

Summon up Remembrance

The fascinating story of a pleasure-seeking Persian boy who became one of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's leading English translators and united East and West in the first Persian-American Bahá'í marriage

Marzieh Gail



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by

Marzieh Gail



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This book is based on a memoir left by Ali-Kuli Khan, writings of his wife Florence, and other family papers and memories. The 'Akká accounts have only the same status as all pilgrims' reports. But Khan was a pilgrim who lived in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's house as His amanuensis for over a year, and spoke His tongue.

For a better perspective, my father is referred to in the third person throughout. He is called Khan because he was widely known by that name, rather than by his state title, Nabílu'd-Dawlih. 'Khan' began as a title, but is now an honorific, like Sir. It must not be thought that every Persian whose name ends with Khan was his relative. All Occidentals addressed as Sir are not necessarily related.

For Harold, as ever,
and
for Dr Richard Ferguson,
who saved my life in San Francisco
when I was halfway through the book

Safe from the Evil Eye

The small hammock was of hand-woven, wine-colored velvet, embroidered with seed pearls, and threads of silver and gold.

Ten babies would come, one after the other, to sleep in the hammock. Six of the babies would die. It is the ninth one that concerns us here. They guarded him with turquoise-blue beads to ward off the evil eye. The evil eye is the eye of perfection and perfection is always in danger. Never say, 'Oh what a fine baby! Fine horse! Fine sheep!' unless you say 'Máshá'lláh' – whatever God wills – along with it, and for good measure, an admired object ought to have on blue beads.

Around 1879 the ninth baby lay in his wine velvet, hammock-like cradle, the slender black forefinger of his young wet-nurse giving it a gentle push now and then, the flickering moth-like shadows of the poplar tree in the courtyard, moving in a slight breeze, passing over him, under the turquoise sky. All was safe. All was well.

This baby was born in Káshán. His family was of the Zarrábís, keepers of the Mint, and the infant rejoiced in an African nurse who was part of his mother's dowry, when she had come to his future father as a bride. The house where he lived had a large pool with a fountain in the center. A walled courtyard, blind to the street, enclosed flower gardens, fruit and nut trees, herbs, and small beds of vegetables for the family table. Table is the wrong word, for they sat around a cloth, spread on the floor.

Like many Persian houses, this one had separate buildings, one for the men, one for the veiled, secluded life of the women. Such houses were made of sun-baked brick, the same kind of building that passed down the ages from the East to Spain to California, with the rooms usually at ground level, great mansions being the exception. An important feature was the cool cellar, a living-place during the hottest part of the day.

The flat roofs of the house were supported on horizontal poles – the straight trunks of trees, such as poplars. Over the poles there was straw matting and over that a mix of clay and straw to seal out the leaks. The roofs were then rolled, much like a clay tennis court in the West. In winter, in case of a thick snowfall, the roofs would be shoveled off, quite possibly onto the chance pedestrian walking along the lane outside the wall.

Many would sleep on these roofs in summer, under the bright stars. Or an even cooler place might be arranged, over a blue-tiled pool in the courtyard: here a low-fenced, wooden platform could be built, with stairs leading up. Room-sized mosquito nets, with a cloth entry, could be set up on the platform, mattresses serving for beds. The summer nights were thus cool, and near each mattress stood a clay jar, filled with cool water, the same sort of jar that 'Umar Khayyám wrote about eight hundred years before.

Fleeing the midday sun, they would go down and sleep in deep cellars, cool and dry.

Breezes from over the many-colored rose fields brought in the rose scent – attar of Káshán, world-famous.

One day when Khan was not much more than two, his African nurse – *dadih* is the word in Persian – took the baby to see his grandfather, Pokhteh Khan. A slave before, the *dadih* was now free and had stayed on with the Zarrábí family as her very own. She had taught herself a Persian which nobody but they understood. They called her Rose of Sheba (Gul-Şabá), and she married a Persian attendant in the household, and produced a daughter named Tamáshá (delightful to look at). This daughter, a beauty, died at twenty-two, perhaps of appendicitis, a killer of that day.

Holding Khan in her arms she took him to the high-walled garden of the patriarch. There was a wide courtyard in front of the house, and Khan's grandfather, dressed in flowing robes, and with a long, full beard, came out and patted the baby and kissed him. Pokhteh Khan had many such gardens, walled and with pools, and with rooms and apartments of sun-baked brick, always crowded with family and guests. He was a man of awesome dignity, so that people did not raise their voices in his presence.

Here, too, the scent of roses came in on the wind. Rose water was for washing the right hand after food, to flavor sherbets and sweets, for ablutions. To make it they pressed the petals from thousands of roses into a great iron pot, poured water over the mass, and piled red-hot charcoal around the pot. A tube carried the fragrant steam through a jar of cold water, turning it into a warm, richly-scented liquid that dripped slowly into a bottle. It is well known, at least to Persian poets, that only the roses will bring out the singing from a nightingale's throat, only the nightingale's song will bring out the roses from their buds.

But even the fruits smelled unusually sweet. People would place rows of apples and quinces on their shelves and their rooms would stay fragrant for weeks. Sweet scents and birdsong and long stretches of rich quiet were the people's heritage.

The plains around Káshán border on the Great Salt Desert, and

about them are bare mountains sharp against the sky. For an overview of the city, Henry Savage Landor tells of blue mosque domes rising out of the brown plains.¹ He and others write of terrible summer heat, and scorpions that willy-nilly sting themselves to death if you circle them with fire. Of silk factories – maybe three hundred of them at the turn of the century, and maybe seventy thousand inhabitants. Landor saw where precious blue tiles, named *Káshí* because they are manufactured here, and often left at the mercy of export-minded mullás, were missing from the dome of a great shrine. He noted the hundred-foot-high swaying minaret, like a factory chimney, he said.

He tells of how, to ease the summer heat, there was ice from the ice houses: deep pits under a cone-shaped roof of sun-baked brick, supplied during winter months from the near-by mountains. He visited the copper bazaar, its ‘sound waves clashing’ under vaulted roofs, where you could not hear yourself think.

There were eighteen mosques and five times that many shrines, and a docile, hard-working population, easy for the mullás to control. Khan’s own family were of that same mild temperament. The Zarrábí men were said to come out of the women’s quarters only at the age of eighteen – they were mothers’ boys. Khan was morally brave himself, but came from a people known for, let us say, extreme prudence in the face of danger. The story goes that when the Shah sent for a hundred men of *Káshán* to join the army, they replied that they would come if they could have an armed guard.

When the inhabitants traveled it was mostly by horse power. Landor tells how he obtained ‘fresh’ horses here. It turned out they had already gone forty-eight miles over rough ground and without rest or food. Now they were sent out for twenty-eight more miles. Their knees constantly giving way, they kept collapsing under their loads. The leader and his attendant had to go forward on foot and drag the animals behind them. ‘It was no easy job’, Landor says, ‘to get them to stand up again. One of them never did. He died, and naturally, we had to abandon him.’ This meant the dead animal’s load had to be heaped onto the remaining exhausted horses. They went ahead at the rate of about one mile an hour. Around three-thirty in the morning they came to a mountain caravanserai – and at its door all the horses, acting as one, threw themselves down and refused to rise again.²

If you had come through *Káshán* in the old days they would have told you that the city was built by Zubayda, the wife of Hárúnu’r-Rashíd, ninth-century Caliph. She did rebuild it, perhaps. Actually it goes back at least eight hundred years before Christ, thus Firdawsí and the city fought ‘Umar at the time of the Muslim Conquest, but all in vain.

A mid-fourteenth century visitor describes its torrid summer

months and pleasant winters. He tells of the garden of Fín, and how its reservoir, fed by the Kúh-Rúd river, plus rainwater cisterns, supplied the city. He said the inhabitants were Shiahs, surrounded by eighteen villages of Sunnites. He praised the Káshán melons and figs.

In the next century, the Italian Josefa Barbaro who settled there a while around 1474, wrote of 'Cassan, where . . . they make sylkes and fustian . . .' He says it was walled, with beautiful suburbs.³

But the main thing to remember must be that from this city, so legend or tradition has it, the Three Kings, Magi forewarned by Zoroaster the Prophet, set out for Jerusalem to worship the new-born Christ. Jackson says most of the Christian Fathers agree that the Three Wise Men came from Persia and he cites Marco Polo (1272) and Odoric of Pordenone (c. 1320) and their assigning the three to particular cities of Iran. Odoric places them in 'Cassan', and says they got to Jerusalem by divine aid, non-human, in only thirteen days. A royal city, he calls Káshán, but much ravaged by the Tartars. It was rich, Odoric says, in bread, wine, and all else. Marco Polo relates one of the Wise Men to 'the Castle of the Fire-Worshippers' (Cala Ataperistan – Qal'iy-i-Átishparastán) which, says Jackson, may well be in or about Káshán.⁴

On the mountainside, about five miles out of Káshán, is the one-time park and pleasure dome of Fín. Here is a place, now ruined. Here are gardens where Persian kings once took their ease, and avenues of cypresses, and water sparkling over channels of blue and green tiles. This is the place where the Grand Vazír who martyred the Báb was called to account. You can see a portrait of the murderer in the chronicle of Nabíl.⁵

The Shah's armies had finally triumphed and the early believers had been mowed down and destroyed, but nothing stopped the survivors. They loved the imprisoned Báb even more than they had before, if such a thing were possible. And so the Grand Vazír decided the Báb must die.

Gobineau says that first, however, the Grand Vazír wanted to humiliate the Báb – bring Him down out of His mountain prison of Chihríq where He shone out like a sunburst, where He was crowned with a nimbus of holiness and suffering and knowledge – let the populace see Him as the Vazír imagined Him now to be – much, says Gobineau, as you would lead forth a lion who has been beaten down, his teeth and claws pulled out, to expose him to the dog pack, so all could see how easy he is to destroy.⁶

So they brought the Báb to Tabríz and three days after His arrival the Grand Vazír's command arrived to put Him to death. The contemporary Nabíl tells how, with ten thousand people looking on, when the first seven hundred and fifty bullets took no effect, the stunned

officer in charge marched his men away and resigned his post. Then another officer marched in his regiment and this time the Báb instantly died. At the end of his book, Nabíl says that the believers had no idea where the Báb's remains were hidden or where they would eventually be transferred.⁷ Today, as the whole world knows, the sacred body of the Báb (and of the youth who was shot with Him) lies under the golden dome of the Shrine on Mount Carmel, visited by pilgrims from around the globe.

The public did not fail to note that those who carried out the execution suffered agonies in the years to come. An earthquake killed two hundred and fifty of the officers and men who had done the killing, that same year, 1850, and three years later the remaining five hundred mutinied, and were shot just as they had shot the Báb.

TWO

Born with a Tooth

Some of the people of Tabríz could not help but wonder aloud about these strange events, and they asked themselves whether they were not, perhaps, the vengeance of God. The mullás of the city imposed heavy fines on or beat anyone repeating such sentiments. They knew that the Bábís had prophesied the early end of the Grand Vazír, and that certain martyrs had even announced the way he would die.

The Vazír was the brother-in-law of the Shah and seemed secure, and his princess wife hovered over him with her royal protection. Still, in less than two years after the Báb's execution, the prime mover of it all fell from favor at the Court, and was banished to Fín. When he knew the Shah's men were coming for him, he removed to the hot bath and there severed his veins. People who visited there were shown his blood across the wall for a long time to come.

This took place about twenty-seven years before Khan was born.

At the turn of the century, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá's secretary in the Holy Land, Khan would be working night and day in the vicinity of the Báb's holy remains, not dreaming that the Master had hidden them, safe from all foes, near the place where Khan was at work.

Khan was the last child but one of ten, and four of them lived. This was how it was. A household was a place of continual birthings and dyings. Of the midwife draped in black, reciting her invocation. Of the dreaded Ál – an evil dwarf that swallows down the newborn.

Anyone you saw walking about, you knew was a survivor, for by

rights he or she ought to have been dead. The Ál should have gotten him, or smallpox or typhoid. Khan would have the cholera three times, and live.

He came into the world with a tooth, which meant he was a prodigy. Because of this, his eldest sister, sixteen when he was born, taught him the alphabet as soon as she could – how to form the letters from right to left, how to add four extra letters to the Arabic alphabet, thus making thirty-two, for the Persian.

He could read and write when barely four, and could also recite poems from the Persian classics.

It was, after all, a literary household. The baby's father, Mírzá 'Abdu'r-Rahím Khán Zarrábí, was a poet with a mystic turn of mind, and also a painter. Friends of his youth would say that he was very handsome and that many leading families wanted him for a son-in-law. He finally selected his cousin Khadíja, eldest daughter of Abu'l-Qásim Khán. In later years the half-American posterity of this great-grandfather, always looking for laughs, were amused at his title, Pokhteh Khan. The word means 'one of mature judgment', but it also means well-cooked. Khan's father was the eldest of five brothers, all the others richer than he, and two of them married to princesses of the ruling house. Khan brought his children up to take pride in their Káshán forebears, who had given many a great man to the Empire: prime ministers and diplomats, authors, historians, poets. They were particularly proud to know, on those occasions when they did lend an ear to parental accounts, that their grandfather, who, after being Lieutenant-Governor of Káshán, became the Mayor (Kalántar) of Tehran, and was a follower of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh.

Khan's father had learned of the new Faith from the Báb Himself during the three days in 1847 when the Manifestation of God was in Káshán on His way to being imprisoned in a lonely, four-towered mountain castle of stone. The convert's fervor was so great that he publicly preached the new message, whereupon, inevitably, the mullás arose to silence him; and his fellow-believers, considering him too valuable to be left to the mob, prevailed on him to leave for the capital. He left, but in Tehran again, where enemies of the Faith had aroused the Shah, they kept him in their sights.

His uncle, Farrukh Khán, who was Chief Court Minister at the time, saved his nephew's life by promising the Shah that his kinsman would sever all relations with the new religion. Later on, through this uncle's influence, the nephew became Mayor of Tehran, and held the post till his death.

Outwardly, Khan's father kept his distance from the believers. Still, through returning pilgrims, he received communications from Bahá'u'lláh, and time and again saved Bahá'ís from prison, torture and

death. One of those he rescued was the great philosopher and scholar, Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl of Gulpáygán. This erudite man had committed an act forbidden to Bahá'ís, but for what he considered a good reason: there was an Armenian who had been converted by Protestant missionaries, and one day when Mírzá was speaking on the Bahá'í Faith at a public tea house, this individual vilified the name of Bahá'u'lláh. Abu'l-Faḍl could not bear it, and struck him to the ground.

Khan's eldest sister, a strict Shiah, brought the child up according to her version of Islam, replete with what the mullás had added on down the years. Implanting the fear of God in him was salutary, it goes without saying, teaching him that ultimately good is rewarded and evil is punished. Evil is detestable. Hell, the Qur'án says, is foul with purulent matter which the damned lap up the way a thirsty camel drinks. But Paradise is a place of all delights: of shade trees, sweet fruits and cups of refreshing wine; of maids and ever-blooming youths, dwelling in gardens beneath which rivers flow.

However, she frightened the toddler with her accounts of a being's first night in the grave. She told him that on that first night the walls of his grave would come together and stifle him. Two angels would appear, and each would sit himself down on a side of the new corpse. Their names were Nakír and Munkar. One of them would ask him about the principles of Islam, and ask if his deeds had been righteous. Then the companion angel would coach him as to the answers he must make. If his good deeds had exceeded his evil ones, the two would then make him a tunnel from his tomb to Paradise, and there he would stay until the Day of Resurrection. But if his evil deeds had been more numerous than his good, they would open up a tunnel to Hell, and there he would burn on and on, getting a new skin as each was consumed, till the Resurrection Morn.

She would then conjure up undreamable horrors, tortures which would be inflicted on the evil (not remembering that every Súrih of the Qur'án, except one, begins: 'In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful,' and says that God has 'imposed mercy on Himself as a law').⁸

The child learned, too, how difficult was the way to Paradise, for even after all other tests had been passed he must cross the abyss of Hell on a bridge called the Sirát that was sharp as a sword-edge and narrow as a hair.

So indoctrinated, even after many decades as a liberated Bahá'í, Khan could recall his infant terrors, and one gathered that of all the promised tortures it was probably being squeezed in his grave that frightened him the most. This inevitable post-mortem experience is called the *fishár-i-qabr*, constriction in the grave. Being mewed up all

alone in the grave's encroaching walls seemed of more immediate concern to the little boy than all the other tortures. It hit home.

How relieved he must have been, in after years, to read Bahá'í Teachings about death in *The Hidden Words*: 'I have made death a messenger of joy to thee. Wherefore dost thou grieve?'⁹ ' . . . Thou art My robe and My robe shall never be outworn.'¹⁰

Khan came to realize later on that many of the horrifying things his sister taught him were not from Muḥammad. Some had come down from ancient Magian and Zoroastrian lore, misremembered, misinterpreted by the priesthood and later interwoven with misinterpretations of Islam and its true and authentic Scripture, the Qur'án.

Mother and sisters were determined that the new child should grow up a devout Muslim, not an unclean infidel like the followers of other Faiths. They knew the Qur'án teaches that all the Prophets – Moses, Jesus Christ, all, up to and including Muḥammad, to them the last one forever and ever – came from God, and were authentic and true. But they believed that other religionists had been misled by their priests, and were thus really unbelievers, to be shunned by the chosen – i.e. the Shiah Muslims, to whose religion the child's mother and sisters belonged.

Not only his sister but everyone around the child taught him that non-Muslims were unclean. A Muslim beggar in the street would draw his rags across his palm before accepting the European's coin, though he would not reject the money.

That non-Muslims were unclean – in a religious not a physical sense, what Bible scholars might call Levitically unclean – was a universal Shiah belief. It can be traced back to an unwarranted extension of Qur'án 9:28 where the verse states that 'only they who join gods with God are unclean'.¹¹ Translators take this to mean the pagans, idol worshippers, who were all around the early believers in Muḥammad. Later, in the popular mind, the verse came to include all non-Muslims. When Khan became a man and went off to the country of the infidels and married a Bahá'í of Christian background, his Shiah family were not sure but that the bride was ceremonially unclean (najis).

A Son Meets His Father

Khan was four when his family left the large house in Káshán to join the Kalántar at the capital. He could always remember that time. They traveled by way of Qum, the shrine city, accompanied by men and women attendants and horsemen while they sat in palanquins balanced on sturdy mules. The journey of 150 miles took them ten days.

The little cavalcade wound its way into a vast city of sun-baked brick. Tehran lay in a wide, saucer-like plain, with the Alburz wall of mountains to the north. These were bare, sharp against the turquoise sky, and thrusting from the northeastern corner of the Alburz stood great, cone-shaped Dimávand under its snows.

The Shah, Náşiri'd-Dín, back from Western travels, had modernized his throne city. He had torn down its ancient walls; and his new wall, some ten miles long, was pierced by twelve gates, fairy gates that looked like small castles almost, with bright towers and minarets, their shining colored tiles visible from far away.

He had interrupted the old winding lanes with broad avenues, and these were bustling with European carriages, for by now there were more than five hundred carriages in Tehran. (Herodotus had again been proved right. Back in the fifth century BC he wrote that whenever the Persians heard of a luxury, they instantly made it their own.) But since eras interpenetrate, there were also camel caravans swinging by, nobles on prancing Arab horses, street vendors, peasants in sky blue clothes and beehive hats, priests in turbans and 'abás jogging by on donkeys, bony arms of beggars lifting from the ground, and everywhere the women, black phantoms in wide chádurs over baggy pantaloons.

In the 1880s Tehran was mostly built of sun-baked brick. There was stone and marble in the south, and plenty of wood in the Caspian provinces, but here were no thick forests, only groves and walled parks. Hiding from street life, the dwellings presented only blind earth-colored walls to passersby. This because of the jealously guarded women, wrapped in their veils. Perhaps through an opened door a bed of flowers would be glimpsed, perhaps the tip of a tall poplar tree would wave above a wall.

As a capital, Tehran was new; less than a hundred years before, in

1788, the eunuch-founder of Qájár rule, Ághá Muḥammad Sháh, had given it that rank. Before then Shíráz was the capital, and before then Iṣfahán and Qazvín. Tehran had been of small importance. In 1220 a traveler described it merely as 'a stronghold, one farsakh distant from Rayy', a farsakh being the distance a loaded mule travels in an hour. The inhabitants, he said, dug out places underground to serve as their dwellings, were against all authority, and fought with everybody. However, modern Tehran covers the area of ancient Rayy which, Jackson says, 'shared with Ecbatana [Hamadán] supremacy over Iran'.¹² According to tradition Rayy was founded four thousand years before the birth of Christ. The Apocrypha's Book of Tobit refers to it as 'Rages of Media'.

But time took a long detour afterward, and power went south in the days of Cyrus (d. 529 BC), founder of the Achaemenian kings. Cyrus built Pasargadae for his capital because it was there that he beat the Medes. Forty miles away is the later capital, Persepolis, both ruined memories under an empty sky. Today, the king's lonely tomb lifts up out of barren desert, and even the inscription he had them carve on it is gone:

O Man, whoever thou art, whensoever thou comest,
I am Cyrus. I founded the Empire of the Persians.
Then begrudge me not this bit of earth that covers my body.

With Tehran's rise to power, Jackson says, 'Media has been able to reclaim once more the supremacy she lost to Persis in the time of Cyrus . . .'¹³

In Qájár days any building fronting on the main avenues must by law be windowless, because the ladies of the Shah's household, as they were driven past, might otherwise be glimpsed, shut in carriages and thickly veiled though they were.

These main avenues were cleared by heralds when the ladies were to leave the royal palace. All shops had to close – and anyone staying in the vicinity of the line of carriages would be killed on the spot. 'Depart! Be blind! (Kúr shíd! Rad shíd!)' the heralds would shout, and the inhabitants would understandably hasten to comply. As the century wore on, and some gentler ways prevailed, a severe beating of the inadvertent voyeur might replace his execution. But even contemporary with the move of Khan's family to Tehran, should a man dare to raise a woman's veil in public he would be liable to instant death. Many a woman was thus free to go anywhere she pleased, fully disguised in her chádur. Criminals, too, well aware of the veil's protection, when need be dressed as women, leaving the policemen helpless.

The four-year-old now met his father for the first time, and the occasion was etched into his mind. It happened on the day when they arrived in Tehran. He and his elder brother were escorted to the Police Administration headquarters, the Mayor's (Kalántar) office, by their lálíh, a kind of bodyguard-tutor-servant. Awestruck, bowing low, the two little boys from Káshán found their father dressed in a dazzling European military uniform of summer white, wearing epaulettes and carrying a sword. The uniform was copied, Khan recalled in later years, from the Austrian military uniform of that day. The Chief of Police was an Italian-Austrian, a Count Monteforte, and the Shah, when on a visit to Europe, had engaged him to reorganize (perhaps organize would be a better word) the Persian police.

Khan's father maintained his household in Tehran with his salary as Mayor, plus whatever benefits went with the office. There was other income as well, some from property in Káshán inherited from Khan's grandparents, some from a certain annual stipend called 'Perpetual' (mustamarrí) that came down to them from long-ago ancestors. In later times such income was discontinued.

The Kalántar's family was thus adequately provided for, but as the years passed the fortunes of his brothers grew far greater than his own. The ones in Tehran were politically ambitious and held lucrative posts, while the Kalántar, a poet and mystic, cared little for material advancement. All he wanted was peace and quiet in which to meditate on spiritual values, and to share his thoughts with his Bábí, later Bahá'í, friends.

Khan's mother, however, a rigid Muslim, and respected as the lady of the family, the daughter of Pokhteh Khan, had other ideals. When the uncles' families would invite her to a lavish party, she, Persian-fashion, was never satisfied until she had outdone them with a party of her own. This kind of rivalry was typical of the time and place. It is epitomized by a tale, which may not be apocryphal, of the hostess who received her guests in a gown of sumptuous Paris materials, and at the return party the following week found that her hostess had dressed all her maids in gowns identical to the one she had worn.

The Kalántar's lady, who had supervised her father's opulent household when her own mother had died, thus placed a heavy burden on the Mayor's finances with her ever-increasing extravagance.

As for her husband, he retained considerable affection for her, going back to days when she was his bride and he had written love poems in praise of her beauty. In appearance she was dark, having an Arab strain inherited from the Prophet, for those with her degree of kinship to the Siyyids – the Prophet's descendants – were called Siyyids-on-Friday-nights. She had *salt* (a kind of sweetness or charm), but also a terrible temper.

