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 LARGE PRINT / Standard Print.Why I became a Bahá'í

The Witness

A CITY IN PERSIA, in the 1800s.... It is a clear, sunny day, and late in the morning you decide to go down to the bazaar. As you leave the house, your mind already thinking about what you will need to buy, you notice that most of the streets are half empty. There is no reason for this, what can it be? There is no special holiday. Somehow you feel your curiosity grow. You begin to feel or notice something amongst the people in the streets, there is somehow a feeling of anticipation, of anxiousness...

People are walking with intention, mostly heading in the same direction; yes, they are moving quickly, to a common destination. You follow them, as if somehow pulled by an invisible force; something urges you to see what is going on, what is the reason for this common purpose... "Why?" you ask yourself. "Why am I doing this? And why are they? Why do I not head for the bazaar instead?"

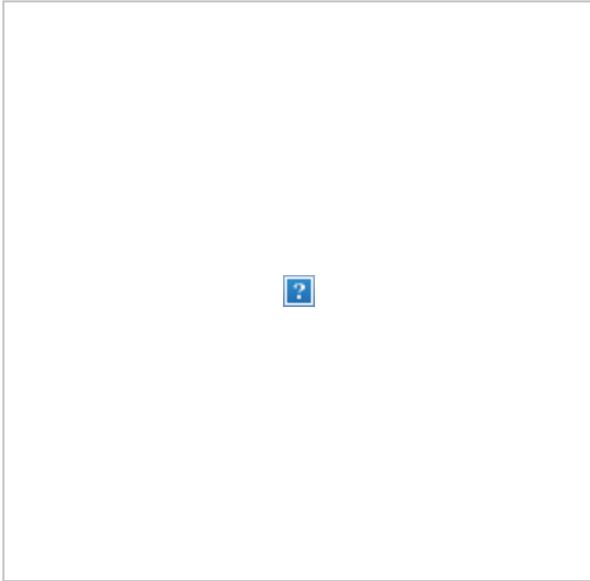
Unsure why, but with feelings of an overwhelming desire to witness what is causing this mass movement of people, pulling them towards the same goal, you follow the growing crowds, which are like small streams joining to make a river, a river of humans, flowing steadily, and uninterrupted.

A feeling to ask about this common destination is stifled in your breast. How to find the reason for the flow of people? Something inside you stops you from asking, for surely, if you are part of the flow, you must know where you want to go! And why! Only going with the flow will give you the answers. The flow increases and grows louder, it is expectant, there is babbling and nodding, and you are poured like molten metal into the confines of the public square of the barracks, a place you know well and have taken for granted all your life.

Somehow this ordinary square, so familiar, has been transformed. There are thousands of people around its sides and on the roofs of the surrounding buildings. They are focused, focused intently on a central spot: on that they watch, gaze, stare, and frown.

You lean forward, raise yourself on tiptoes to see what is there, but, still unable to see, push forward, in between bodies, forcing yourself past hot, sweaty humanity, to behold what is the centre of all this attention.

Finally you see... You see two young men, captives, standing and waiting while ropes are being secured to a pillar of the wall, from which they are to be suspended... Even so, they look serene, mild expressions on their faces, with almost a gentle and patient expectation. What is happening? This cannot be! Surely they are to be executed! How can they look so



Tabriz in the 19th century

What is happening? How can it be that they are to be executed, how can they look so calm?

Unsure what to think, you turn to a white-bearded man standing next to you. “What is to happen to these two young men?” you ask. “Why are they to be killed?”

“Don’t you know?” is his surprised reply. “Why haven’t you heard? One of the two proclaims Himself a prophet, a holy figure, with a message from the One True God. People call him the Mehdi, the Promised One, and He is convicted of heresy! He has been attracting others to follow in His ways. The other one is one of His followers!”

Looking again at the two with a dizzy sense of shock, you see only two young figures, with a happiness, and almost an innocence about them. Why kill them? What have they done which is so terrible? And if they make such claims, how could we ever know if they speak truly, once they are dead? And what harm could they bring?

But you realise, with a dull thud in your head, that the authorities want no answers to such questions. That is why they are to be killed – so we will never know of their claims, or if such claims are true. And so, we will never be tempted to follow!

You watch as the two men are suspended by the ropes from the wall of the square. At the same time, a large regiment of soldiers marches mechanically, with stony faces, into the square before the crowds. They line up in rows of three before the two. Commands are shouted, and echo around the square: the crowd becomes hushed, rifles are raised, aimed at the waiting victims. So many weapons, so many instruments of death, against two seemingly insignificant souls who raise not weapons or threats!

The cry of death rings out, the command to fire, followed by a deafening explosion, and a second and third, as successively three volleys of bullets are fired at the two. The muskets discharge great clouds of smoke, great palls of blue, which totally obscure the view. The acrid smell of gunpowder stings your nostrils. The crowd is restless, straining their eyes to see through the clouds.

Finally the smoke starts to clear – and then, with a thudding in your head, the bass drum of your heartbeat filling your brain, you strain your eyes, and see – No! You fear the heat has overcome your good senses, and what you see fills you with a fear, a shock, a nausea, almost a thrill of disbelief, for where once hung two hapless victims, now stands only one, totally unharmed! The other has vanished, completely from sight! No blood, no bodies, no stinking smell of death! There is a gasp from the crowd, cries of disbelief, muttered prayers, exclamations of wrath!

What has happened? A miracle? NO! It cannot be! Such miracles don’t happen! I have never believed! NO! It cannot be true! NO! Is he the Mehdi, who has now flown from these bullets, tricking death by the breadth of a hair, to laugh in the face of his would-be executioners? What have you witnessed?

There is panic in the square. Soldiers, priests and commanders are angry. They bellow and scream orders, men are discharged; others rush to obey! He must be found, this missing man! He cannot be far! “He has escaped to make us all fools!” “Quick, grab him.” The bemused waiting one stands staring in disbelief. Looking disoriented, he is grabbed and re-suspended. Not long after, you hear bellows and hoots and cries of relief. The other one – the “Mehdi” – has been found, not far away, as they said he would be, back in his cell. Oh fool! When he could have escaped!

The two are repositioned; a new regiment marches in. Guns are poised; men hold their breath. Thousands wait for a second chance to see the miracle, the Mehdi who escapes death! CRASH! The muskets roar out, three times again, and belch smoke and bullets at the two, these two who are somehow racking the hearts and minds of a whole town! With each explosion, you feel your heart jolt, as if fatal blows had been struck against the universe.

More smoke, more smell, more waiting... A breeze begins to blow which clears the air, you see... Bodies riddled with bullets.... There is relief for some, disappointment for others,

maybe even a feeling of being cheated. what miracle is this? what mendic? where is he now? Flown to heaven? What makes Him so different from other men? In death, are all one and alike?

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