

From an Interview given by 'Abdu'l-Bahá to the Weekly Budget.

'Abdu'l-Bahá

Original English



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Some of the Experiences of his Forty Years Imprisonment

September 23rd,

IN an apartment in Cadogan Gardens sits a spiritually illumined Oriental, whose recent advent in London marks the latest junction of the East and West.

The teaching of 'Abdu'l-Bahá has already brought about the commingling of thousands of Englishmen and Englishwomen with Orientals from every quarter of the East. Upon the basis of mutual help and friendship and the worship of God, regardless of creed and denomination, they have joined hands with an earnestness and brotherly love contrary to the theories of certain cynical poets and philosophers.

Most of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's life has been spent in an Eastern prison, which he gladly endured rather than abjure his faith, one of the tenets of which is the absolute equality of souls regardless of physical differences, such as sex and colour. He recognizes no class distinctions except those conferred by service and the spirit of brotherly love. For this and other like doctrines he was held prisoner for forty years in the fortress city of 'Akká, in Palestine. When I requested to talk with him, I was told to come early, and called, according, at nine o'clock, for an interview. It was already mid-day to 'Abdu'l-Bahá who rises at four, and who had seen eighteen people before his breakfast at half-past six.

Representatives of many languages and nationalities awaited him in the drawing room.

We sat in a circle facing 'Abdu'l-Bahá who inquired if there were any questions we would like to ask. I said my editor had sent me to ascertain something of his prison life, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá at once related in a simple impersonal way one of the most remarkable stories conceivable.



ORIGINAL



AUDIO

“At nine years of age, I accompanied my father, Bahá'u'lláh, in his journey of exile to Baghdád, seventy of his disciples going with us. This decree of exile, after persistent persecution, was intended to effectively stamp out of Persia what the authorities considered a dangerous religion. Bahá'u'lláh, with his family and followers, was banished, and travelled from one place to another. 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.”

The First Summer

“We had no communication whatever with the out-side world. Each loaf of bread was cut open by the guard to see that it contained no message. All who believed in the Bahá'í manifestation, children, men and women, were imprisoned with us. There were one-hundred and fifty of us together in two rooms and no one was allowed to leave the place with the exceptions of four persons, who went to the bazaar to market each morning, under guard. The first summer was dreadful. 'Akká is a fever-ridden town. 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, malaria, typhoid and dysentery attacked the prisoners, so that all, men, women and children, were sick at one time. There were no doctors, no medicines, no proper food, and no treatment of any kind.

“I used to make broth for the people, and as I had much practice, I make 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 wonderful patience, helpfulness, and endurance that he was always called “The Master.” One could easily feel his mastership in his complete severance from time and place, and absolute detachment from all that even a Turkish prison could inflict.

Better Conditions

“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 they 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 allow the believers 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.”

I learned, afterwards, from a Persian, who, during these troublous times, was a member of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's household, that the Turkish government could not credit the fact that the interest of the English and American visitors was purely spiritual and not political. Often these pilgrims were refused permission to see him, and, many times, the whole trip from America would be rewarded merely by a glimpse of 'Abdu'l-Bahá from his prison window.

The Government thought 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-Ḥamíd's Committee

"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, Árif Bey, and with him were three army commanders varying in rank.

"Immediately upon his arrival, Árif Bey proceeded to denounce me and tried to get proof strong enough to 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.

"The committee twice sent for me to hear what I had to say in my own defence and twice I sent back word: 'I know your purpose, I have nothing to say.'

"This so infuriated Árif Bey that he declared he would return to Constantinople and bring back an order from the Sultán to have me hanged at the gate of 'Akká. He and his committee set sail with their report containing the following accusations: — 'Abdu'l-Bahá is establishing a new nation of which he is to be the king; 'Abdu'l-Bahá is uplifting the banner of a new religion; 'Abdu'l-Bahá has built or caused to be built fortifications in Haifa, a neighbouring village, and is buying up all the surrounding lands.'

"About this time an Italian ship appeared in the harbour sent by order of the Italian Consul. It had been planned that I was to escape on it by night. The Bahá'ís in 'Akká implored me to go but I sent this message to the captain: 'The Báb 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 Sultán's committee of investigation was homeward bound that the first shell was dropped into 'Abdu'l-Ḥamíd's camp and the first gun of freedom was fired into the home of despotism. That was God's gun," said 'Abdu'l-Bahá, with one of his wonderful smiles.

"When the committee reached the Turkish capital, they had more urgent things to think of. The city 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 were establishing a constitutional government and 'Abdu'l-Ḥamíd was given no chance to act."

The Release

"With the advent of the Young Turks' supremacy, realized through the Society of Union and Progress, all the political prisoners of the Ottoman Empire were set free. 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?" asked someone, breaking the deep silence that followed the recital of this thrilling page of history. "Árif Bey," continued 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "was shot with three bullets, the general was exiled, the next in rank died, and the third ran away to Cairo, where he sought and received help from the Bahá'ís."

"Will you tell us how you felt while in prison and how you regard your freedom?" I asked. "We are glad that you are free."

"Thank you," he said graciously, and continuing —

"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, death is life, and to be despised is honour. Therefore, I was happy all that time in prison. When one is released from the prison of self, that is indeed release, for that is the greater prison. When this release takes place, then one cannot be outwardly imprisoned. When they put my feet in stocks, 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 centre the consciousness upon the limitations, and 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 in me rose doubting if the discipline could be compensated for by the effort. "What do you mean by the confirmations of the Spirit?"

"The confirmations of the Spirit are all those powers and gifts which some are born with (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 all suddenly seemed inspired as 'Abdu'l-Bahá bade us good-bye.

It was a remarkable experience, hearing one who had passed along the prison path for forty years declare "There is no prison but the prison of self;" and it drove conviction to one's mind as this white-robed messenger from the East pointed the way out, — not by the path called "Renunciation," but "Unattachment;" Radiant Acquiescence — the Shining Pathway out of the "greater prison of self" as 'Abdu'l-Bahá so beautifully terms those bars that keep us from our fulfillment.

Isabel Fraser.

