

A woman chaste and holy, a sign and token of surpassing beauty was Jinab-i-Tahirih (pronounced TA-heh-reh.) She was called Umm-Salma; she was the daughter of Haji Mulla Salih, a mujtahid of Qazvin, and her paternal uncle was Mulla Taqi, the Imam-Jum'ih or leader of prayers in the cathedral mosque of that city. They married her to Mulla Muhammad, the son of Mulla Taqi, when she was very young, perhaps only 13, and she gave birth to three children, two sons and a daughter; all three were bereft of the grace that encompassed their mother.

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!" (Cf. *The Dawn-Breakers*, p. 81, note 2, and p. 285, note 2. Certain lines, there translated by Shoghi Effendi, are incorporated here).

One day she was a guest in the home of Mulla Javad, a cousin on her mother's side, and there in her cousin's library she came upon some of the writings of Shaykh Ahmad-i-Ahsa'I (a forerunner of the Bab, and first of the two founders of the Shaykhi School). Delighted with what he had to say, Tahirih asked to borrow the writings and take them home. Mulla Javad violently objected, telling her: "Your father is an enemy of the Twin Luminous Lights, Shaykh Ahmad and Siyyid Kazim. 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." Tahirih 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, Mulla Javad sent over the writings of the Shaykh and the Siyyid.

One night, Tahirih sought out her father in his library, and began to speak of Shaykh Ahmad's teachings. The very moment he learned that his daughter knew of the Shaykhi doctrines, Mulla Salih's denunciations rang out, and he cried: "Javad has made you a lost soul!" Tahirih 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 Imams. 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 Muhammad to Heaven, the Promise and the Threat, and the Advent of the Promised One (Qur'an 17:1; 30:56; 50:19; etc.) Lacking arguments, her father would resort to curses and abuse. Then one night, in support of her contention, Tahirih quoted a holy tradition from the Imam Ja'far-i-Sadiq (the sixth Imam); and since it confirmed what she was saying, her father burst out laughing, mocking the tradition. Tahirih said, "Oh my father, these are the words of the Holy Imam. 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 Kazim, 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 Tahirih ("The Pure One"), it was first associated with her in Badasht, and was subsequently approved by the Bab, and recorded in Tablets.

In 1843, when she was between 23 and 26 years old and was already known as one of the most learned women of her times, Tahirih had caught fire. She set out for Karbila, hoping to meet Siyyid Kazim, 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-Kufih, while some awaited the Advent in Karbila. Among these was Tahirih, 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. On the night of May 22, 1844, the Bab declared His mission to Mullá Husayn in Shiráz, and in the course of that night revealed the first part of His commentary on the Surih of Joseph. After the Bab had declared His mission, and His first book, "The Best of Stories," (the "Ahsanu'l-Qisas," the Bab's commentary on the Surih of Joseph, was called the Qur'an of the Babis, and was translated from Arabic into Persian by Tahirih. Cf. *God Passes By*, p. 23) was circulated, Tahirih 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 Bab's message was truth.

This good news reached her in Karbila 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 Ulamas in Karbila 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 Tahirih, 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-Duha, mistaking her for Tahirih. As soon, however, as they heard that Tahirih had been arrested they let Shams go – for Tahirih 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 Baghdad 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 Baghdad, Tahirih referred her case to the Governor, saying: "No word has come from either Baghdad or Constantinople. Accordingly, we will ourselves proceed to Baghdad and await the answer there." The Governor gave her leave to go, and she set out, accompanied by Shamsu'd-Duha and the "Leaf of Paradise" (the sister of Mulla Husayn) and her mother. In Baghdad she stayed first in the house of Shaykh Muhammad, the distinguished father of Aqa Muhammad-Mustafa. But so great was the press of people around her that she transferred her residence to another quarter (1847), engaged night and day in spreading the Faith, and freely associated with the inhabitants of Baghdad. She thus became celebrated throughout the city and there was a great uproar.

Tahirih also maintained a correspondence with the Ulamas of Kazimayn; 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 Shi'ih divines, saying to them: "If you are not satisfied with these conclusive proofs, I challenge you to a trial by ordeal."

(Qur'an 3:54: "Then will we invoke and lay the malison of God on those that lie!" The ordeal was by imprecation). Then there was a great outcry from the divines, and the Governor was obliged to send Tahirih and her women companions to the house of Ibn-i-Alusi, who was Mufti of Baghdad. Here she remained about three months, waiting for word and directions from Constantinople. Ibn-i-Alusi 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 mufti related one of his dreams, and asked her to tell him what it meant. He said, "In my dream I saw the Shi'ih Ulamas arriving at the holy tomb of Imam 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." Tahirih answered: "This is the meaning of your dream: you are about to deliver me from the hands of the Shi'ih divines". "I too had interpreted it thus", said Ibn-i-Alusi.

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 Sirat, (Qur'an 21:48; 19:37, etc. In Islam the Bridge of Sirat, sharp as a sword and finer than a hair, stretches across Hell to Heaven) and he would not turn away.

Then came a night when the father of Ibn-i-Alusi called at the house of his son. He had a meeting with Tahirih and abruptly, without asking a single question, began to curse, mock and revile her. Embarrassed at his father's behavior, Ibn-i-Alusi 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 Tahirih, with her women companions, left the mufti's house, saw to arranging for their travel gear, and went out of Baghdad. When they left the city, a number of Arab believers, carrying arms, walked along beside their convoy. Among the escort were Shaykh Sultan, Shaykh Muhammad and his distinguished son Muhammad-Mustafa, and Shaykh Salih, and these were mounted. It was Shaykh Muhammad who defrayed the expenses of the journey.

When they reached Kirmanshah 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 Ulamas were soon in a state of frenzy and they commanded that the newcomers be expelled. As a result the Kad-khuda or chief officer of that quarter, with a band of people, laid siege to the house where Tahirih was, and sacked it. Then they placed Tahirih 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.

Tahirih 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 Kirmanshah he said, "I knew nothing of this injustice. This mischief was kindled by the divines." He immediately commanded the Kad-khuda 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 Hamadan 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 Tahirih's teaching. In Hamadan she dismissed a part of her escort and sent them back to Baghdad, while she brought some of them, including Shamsu'd-Duha and Shaykh-Salih, along with her to Qazvin.

As they traveled, some riders advanced to meet them, kinsmen of Tahirih's from Qazvin, and they wished to lead her away alone, unescorted by the others, to her father's house. Tahirih refused, saying: "These are in my company." In this way they entered Qazvin. Tahirih proceeded to her father's house, while the Arabs who had formed her escort alighted at a caravanserai. Tahirih 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 Mulla Taqi, (Cf. the Dawn-Breakers, p. 276. The murderer was not a Babi, but a fervent admirer of the Shaykhi leaders, the Twin Luminous Lights) when every Babi in Qazvin was taken prisoner. Some were sent to Tehran and then returned to Qazvin and martyred.

Mulla Taqi'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 Ahmad-i-Ahsa'i. 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 Shiraz. 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 Mulla Taqi 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 Mulla Taqi had vilified Shaykh Ahmad. "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 Tehran.

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 Rida Khan – that rare and precious man, that star-sacrifice among the lovers of God – the son of Muhammad Khan, Master of the Horse to Muhammad Shah. He stayed there for a time, after which he and Rida Khan secretly rode away to the Fort of Shaykh Tabarsi in Mazindaran (Cf. The Dawn-Breakers, p. 278). Muhammad Khan 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 Tabarsi, where both of them won a martyr's death. As for the other friends who were in the prison at Tehran, some of these were returned to Qazvin and they too suffered martyrdom.

One day the administrator of finance, Mirza Shafi', called in the murderer and addressed him, saying, "Jinab, 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." (This refers to the doctrine that there are three ways to God: the Law (shari'at), the Path (tariqat), and the Truth (haqiqat). That is, the law of the orthodox, the path of the dervish, and the truth. Cf. R. A. Nicholson, Commentary on the Mathnavi of Rumi, s.v.)

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 Bab 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 Ulamas 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 Karbila – 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, Mulla Taqi, in Qazvin, Tahirih 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 Farrashes, and her foes. While she languished thus, Baha'u'llah dispatched Hadiy-i-Qazvini, husband of the celebrated Khatun-Jan, from the capital, and they managed, by a stratagem, to free her from that embroilment and got her to Tehran in the night. She alighted at the mansion of Baha'u'llah and was lodged in an upper apartment.

When word of this spread throughout Tehran, the Government hunted for her high and low; nevertheless, the friends kept arriving to see her, in a steady stream, and Tahirih, seated behind a curtain, would converse with them. One day the great Siyyid Yahya, surnamed Vahid, was present there. As he sat without, Tahirih listened to him from behind the veil. I was then a child, and was sitting on her lap. With eloquence and fervor, Vahid 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 Yahya! 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 Tahirih's journey to Badasht (1848) 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 Quddus (The eighteenth Letter of the Living, martyred with unspeakable cruelty in the market place at Barfurush, when he was twenty-seven. Baha'u'llah conferred on him a station second only to that of the Bab Himself. Cf. *The Dawn-Breakers*, pp. 408-415.), but this was kept a secret. Another was set apart for Tahirih, and in a third was raised the pavilion of Baha'u'llah. On the field amidst the three gardens, the believers pitched their tents. Evenings, Baha'u'llah, Quddus and Tahirih would come together. In those days the fact that the Bab was the Qa'im had not yet been proclaimed; it was the Blessed Beauty, with Quddus,

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, Baha'u'llah fell ill; that is, the indisposition was to serve a vital purpose. On a sudden, in the sight of all, Quddus came out of his garden, and entered the pavilion of Baha'u'llah. But Tahirih sent him a message, to say that their Host being ill, Quddus should visit her garden instead. His answer was: "This garden is preferable. Come, then, to this one." Tahirih, with her face unveiled, stepped from her garden, advancing to the pavilion of Baha'u'llah; and as she came, she shouted aloud these words: "The Trumpet is sounding! The great Trump is blown! The universal Advent is now proclaimed!" (Cf. Qur'an 74:8 and 6:73. Also Isaiah 27:13 and Zechariah 9:14). 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 Surih of the Inevitable," (Qur'an, Surih 56) said Baha'u'llah; 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 Baha'u'llah. The Conference of Badasht broke up, but the universal Advent had been proclaimed.

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 Mazindaran, some 300 believers, mostly students and recluses, built the Fort of Shaykh Tabarsi 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). Afterward, Quddus hastened away to the Fort of Tabarsi and the Blessed Beauty, with provisions and equipment, journeyed to Niyala, having the intention of going on from there by night, making His way through the enemy encampment and entering the Fort. But Mirza Taqi, the Governor of Amul, got word of this, and with seven hundred riflemen arrived in Niyala. Surrounding the village by night, he sent Baha'u'llah with eleven riders back to Amul, and those calamities and tribulations, told of before, came to pass.

As for Tahirih, after the breakup at Badasht she was captured, and the oppressors sent her back under guard to Tehran. There she was imprisoned in the house of Mahmud Khan, the Kalantar. But she was aflame, enamored, restless, and could not be still. The ladies of Tehran, 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 Tehran's ladies were invited, the princesses, the wives of Vazirs 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 Tahirih 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 Tahirih and listen to the sweet words of her mouth.

On August 15, 1852, a half-crazed Babi youth wounded the Shah (Nasiri'd-Din Shah) 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). Thus she remained, a helpless captive. Then came the attempt on the life of the Shah; a Farman was issued; she was sentenced to death. Saying she was summoned to the Prime Minister's, they arrived to lead her away from the Kalantar'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 Tahirih. 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 Tahirih 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.

She was at most 35 years old at her death. She became a martyr to the Cause of the Bab and to women's rights only four years after the Seneca Falls conference. Her sacrifice is underscored by the words that are sometimes said to be her last, although she probably spoke them earlier:

"You can kill me as soon as you like, but you cannot stop the emancipation of women!"

Salutations be unto her, and praise. Holy be her dust, as the tiers of light come down on it from Heaven (Abdu'l-Baha, *Memorials of the Faithful*, p. 203).