

The World's Greatest Prisoner

'Abdu'l-Bahá

Original English



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Some Experiences of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Forty Years'

Imprisonment in a Turkish Fortress

In an apartment in Cadogan Gardens sits a Persian sage, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, whose recent advent in London marks the latest link between the East and West.

The teachings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá have already brought about a community of thought between the Orient and the Occident. Upon the basis of mutual help and friendship the people have joined hands with an earnestness and brotherly love contrary to the theories of certain cynical poets and philosophers.

In his reception room one found a constantly augmented group representing many languages and nationalities. There were turbaned people from the East, a member of the English House of Lords, smartly dressed women from the continent, two tramps, who, having read of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in the papers, sought his presence; an arch-deacon of the Church of England, and several Americans.

'Abdu'l-Bahá entered. With one impulse we arose, paying unconscious homage to the majesty of the station of servitude. Surely there can be no greater station than this! Instantly one felt an



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intangible something that stamped him as one apart. Try as one would it could not be defined. [pg 17] All that was tangible was the dome-like head with its patriarchal beard and eyes that suggested eternity. After greeting us he waved us to our seats and inquired if there were any questions we would like to ask. When informed that my editor had sent me to ascertain if he would speak of his prison life, 'Abdu'l-Bahá began at once to tell his story in a simple, impersonal way:

"At nine years of age, I was banished with my father, Bahá'u'lláh, on his journey of exile to Baghdád, Arabia; seventy of his followers accompanying us. This decree of exile after persistent persecution was intended to effectively stamp out of Persia what the authorities considered a dangerous movement. Bahá'u'lláh, his family and followers were driven from place to place.

"When I was about twenty-five years old, we were moved from Constantinople to Adrianople and from there went with a guard of soldiers to the fortified city of 'Akká where we were imprisoned and closely guarded.

"There was no communication whatever with the outside world. Each loaf of bread was cut open by the guard to see that it contained no message. All who believed in the universal precepts of Bahá'u'lláh, children, men and women, were imprisoned with us. At one time there were one hundred and fifty of us together in two rooms and no one was allowed to leave the place except four people who went to the bazaar to market each morning under guard.[pg 18]

"'Akká was a fever-ridden town in Palestine. It was said that a bird attempting to fly over it would drop dead. The food was poor and insufficient, the water was drawn from a fever-infected well and the climate and conditions were such that even the natives of the town fell ill. Many soldiers succumbed and eight out of ten of our guard died. During the intense heat of that first summer, malaria, typhoid, and dysentery attacked the prisoners, so that all the men, women and children were sick at one time. There were no doctors, no medicine, no proper food and no medical treatment of any kind. I used to make broth for the people and as I had much practice, I made good broth," said 'Abdu'l-Bahá, laughingly.

At this point one of the Persians explained to me that it was on account of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's untiring patience, resource and endurance that he was termed "The Master of 'Akká." I felt a mastership in his complete severance from time and place and from all that even a Turkish prison could inflict.

"The Master" continued: "After two years of the strictest confinement, permission was granted me to find a house, so that we could live outside the prison walls but still within the fortifications. Many believers came from Persia to join us, but were not allowed to do so. Nine years passed. Sometimes we were better off and sometimes very much worse. It depended on the governor, who if he happened to be a kind and lenient ruler, would grant us permission to leave the fortification and would [pg 19] allow the people free access to visit the house; but when the governor was more rigorous, extra guards were placed around us and often pilgrims who had come from afar were turned away."

Again my Persian friend, who, during these troublous times was a member of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's household, explained that the Turkish Government could not credit the fact that the interest of the English and American visitors was spiritual and not political. Finally, pilgrims were refused permission to see him and the whole trip from America would be rewarded merely by a glimpse of 'Abdu'l-Bahá from his prison window. The government suspected that the tomb of the Báb, an imposing building on Mount Carmel, was a fortification erected with the aid of American money and that it was being armed and garrisoned secretly. Suspicion grew with each new arrival, resulting in extra spies and guards.

'Abdu'l-Bahá continued: "One year before 'Abdu'l-Ḥamíd was dethroned, he sent an extremely overbearing, treacherous and insulting committee of investigation. The chairman was one of the governor's staff, Arif Bey, and with him were three army commanders of varying rank."

"Immediately upon his arrival, Arif Bey proceeded to try to get proof strong enough to denounce me to the Sulṭán and warrant sending me to Fizán, or throwing me into the sea. Fizán is a caravan station on the boundary of Tripoli, where there are no houses and no water. It is a month's journey by camel route from 'Akká. [pg 20]

“The committee, after denouncing me in their report, sent word that they wanted to see me, but I declined. I assured them that I had no desire to meet them. This infuriated them and when they sent for me again I sent this word back: ‘I know your purpose. You wish to incriminate me. Very well, write in your report just what you like; send me a copy with instructions as to what you want me to write, and I will seal it myself and give it to you.’

“A ship came into port reputed to be the one that was to take me to Fizán or drop me into the sea. The people used to stand on the wall of the city and look at this ship; but Arif Bey, rising in supreme wrath, declared that he would return to Constantinople and bring back an order from the Sulṭán to have me hanged at the gate of ‘Akká.

“About this time another ship appeared in the harbor, an Italian vessel sent by order of the Italian consul. On it I was to escape by night. The friends implored me to go, but I sent this message to the captain: ‘The Báḅ did not run away; Bahá’u’lláh did not run away; I shall not run away’ — so the ship sailed away after waiting three days and three nights.”

“It was while the Sulṭán’s committee of investigation was homeward bound that the first historic shell was dropped into ‘Abdu’l-Ḥamíd’s camp and the first gun of freedom was into the home of despotism. That was God’s gun,” said ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, with one of his wonderful smiles.

“When the committee reached Constantinople they had more urgent things to think of. The capital was in a state of uproar and rebellion and the committee, as members of the government staff, were delegated to investigate the insurrection. Meanwhile the people established a constitutional government and ‘Abdu’l-Ḥamíd was deposed.”

“With the advent of the Young Turk’s supremacy, realized through the Society of Union and Progress, in 1898, all the political and religious prisoners of the Ottoman Empire were freed. Events took the chains from my neck and placed them about Ḥamíd’s. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá came out of prison and ‘Abdu’l-Ḥamíd went in!”

“What became of the committee?” was asked.

“Arif Bey,” answered ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “was shot with three bullets; the general was exiled; the next in rank died suddenly and the third ran away to Cairo where he sought and received help from some of the friends there.”

“We are glad you are free,” I said.

Again the wondrous smile. “Freedom is not a matter of place. It is a condition. I was thankful for the prison and the lack of liberty was very pleasing to me, for those days were passed in the path of service under the utmost difficulties and trials, bearing fruits and results.”

“Unless one accepts dire vicissitudes he will not attain. To me prison is freedom; troubles rest me; incarceration is an open court; death is life and to be despised is honor. Therefore, I was happy all that time in prison. When one [pg 22] is released from the prison of self, that is indeed freedom, for self is the greater prison. When this release takes place, one can never be imprisoned. They used to put my feet in stocks so,” and he put out his feet before him to illustrate and laughed as though it were a joke he enjoyed.

“I would say to the guard ‘You cannot imprison me, for here I have light and air and bread and water. There will come a time when my body will be in the ground and I shall have neither light nor air nor food nor water, but even then I shall not be imprisoned.’ The afflictions which come to humanity sometimes tend to center the consciousness upon the limitations. This is a veritable prison. Release comes by making of the will a door through which the confirmations of the spirit come.”

This sounded so like the old theology that the modern within me rebelled doubting if the discipline really compensated for the effort.

“What do you mean by the confirmations of the spirit?” I asked.

“The confirmations of the spirit are all those powers and gifts with which some are born and which men sometimes call genius, but for which others have to strive with infinite pains. They come to that man or woman who accepts his life with radiant acquiescence.”

Radiant acquiescence — that was the quality with which we were suddenly seemed inspired as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá bade us good-bye.

It was a remarkable experience, hearing one[pg 23] who had passed along the prison path for forty years declare, “There is no prison save the prison of self”; and it drove conviction to the heart as this white-robed messenger from the East pointed the way out; not by renunciation, but by radiant acquiescence — the shining pathway out of the “greater prison of self.”[pg 24]

