on condition that you leave his realms. Go then, tomorrow, make your preparations for the journey, and hasten away from this land.”

Accordingly Táhirih, with her women companions, left the muftí's house, saw to arranging for their travel gear, and went out of Baghdád. When they left the city, a number of Arab believers, carrying arms, walked along beside their convoy. Among the escort were Shaykh Sultán, Shaykh Muḥammad and his distinguished son Muḥammad-Muṣṭafá, and Shaykh Šálih, and these were mounted. It was Shaykh Muḥammad who defrayed the expenses of the journey.

When they reached Kirmansháh the women alighted at one house, the men at another, and the inhabitants arrived in a continuous stream to seek information as to the new Faith. Here as elsewhere the 'ulamás were soon in a state of frenzy and they commanded that the newcomers be expelled. As a result the kad-khudá or chief officer of that quarter, with a band of people, laid siege to the house where Táhirih was, and sacked it. Then they placed Táhirih and her companions in an uncovered howdah and carried them from the town to an open field, where they put the captives out. The drivers then took their animals and returned to the city. The victims were left on the bare ground, with no food, no shelter, and no means of traveling on.

Táhirih at once wrote a letter to the prince of that territory, in which she told him: "O thou just Governor! We were guests in your city. Is this the way you treat your guests?" When her letter was brought to the Governor of Kirmansháh he said: "I knew nothing of this injustice. This mischief was kindled by the divines." He immediately commanded the kad-khudá to return all the travelers' belongings. That official duly surrendered the stolen goods, the drivers with their animals came back out of the city, the travelers took their places and resumed the journey.

They arrived in Hamadán and here their stay was a happy one. The most illustrious ladies of that city, even the princesses, would come to visit, seeking the benefits of Táhirih's teaching. In Hamadán she dismissed a

part of her escort and sent them back to Baghdád, while she brought some of them, including Shamsu'd-Duḥá and Shaykh-Ṣálih, along with her to Qazvín.

As they traveled, some riders advanced to meet them, kinsmen of Táhirih's from Qazvín, and they wished to lead her away alone, unescorted by the others, to her father's house. Táhirih refused, saying: "These are in my company." In this way they entered Qazvín. Táhirih proceeded to her father's house, while the Arabs who had formed her escort alighted at a caravanserai. Táhirih soon left her father and went to live with her brother, and there the great ladies of the city would come to visit her; all this until the murder of Mullá Taqí,^{ix} when every Bábí in Qazvín was taken prisoner. Some were sent to Tíhrán and then returned to Qazvín and martyred.

Mullá Taqí's murder came about in this way: One day, when that besotted tyrant had mounted his pulpit, he began to mock and revile the great Shaykh Aḥmad-i-Ahsá'í. Shamelessly, grossly, screaming obscenities, he cried out: "That Shaykh is the one who has kindled this fire of evil, and subjected the whole world to this ordeal!" There was an inquirer in the audience, a native of Shíráz. He found the taunts, jeers and indecencies to be more than he could bear. Under cover of darkness he betook himself to the mosque, plunged a spearhead between the lips of Mullá Taqí and fled. The next morning they arrested the defenseless believers and thereupon subjected them to agonizing torture, though all were innocent and knew nothing of what had come to pass. There was never any question of investigating the case; the believers repeatedly declared their innocence but no one paid them any heed. When a few days had passed the killer gave himself up; he confessed to the authorities, informing them that he had committed the murder because Mullá Taqí had vilified Shaykh Aḥmad. "I deliver myself into your

hands,” he told them, “so that you will set these innocent people free.” They arrested him as well, put him in the stocks, chained him, and sent him in chains, along with the others, to Tīhrán.

Once there he observed that despite his confession, the others were not released. By night, he made his escape from the prison and went to the house of Riḍá Khán—that rare and precious man, that star-sacrifice among the lovers of God—the son of Muḥammad Khán, Master of the Horse to Muḥammad Sháh. He stayed there for a time, after which he and Riḍá Khán secretly rode away to the Fort of Shaykh Tabarsí in Mázindarán.^x Muḥammad Khán sent riders after them to track them down, but try as they might, no one could find them. Those two horsemen got to the Fort of Tabarsí, where both of them won a martyr’s death. As for the other friends who were in the prison at Tīhrán, some of these were returned to Qazvín and they too suffered martyrdom.

One day the administrator of finance, Mírzá Sháfí, called in the murderer and addressed him, saying: “Jináb, do you belong to a dervish order, or do you follow the Law? If you are a follower of the Law, why did you deal that learned mujtahid a cruel, a fatal blow in the mouth? If you are a dervish and follow the Path, one of the rules of the Path is to harm no man. How, then, could you slaughter that zealous divine?” “Sir,” he replied, “besides the Law, and besides the Path, we also have the Truth. It was in serving the Truth that I paid him for his deed.”^{xi}

These things would take place before the reality of this Cause was revealed and all was made plain. For in those days no one knew that the Manifestation of the Báb would culminate in the Manifestation of the Blessed Beauty and that the law of retaliation would be done away with, and the foundation-principle of the Law of God would be this, that “It is better for you to be killed than to kill”; that discord and contention would cease, and the rule of war and butchery would fall away. In those

days, that sort of thing would happen. But praised be God, with the advent of the Blessed Beauty such a splendor of harmony and peace shone forth, such a spirit of meekness and long-suffering, that when in Yazd men, women and children were made the targets of enemy fire or were put to the sword, when the leaders and the evil ‘ulamás and their followers joined together and unitedly assaulted those defenseless victims and spilled out their blood—hacking at and rending apart the bodies of chaste women, with their daggers slashing the throats of children they had orphaned, then setting the torn and mangled limbs on fire—not one of the friends of God lifted a hand against them. Indeed, among those martyrs, those real companions of the ones who died, long gone, at Karbilá—was a man who, when he saw the drawn sword flashing over him, thrust sugar candy into his murderer’s mouth and cried, “With a sweet taste on your lips, put me to death—for you bring me martyrdom, my dearest wish!”

Let us return to our theme. After the murder of her impious uncle, Mullá Taqí, in Qazvín, Táhirih fell into dire straits. She was a prisoner and heavy of heart, grieving over the painful events that had come to pass. She was watched on every side, by attendants, guards, the farráshes, and her foes. While she languished thus, Bahá’u’lláh dispatched Hádíy-i-Qazvíní, husband of the celebrated Khátún-Ján, from the capital, and they managed, by a stratagem, to free her from that embroilment and got her to Tíhrán in the night. She alighted at the mansion of Bahá’u’lláh and was lodged in an upper apartment.

When word of this spread throughout Tíhrán, the Government hunted for her high and low; nevertheless, the friends kept arriving to see her, in a steady stream, and Táhirih, seated behind a curtain, would converse with them. One day the great Siyyid Yahyá, surnamed Vahíd, was present there. As he sat without, Táhirih listened to him from behind the veil. I

was then a child, and was sitting on her lap. With eloquence and fervor, Vahíd was discoursing on the signs and verses that bore witness to the advent of the new Manifestation. She suddenly interrupted him and, raising her voice, vehemently declared: “O Yaḥyá! Let deeds, not words, testify to thy faith, if thou art a man of true learning. Cease idly repeating the traditions of the past, for the day of service, of steadfast action, is come. Now is the time to show forth the true signs of God, to rend asunder the veils of idle fancy, to promote the Word of God, and to sacrifice ourselves in His path. Let deeds, not words, be our adorning!”

The Blessed Beauty made elaborate arrangements for Táhirih’s journey to Badasht and sent her off with an equipage and retinue. His own party left for that region some days afterward.

In Badasht, there was a great open field. Through its center a stream flowed, and to its right, left, and rear there were three gardens, the envy of Paradise. One of those gardens was assigned to Quddús,^{xii} but this was kept a secret. Another was set apart for Táhirih, and in a third was raised the pavilion of Bahá’u’lláh. On the field amidst the three gardens, the believers pitched their tents. Evenings, Bahá’u’lláh, Quddús and Táhirih would come together. In those days the fact that the Báb was the Qá’im had not yet been proclaimed; it was the Blessed Beauty, with Quddús, Who arranged for the proclamation of a universal Advent and the abrogation and repudiation of the ancient laws.

Then one day, and there was a wisdom in it, Bahá’u’lláh fell ill; that is, the indisposition was to serve a vital purpose. On a sudden, in the sight of all, Quddús came out of his garden, and entered the pavilion of Bahá’u’lláh. But Táhirih sent him a message, to say that their Host being ill, Quddús should visit her garden instead. His answer was: “This garden is preferable. Come, then, to this one.” Táhirih, with her face unveiled, stepped from her garden, advancing to the pavilion of

Bahá'u'lláh; and as she came, she shouted aloud these words: “The Trumpet is sounding! The great Trump is blown! The universal Advent is now proclaimed!”^{xiii} The believers gathered in that tent were panic struck, and each one asked himself, “How can the Law be abrogated? How is it that this woman stands here without her veil?”

“Read the Súrih of the Inevitable,”^{xiv} said Bahá'u'lláh; and the reader began: “When the Day that must come shall have come suddenly... Day that shall abase! Day that shall exalt!...” and thus was the new Dispensation announced and the great Resurrection made manifest. At the start, those who were present fled away, and some forsook their Faith, while some fell a prey to suspicion and doubt, and a number, after wavering, returned to the presence of Bahá'u'lláh. The Conference of Badasht broke up, but the universal Advent had been proclaimed.

Afterward, Quddús hastened away to the Fort of Tabarsí^{xv} and the Blessed Beauty, with provisions and equipment, journeyed to Níyálá, having the intention of going on from there by night, making His way through the enemy encampment and entering the Fort. But Mírzá Taqí, the Governor of Ámul, got word of this, and with seven hundred riflemen arrived in Níyálá. Surrounding the village by night, he sent Bahá'u'lláh with eleven riders back to Ámul, and those calamities and tribulations, told of before, came to pass.

As for Táhirih, after the breakup at Badasht she was captured, and the oppressors sent her back under guard to Tíhrán. There she was imprisoned in the house of Maḥmúd Khán, the Kalántar. But she was aflame, enamored, restless, and could not be still. The ladies of Tíhrán, on one pretext or another, crowded to see and listen to her. It happened that there was a celebration at the Mayor's house for the marriage of his son; a nuptial banquet was prepared, and the house adorned. The flower of Tíhrán's ladies were invited, the princesses, the wives of vazírs and

other great. A splendid wedding it was, with instrumental music and vocal melodies—by day and night the lute, the bells and songs. Then Táhirih began to speak; and so bewitched were the great ladies that they forsook the cithern and the drum and all the pleasures of the wedding feast, to crowd about Táhirih and listen to the sweet words of her mouth.

Thus she remained, a helpless captive. Then came the attempt on the life of the Sháh;^{xvi} a farmán was issued; she was sentenced to death. Saying she was summoned to the Prime Minister's, they arrived to lead her away from the Kalántar's house. She bathed her face and hands, arrayed herself in a costly dress, and scented with attar of roses she came out of the house.

They brought her into a garden, where the headsmen waited; but these wavered and then refused to end her life. A slave was found, far gone in drunkenness; besotted, vicious, black of heart. And he strangled Táhirih. He forced a scarf between her lips and rammed it down her throat. Then they lifted up her unsullied body and flung it in a well, there in the garden, and over it threw down earth and stones. But Táhirih rejoiced; she had heard with a light heart the tidings of her martyrdom; she set her eyes on the supernal Kingdom and offered up her life.

Salutations be unto her, and praise. Holy be her dust, as the tiers of light come down on it from Heaven.

ⁱPronounced TÁ-heh-reh.

ⁱⁱCf. The Dawn-Breakers, p. 81, note 2, and p. 285, note 2. Certain lines, there translated by Shoghi Effendi, are incorporated here.

ⁱⁱⁱA forerunner of the Báb, and first of the two founders of the Shaykhí School. See glossary.

^{iv}Qur'án 17:1; 30:56; 50:19; etc

^vThe sixth Imám.

^{vi}The “Ahsánu'l-Qisás,” the Báb’s commentary on the Súrih of Joseph, was called the Qur'án of the Bábís, and was translated from Arabic into Persian by Táhirih. Cf. God Passes By, p. 23.

^{vii}Qur'án 3:54: “Then will we invoke and lay the malison of God on those that lie!” The ordeal was by imprecation.

^{viii}Qur'án 21:48; 19:37, etc. In Islám the Bridge of Şirát, sharp as a sword and finer than a hair, stretches across Hell to Heaven.

^{ix}Cf. The Dawn-Breakers, p. 276. The murderer was not a Bábí, but a fervent admirer of the Shaykhí leaders, the Twin Luminous Lights.

^xCf. The Dawn-Breakers, p. 278.

^{xi}This refers to the doctrine that there are three ways to God: the Law (sharí'at), the Path (taríqat), and the Truth (haqíqat). That is, the law of the orthodox, the path of the dervish, and the truth. Cf. R. A. Nicholson, Commentary on the Mathnaví of Rúmí, s.v.

^{xii}The eighteenth Letter of the Living, martyred with unspeakable cruelty in the market place at Barfurúsh, when he was twenty-seven. Bahá'u'lláh conferred on him a station second only to that of the Báb Himself. Cf. The Dawn-Breakers, pp. 408–415.

^{xiii}Cf. Qur'án 74:8 and 6:73. Also Isaiah 27:13 and Zechariah 9:14.

^{xiv}Qur'án, Súrih 56.

^{xv}A systematic campaign against the new Faith had been launched in Persia by the civil and ecclesiastical authorities combined. The believers, cut down wherever they were isolated, banded together when they could, for protection against the Government, the clergy, and the people. Betrayed and surrounded as they passed through the forest of Mázindarán, some 300 believers, mostly students and recluses, built the Fort of Shaykh Tabarsí and held out against the armies of Persia for eleven months. Cf. The Dawn-Breakers, chapters XIX and XX; God Passes By, p. 37 et seq.

^{xvi}On August 15, 1852, a half-crazed Bábí youth wounded the Sháh with shot from a pistol. The assailant was instantly killed, and the authorities carried out a wholesale massacre of the believers, its climax described by Renan as “a day perhaps unparalleled in the history of the world.” Cf. Lord Curzon, Persia and the Persian Question, pp. 501–2, and God Passes By, p. 62 et seq.