

It Is Written

A Monologue Recounting the Episode of the Martyrdom of the Báb

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There is a word in Arabic: Maktub. It is written.

My name is Hasan. Everybody's name is Hasan. That doesn't matter. Today, I am a special Hasan, the one that matters. You see the regiment over there? And the one there? I anticipate that before the fourth prayer of the day, they will open fire and I will die. Maktub. It is written. I am about to be shot. Thank God. Thank God.

It's a funny thing, this world. Or maybe not so funny—I really don't know anymore. Yesterday, for the last fourteen years, it was I who was doing the killing. And now.

Have you ever been afraid of death? I have known this fear. Not always, not now but—because this, this is right—but for the last three years I have feared death more than I can say. But don't misunderstand me. I am no coward. Even though today I deserve, thank God, to die for the most cowardly act of my life. No: mine has not been your normal, your average, your spineless fear of death. My fear for the last three years, since the ninth day of July, 1850, since that fateful day in July just three years ago, my fear has been a fear of death without retribution, of death without final judgement, of an accidental, a meaningless death. My fear has been of a death that would leave blood not only on my hands, but on my very soul.

Do you see the difference I am trying to make? Please: it is important to me that you understand! I am no coward. I am a soldier. But I was not one of those that were dragged crying, with their noses running, into the army. Oh no! I signed up myself, at the age of seventeen, ready and willing, without any hesitation, to die for my country and for my king. By the end of my first year in the army, I had earned a nickname: *Áb-Purtuqál*. Orange Juice. You smile and that is fine today. But back then it was a title of respect given to me by my fellow soldiers. Throw an orange up in the air as high as you can, give me my rifle and put me fifteen feet away: that orange will never

touch the ground again. Orange juice. By the end of my second year, it was no longer oranges at the unfortunate end of my gun. In my fifth year, I was transferred to the Násirí regiment of my home province of Khamsih. For a Turk of the small town of Zanján like myself, this was my ticket to real glory, to travel and action all over Persia. Well, it did not turn out as I had expected but, nevertheless, the next few years would see many special honours conferred upon my regiment. You see, by my seventh year in the army things had begun to get very interesting for us soldiers—plenty to do. A war had begun, but it was not the war that I had anticipated, played out in the battlefield of politics, army against army. It was an unexpected, unusual war against my fellow citizens, driven, I can see now, by the extremely profitable business of religion.

As I have told you, I am not a coward. And it matters little now that I should confess that I am not religious. Again, don't misunderstand me: I had always considered myself a devout Muslim but I kept it simple. You believe in God and only in God, you pray, you give to the needy, you fast, and you go on pilgrimage once in your life if you can. Beyond that, religion is a business, as corrupt as any, undertaken at the expense of the people. Fat clerics, starving people. I did not need that. And that is why I say that things had begun to get very interesting. A year before, 1844, a Man, a well to-do merchant of Shíráz, began to make certain religious claims. At first it was unclear what He was about and only a few people seemed to have taken any interest. But within a matter of months, it was all too clear that this man was not only mad, but dangerous. He claimed to be the one promised by the Prophet Muhammad—the Promised Qá'im, the Twelfth Imám, the Mihdí! And as if a single man's blasphemy is not bad enough, this infidel began to attract increasing numbers of people to Him. You can imagine how my blood boiled: here is another parasite, this one going to the extent of the greatest sacrilege, in order to

line His own pockets with the hard-earned silver of the people. What greed! Was He not wealthy enough as a merchant? So it was with deep satisfaction on my part that my regiment was increasingly commanded to play its part in upholding the justice of the people and the reverence and dignity of Islam throughout the land.

It was in the summer of 1847 that I first saw this Man who had come to be known as Siyyid-i-Báb, thanks to Muhammad Sháh's treacherous and cruel Prime Minister, Hájí Mírzá Áqásí. Do you know this saying: the pot accusing the pan of being black? Well, this jealous and thieving cleric had managed to prevent Siyyid-i-Báb from meeting the Sháh and was sending Him to prison instead. Tabríz, where my regiment was posted, was a stop for Siyyid-i-Báb on His way to the prison castle of Máh-Kú. And we Násirís were to guard Him at the Citadel, where He was to be quartered.

I don't know what I was expecting but my first sight of the Man Himself was a complete surprise. He did not look like any of the other charlatans I had seen or seen pictures of—and certainly nothing like our wretched Prime Minister. As a matter of fact, at first I thought that there had been some sort of mistake—this couldn't possibly be the same prisoner we were expecting that day at the Citadel! To begin with, He was young—He looked to be about my age. And He was beautiful! He had a pale, handsome face framed by a black beard and a small moustache. His delicate hands, his simple but very neat clothes, his refined manners and appearance—everything about Him made you wish to be His companion, made you wish that He would consider you a friend.

Ah! Look at you Hasan! For shame! This is it! This is it! He is doing it to you as well! Believe me: for a minute I had forgotten who I was, who He was, everything! His personality was embracing me just as it had embraced so many others. I hammered my foot with my rifle so as to distract myself with the pain and made sure to avoid

looking into His eyes. I even checked to ensure that my purse was still securely attached to my belt—not that I had much in it.

And that was it: He stayed in Tabríz for about forty days confined to the Citadel and in the course of my duties I would catch glimpses of Him here and there, always from a safe distance. But that initial sight of Him had stirred something within me—it had found a weakness that left me uncomfortable and it took all my strength to bury the source of that discomfort. I am, after all, a soldier: it was not for me to question, only to obey. And I tried to leave it at that.

Siyyid-i-Báb was taken His way and we went ours. That was the summer of 1847. Over the course of the next few years and regardless of the efforts of the Sháh and his Prime Minister to crush it, Siyyid-i-Báb's movement grew and grew. Oh they tried everything to crush Him. They sent Him to an even worse prison after a year, they brought Him back to Tabríz to be accused by the holiest men of the province, they killed, we killed, thousands of His followers—nothing. His Cause grew strong even as the country seemed to fall apart. Muhammad Sháh died, his Prime Minister was kicked out of Tihrán like a stray animal, but the Bábís grew strong. Násiri'd-Dín Mírzá was crowned king and a new government came to power and still the Bábís persevered.

It was said that there were no less than one hundred thousand Bábís in the land! And these Bábís—my God! A bunch of scholars and tradesmen, ordinary civilians, defended themselves with the power of the devil himself! As I told you before, never would I have thought that I would see even my own regiment turning with such force on its own countrymen—and yet this, this was the power of Siyyid-i-Báb over these people that at times it looked almost like a civil war. The imperial army triumphed on all occasions, of course, but triumphed at times, I am ashamed to think of it, in a most un-Muslim manner. Well, as they say, anything is fair when you have a holy war on your hands. Anything.

Oh that it should come to me so late in my life: the understanding that we can be so fast asleep even when we are awake. So blind, even with two eyes that see.

Oh yes: the imperial army triumphed on all occasions. It won every battle, but nothing, nothing succeeded in putting out the fire that Siyyid-i-Báb had started.

And this, this was the thing that was eating at our new Prime Minister like leprosy. But our new Prime Minister had the nerve to do what many had thought but none had dared to realise. With the blessing of Násiri'd-Dín Sháh, he decided that Siyyid-i-Báb had to be put to death—that nothing short of the infidel's execution would serve to stamp out, permanently, the ungodly revolution that was underway in Persia.

It was the summer of 1850 and my regiment was posted yet again in Tabríz. This, really, is where my story begins. We are days away from that fateful day when my fear of death began. And if today is the day of my judgement, if today I am on trial, it is not for that which I am accused of by those, those regiments biding their time over there—no! No. No! I stand accused before no body, no being less than God Himself for actions that occurred that summer, three years ago, which I am about to recount, which recounting, which telling stands as my testament before the court of God.

The Prime Minister wanted things to move swiftly and with certainty. On his orders, the Prisoner was suddenly transferred to Tabríz on the 29th of June. Many thought that He was going home. But within days of His arrival new orders came from Tihrán and they were to the point: Siyyid-i-Báb was to be transferred to the barracks of Tabríz immediately and was to be executed in the barracks courtyard as soon as possible.

By this point, Tabríz was in frenzy. The commotion of its people was unlike anything I had ever seen or ever would see again. The

numbers of the Bábís had grown but of course they were under constant attack. And the clergy had been quite effective in their strategy of demonising Siyyid-i-Báb to the point that there were people who would have torn apart with their bare hands a man they had never seen before. Every kind of person was on the street to witness Siyyid-i-Báb taken to his final earthly home. This was no ordinary crowd. It was a crowd plagued by a mysterious turmoil, fuelled by the superstitions and the nightmares of people no better than sheep. As the Prisoner approached the courtyard, a youth, Mírzá Muhammad-'Alíy-i-Zunúzí, broke through the multitude and flung himself at the feet of Siyyid-i-Báb, begging that he be allowed to remain with Him. The Prisoner addressed him, "Muhammad-'Alí arise, and rest assured that you will be with Me. Tomorrow you shall witness what God has decreed." My friends, he would do more than witness!

They had stripped Siyyid-i-Báb of His green turban and sash, the twin emblems of His noble lineage. It was better that way: we were all trying to forget that even though an infidel, He remained a descendent of the Prophet Muhammad. And the next morning, the Vazír-Nizám's chief attendant marched Him, barefoot and bareheaded, with chains about His neck and feet, to the presence of the leading clerics of Tabríz to obtain the authorisations for His execution. At the point of departure, however, an incident seems to have taken place: Siyyid-i-Báb had been in the middle of a final conversation with his secretary, Siyyid Husayn, when the chief attendant had come to fetch them. Being an impatient man, he had grabbed the secretary and pulled him aside, rebuking him probably for keeping him waiting. Siyyid-i-Báb, however, gave the chief attendant a warning the boldness of which must have shocked the man: "Not until I have said to him all those things I wish to say can any earthly power silence Me. Though all the world be armed against Me, yet shall they be powerless to deter Me from

fulfilling, to the last word, My intention." And yet the chief attendant ordered the secretary away.

The authorisations were all given. They had all been prepared in advance, as if the whole thing was a joke, and not one of those powerful leaders of religion dared or cared to see the prisoner they condemned face to face. Such was their justice; such was their mercy.

My regiment was at the barracks that morning. The tension in the city was such that nobody wanted to stray too far. Besides, we were going to have an excellent view of the killing of the notorious infidel! I was not as interested. Too many different thoughts and feelings had been tearing me in different directions—things that were too much for a simple soldier to try and sort out. I wanted only to do my job and as I had no job to do at that moment I preferred to sit in my quarters, blanketing every other thought out with a sense of rage, of anger. Why? How? I don't know. How could I have known? That it was summer, that is was hot, that the tumult on the streets added to all of the heat, none of it was helping me at all and so I stayed indoors, waiting for it all to be over so that I could go back to the ordinary business of being a soldier.

And the noise outside the barracks courtyard grew louder: Siyyid-i-Báb was back. The chief attendant wasted no time in delivering his Prisoner to Sâm Khán, the Christian Colonel of the Armenian regiment that was to do the killing. He now had the blessings of every authority in the land to carry out the execution. And yet it is told that Sâm Khán was not happy about his orders. He went to the Prisoner and said to Him: "I profess the Christian Faith and entertain no ill will against you. If your Cause be the Cause of Truth, enable me to free myself from the obligation to shed your blood." Siyyid-i-Báb told him to follow his instructions. "If your intentions be sincere, the Almighty is surely able to relieve you from your perplexity."

Things moved quickly from there. A nail was driven into a pillar between two of the rooms of the barracks. Two ropes were fastened to that nail. Siyyid-i-Báb and Muhammad-'Alí were brought and suspended securely from the ropes, about twelve feet off the ground so that the firing squad would have a clear shot. The Armenian regiment ranged itself in three files. It had as many men as ours, seven hundred and fifty, and all seven hundred and fifty were going to be used to ensure that the job was done and done well.

Sám Khán's first order came: the soldiers raised their guns. For the first time that day, there was absolute silence. About ten thousand people had gathered around that courtyard and now you could hear a heart beat. With the second command not a living soul was breathing. A glance to the chief attendant, a nod, a signal to the head of the squadron, and Sám Khán finished his job. Three rounds of two hundred and fifty bullets, each round following quickly on the heels of the other. It was over.

How I remember the moment! The silence, the triple explosion of bullets, and then the ringing silence again. I could see clearly in my mind how those thousands of people waited for the thick gunpowder smoke of hundreds of guns to subside so that they could bear witness that the deed was done. That Siyyid-i-Báb was dead. It was just seconds but it felt longer. I myself was just taking my first breath when, when all madness broke loose. I could not believe my ears! It was impossible to mistake the bewildered cries: "Siyyid-i-Báb has gone from our sight!"; "He's gone! He's ascended to heaven!". There, standing with not even a mark on his clothes and with a smile on his face, was Muhammad-'Alí. And as for his Master: there was not a trace of Siyyid-i-Báb.

A frantic search began and it took all the effort of the unnerved Armenians to prevent a stampede of the masses of people into the courtyard. They found Siyyid-i-Báb, seated in the same room that He

had occupied the night before, with an expression of absolute calm upon His face, completing His interrupted conversation with his secretary. Not a mark, not a scratch, not an injury. Then, for the dumbfounded chief attendant He had these words: "I have finished My conversation with Siyyid Husayn. Now you may proceed to fulfil your intention." That the chief attendant didn't drop dead right there was a mercy shown to him by God.

Sám Khán was also stunned by the force of this tremendous revelation. Oh sure: his soldiers were busy trying to convince the hysterical crowds that this was no miracle but merely that by some error only the ropes had been hit and had freed the condemned infidel. Seven hundred and fifty bullets and all that had been hit were the ropes binding them! But Sám Khán recalled the promise of Siyyid-i-Báb to him. He swore there and then that he would not resume his task even if it meant the loss of his own life.

Barracks doors flung open. Officers were running. "Násirís: you'd better have wings! You will be down in the courtyard in no time or you will be hanging next to the infidels yourselves!" My colonel, Áqá Ján Khán-i-Khamsih, had volunteered us to take the place of the Armenian regiment. We were going to kill Siyyid-i-Báb.

What would you have me say to you? Ha? What would you have me say? That I went against my will? That there was a gun pointed to my head even as my gun was about do its own pointing? That I did not want to do it? Could it be as simple as that? Would you even believe it? No my friends. I went willingly. I went with the blind rage of a cornered animal ready to do anything to defend its petty existence. There are no miracles! I went with the full intention of carrying out my orders, of being an excellent soldier, of being the defender of my country. And I knew that these were not feelings, if you can call them even that, shared by all of my fellow soldiers. I knew that there were those in my regiment who were afraid, who would deliberately miss their

mark rather than strike a fatal blow against a descendant of the Prophet of God. But I, oh no.

I made sure that I was in the front row of guns, as I wanted nothing to stand in the way of my aim. Siyyid-i-Báb addressed the people: "Had you believed in Me, O wayward generation, every one of you would have followed the example of this youth, who stood in rank above most of you, and willingly would have sacrificed himself in My path. The day will come when you will have recognised Me; that day I shall have ceased to be with you." Those words, I later realised, had been absorbed by my entire being—that voice... ..but at that time my ears were deaf. Nothing was going to get in my way. I could not tell you why. I waited for the commands. I raised my gun and took aim. Now there were no thoughts, no pounding of the heart. I had nothing. I aimed at, I aimed at His head. The second command came and I knew that I was not going to miss. And we fired. I fired. And we fired again. And again. And we were wrapped in the smell and smoke of the guns. My ears should have been ringing but I swear to heaven, the bullet had not exited the barrel of my gun when the whole universe whispered that word to me: Maktub. It is written.

My God! What had just happened? Did I think that I had actually done something? Did the colonel, the clergy, the ministers, the Sháh, did we deliberately think that they had actually done something? That we had stopped something? Had we supposed that we had had control, at any point in these days and years, over anything? Over this Man who did nothing that He did not desire to do, even in death? Over the stirrings within the souls of thousands of people across the land? Did we, did we really believe that we had assisted God?

Maktub: It is written. What, is written? It was then, at that most ironic of moments when I had made a decision and taken an action that could never be reversed, it was there, in the midst of the gunpowder fog of the firing squad that my own head seemed finally to be

clear. For the first time I stopped, for the first time in the six years of this, this history I stopped and dared to do what I had thought no soldier and no true Muslim ought to do: I asked questions. Just what is it that this Siyyid-i-Báb, this descendant of the Prophet Muhammad, is saying? What is this word, this Revealed Word of His that has set so many of my countrymen on fire? And I realised that I did not know. I did not know a single thing about the Cause for which I had just put this Man to death.

All of these thoughts that came rushing through my head, down to my very soul, all of these thoughts, they came charging through me all at once—in those few seconds after we had fired. Oh if only I had had the time: the time to fall to the ground and weep and laugh. To weep at the horror of what I had done. To laugh at the foolishness of what I, what my whole nation, thought it had done by killing the Báb. No, no my friends. Maktub: it is written. Everything is written by the Hand of God. All that had been asked of me was that I should have seen with my own eyes, heard with my own ears, and acted of my own accord. And so what that I should have died had I reached a different decision in my life? So what? I stand at the threshold of my death a mere three years later and I swear to you: that ninth day of July, 1850, was a better day to die. These three years have been worse than death.

But there was no time for such thoughts then. The gun smoke had cleared away and it was clear and evident that we had accomplished our objective. The Báb was dead. His body and that of His disciple had been so mangled that they had become one. And if that earlier whisper in my ear was not enough, the Báb Himself made the point to me in His death: seven hundred and fifty bullets; I with my legendary aim in the front file; there was not a mark upon His face. Only a look of serene calm, of absolute certitude.

And then I was blown off my feet. I am not making poetry. At the very point of the execution a strange wind overcame Tabríz and

within no time it had turned into a gale of incredible violence, sweeping over the entire city. And with it quickly came a dust storm of such severity that the light of the noonday sun was entirely blocked. Oh how violently the universe laughed at us!

The Báb had been in the thirty-first year of His life. Only three years older than me. He was dead and from that very moment my fear of death began. After all: I was plagued with questions now, you see? I was horrified by the thought that I might die without divine judgement, that I might live out a miserable existence and die a natural death without having been held accountable before God for what I had done. I was not asking for forgiveness or for pity. It was not God's mercy that I was after; only His justice. After all, even if I had developed a conscience, I was still a soldier—a man of honour and dignity.

Oh how even this hope was shattered! Soldier? Defender of king and state? How ironic then that in defence of a king who was increasingly despised by his suffering people, we had killed a Man who had brought joy and hope to thousands. And my king's gratitude? We were worked like donkeys and paid poorly and irregularly. There were times when we were close to starving.

Not long after the execution of the Báb, a third of our regiment was en route back to Tabríz from Ardibíl. They had paused in their march and were resting when a wall under which they were seeking shade suddenly collapsed. There was not one survivor. Oh how I envied them! Could there have been any doubt that justice was served in that incident! And I was dejected. There had been my chance to die the way I deserved to die—but no: I would have to continue living in fear.

But here I am now, thank God. For three miserable years the condition of my regiment grew worse and worse. Finally, we had had enough. We had not been paid in months. Some of my fellow soldiers had families dying back in Khamsih. We made petition that we would

have to be paid in full before we continued to serve. We headed to Tabríz to bring attention to our plight and to make our decision clear to the government there. We came in peace, and meant no harm to anyone. We did not mean to interfere with the population of Tabríz and set up our camp outside the city walls. And this is where you find me now. I cannot remember how long we have been here, but it has been too long. We now stand accused of mutiny—the most serious offence a soldier can commit. Mutiny?

And then news came that the Prime Minister was to be travelling through the region and nothing was to happen about our case until he saw to the matter himself. Oh fate! Where, my friends, is our sense of history that we fail to learn its lessons, to see its patterns? The Prime Minister? I knew my time had come. The Prime Minister is my death warrant in the flesh. And this will be the right death. And so he has arrived, yesterday. He stopped no more than five miles from here. Today he sent two regiments to us, fellow soldiers. They ordered us to disperse knowing full well that we would not, could not. We have given up our guns but we have also just told them that we will not leave until we receive a decree promising us better treatment. These are all games now. They are going to be ordered, they will be ordered to kill us. I am ready for them.

There is no moral, no reason to my story because there was no moral, no reason in my life.

Maybe that is the moral. I await my judgement. It is written. Maktub.