

# Tributes to heroic sacrifice

A colleague recalls the achievements of  
The Hand of the Cause of God  
Keith Ransom-Kehler

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## Impressions of Mrs. Ransom-Kehler

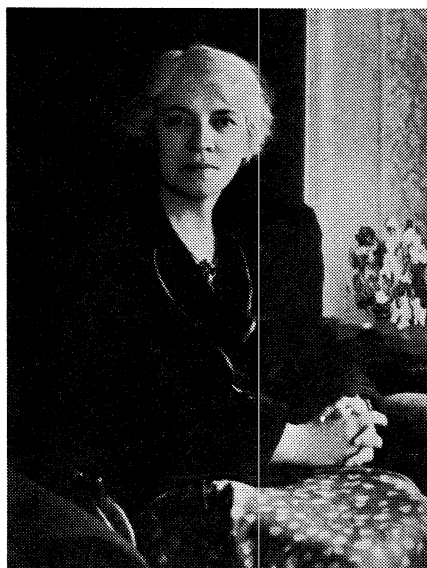
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*"... whereas in days past every lover besought and searched after his Beloved, it is the Beloved Himself Who now is calling His lovers . . ."*

Bahá'u'lláh  
(*Gleanings*, p. 320)

What an ecstasy and holy rapture to be in the presence of the beloved Guardian. To every pilgrim it was a state of spiritual enchantment that could only be obtained in his presence. Wonder, awe, and reverence were awakened in his visitors by his dignified and exalted personality. Days passed like swiftly gliding rivers, but the sweet memories of those hours of pilgrimage remained vivid and unstained by the erosions of time, returning to mind again and again with undying gratitude and affection.

It was during my last pilgrimage, on the first day of my arrival in Haifa, while walking on the slopes of Mount Carmel, that the Guardian expressed sorrow because of the passing of a "valiant martyr and a virtuous peer," Mrs. Keith Ransom-Kehler. With intense longing she had gone to visit the home-



*Mrs. Keith Ransom-Kehler*

land of Bahá'u'lláh and, with unabated determination, had done her utmost to open a way for the entrance from the West of Bahá'í literature into Persia, and for mitigation of the oppressions suffered by her fellow believers. She suffered grave disappointments and defeats; finally in Isfahan, physically exhausted, she succumbed to smallpox, and died a few hours after its onset.

The Guardian spoke on that walk of how great a teacher, how eloquent a writer she had been. [He then very lovingly made mention of Marzieh Khánum and said that she wrote like

Mrs. Ransom-Kehler, instructing me to send a warm letter to her on his behalf.] He expressed sorrow because none of the promises given by the Persian authorities to Mrs. Ransom-Kehler were ever fulfilled. In his boundless blessings he termed her the first American martyr in Iran and an ember from the fire of the love of God. We walked on.

Then, as if the veils of time and space had been parted so that he might behold horizons far away, the Guardian, after a long moment of silence, said the funeral of Mrs. Ransom-Kehler had been a very important event in Isfahan. The Bahá'í friends had followed her coffin with the deepest respect. The inhabitants of the city had stood on both sides of the main streets down which the cortege had traveled. Taken by surprise, they related to each other that a great American teacher had passed away in their city. The Guardian's description was moving and wonderful, one to bring tears of pride and sorrow.

Before my pilgrimage ended, the Guardian sent me a large envelope. It contained a large leaf onto which flowers of varying sizes and colors were pressed in a very beautiful design. He instructed me to take this gift of love to Isfahan and there to lay it upon the grave of Keith Ransom-Kehler, martyr.

What a painful moment when one finally had to leave the presence of

Shoghi Effendi. With tears in my eyes and the darkness of all the disappointments of the world in my heart, I bade him goodbye, and departed for Damascus from Haifa, to proceed through Iraq into Persia. It was a long journey; and in those days the great hazard lay in the crossing of the trackless desert between Damascus and Baghdad. A single car dared not traverse the wastes lest it break down or be irretrievably lost. Therefore, in Damascus I waited until such time as at least six cars would form a caravan, driving together for safety.

When finally the little caravan assembled, we set out through that lifeless, empty, boundless space, which was the picture of my own heart, devoid of hope and happiness. How could

to the sky, "In the desert, that star is our guide." It was the polar star toward which he gestured, and I was strengthened, consoled, made meditative looking at that star, like a diamond nail fixed forever, holding together the firmament. What happens, I pondered, when we Bahá'ís fix our gaze upon him whose light followed the Master? Never, never will we be lost in the trackless wastes of our lives if we live by the Guardian's direction.

Three days before the Bahá'ís of Persia were to hold their annual meetings to commemorate the martyrdom of the Báb, I reached Isfahan. The friends, informed of my coming, looked eagerly forward to the arrival of the Guardian's great gift. The Local

of peace and love, the Bahá'í Faith. The people understood only that she, the stranger, was to receive a great posthumous honor, a prize never sought, but won through her great spirit and sacrifice. With confused feelings they watched the Bahá'ís exulting in this important event. Gathering on the roofs of their houses and on the minarets of their mosques, they felt the irrepressibility of the Faith and the failure of their fight against its aims. They could not quite believe this wonderful spectacle of the Bahá'ís daring to gather in solemn march, in spite of all that had happened to them, in honor of a noble woman from America. For it had not been too many years since their fathers had witnessed the martyrdom of the two brothers, Hasan and Husayn, gloriously entitled "The King of Martyrs" and "The Beloved of Martyrs." To them that bloody event signaled the end of the dangerous Faith with which the two brothers were affiliated and for which they offered their lives. The Isfahanis, as so many others in Persia, wondered at the speed with which the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh had spread, so amazingly, from the East to the West; a process exemplified by this American woman buried in the environs of their city. The hearths of men's hearts would ever burn for this union which already Bahá'u'lláh had visibly created.

Assembling then in silence about the grave in the cemetery, the Bahá'ís raised their unspoken praise of her whom they had come to honor, perhaps in poetic words such as these:

"For you bouquets and ribboned wreaths . . .

For you they call the swaying mass their eager faces turning . . ."

Not for them the empty gestures of which so often we read in our newspapers, when men of politics, of military affairs, or of mundane importance place wreaths on the grave of some "unknown soldier," summoning up all manner of ceremonies for such an occasion: guards of honor, soldiers and bands for music, all in rows to excite the hearts of people by their guns, drums and bugles. What are all these for but to honor soldiers who have sacrificed their lives for man's brutality, when he is farthest from God; honor offered too late to young men



*Bahá'ís of Isfahán gathered about the casket of Keith Ransom-Kehler.*

it be otherwise, when it had been so swiftly taken away from the mountain of God, the abode of the sign of God on earth? And now, crossing the bleak wastes at night, the moon, the stars, the whole firmament looked upon me from above, as if conscious of the emblem of love which I was honored to bear to its recipient. No marks, no traces of paved roads, no river or little hills showed where we were, yet the cars sped onward. I wondered how the drivers would ever reach their destinations safe and sound. "How do you find your direction?" I asked our driver; "There is no sign here." Said the driver, pointing first to the desert sands, then, smiling,

Spiritual Assembly of Isfahan invited all the friends to congregate in the Bahá'í cemetery on the day of the anniversary of the martyrdom of the Báb, to pay tribute to the American woman who had died in their city on October 23, 1933.

On that wonderful, tragic, memorable day of the Báb, groups of the friends proceeded from their villages and from the city of Isfahan itself to the Bahá'í graveyard outside the city limits. Meanwhile, the news sped round the Muslim community that the Bahá'ís were making a visit to the grave of the foreign woman who spent "all her yesterdays" in the promotion of the Cause

who went under fire, enduring all manner of atrocities to win "a handful of dust," yet without a godly objective to sanctify their sacrifices. By contrast, our martyr Keith Ransom-Kehler had a heart lit with the celestial fire. She offered her life, not for savagery but for the promulgation of peace and the establishment of the kingdom of love on this earth; well-known here in this mortal world, she was far better known in the realms of the martyrs. And the simple Bahá'í men and women who assembled about her grave were people who many times had been sorely tried in the fires of oppression, never faltering nor fleeing. Never had wealth or luxuries been distinguishing features of that beloved steadfast group; instead, they were imbued with the noble ideals of their great Faith, suffering the oppressive and vindictive actions of a malevolent Persia in silence and resignation, whether young or aged, new in the Cause or old in its beliefs.

These true people stood in two rows about the grave, watching with eager eyes the precious gift as it was carried to its final place of honor. In the solemn stillness the drops of tears which were fast rolling down their pale faces were the best songs from their hearts, the fittest words to express their appreciation for those days and months of heroine Keith's ardent labor, those long nights devoid of ease that she had spent in the service of the Faith in their country.

Then the day was done, and the darkness fell from the wings of night. There flashed into my heart a feeling of joy mingled with a sense of the beloved Guardian's presence, such that my soul could scarcely resist. Would that my pen could express the thoughts and feelings awakened in the friends at that high moment of a great day of honor to an inimitable Bahá'í soul. Full of the meaning of that hour, the friends silently left the cemetery to return to their abodes, numbed by the ecstasy awakened in their hearts, full of the tenacity of their devotion reawakened.

As they departed from the graveyard, leaving the flowers in tribute on the resting-place of their much-loved American sister, was it possible that the ever-smiling Keith Ransom-Kehler might take the flowers to her breast in the ethereal realms, for the approbation of her fellow martyrs?



*Mrs. Dorothy Baker*

## **Dorothy Baker: "Martyr Pilgrim"**

The beloved Guardian initiated the first International Conferences in 1953. The Bahá'í communities throughout the world were moved and thrilled, and those who could travel made their way to one or more of these Conferences.

The one held in India was the most picturesque. A great variety of colorful dresses added beauty and atmosphere to the assemblage of friends who were seated under a large tent, in semi-circular files. East and West met each other in perfect unity and mutual understanding. People of different colors with varying racial, religious, and cultural backgrounds came together and for the first time tasted the beauty and felt deeply the joy of knowing one another. And for the first time they truly comprehended that they were members of one body, still unfortunately separated by the cruel forces of prejudice, hatred, and ignorance. Now under the canopy of love and unity, they shed tears of joy and often their feelings were uncontrollable.

All the speakers responded to this feeling of unprecedented joy. Their voices sometimes broke with emotion. Deeply touched by the rapture of those moments, I wrote down the beautiful

words of the speakers; but when Dorothy Baker started to speak, my pen would not move. I could take no notes.

She stood elegantly upon the stage, and when she spoke, she seemed to abandon her physical temple. A certain mysterious power caused eloquent words to flow from her lips with the clarity and unerring direction of a mountain stream as it moves swiftly over small pebbles. Her soft penetrating voice had the ring of indescribable music. Her face received fresh lights of joy from the worlds beyond.

She continuously spoke about the beloved Guardian, but never during her visit to India did she speak about her pilgrimage to the Holy Land. I remained with her during her entire stay in New Delhi, even to the last moment when she was settled in her train compartment. Accompanied by her adopted son, Shahriyar, she continued her journey, making trips to other states of India. She bade me farewell as I stood on the pavement beside her train; the last thing I could see was her hand waving goodbye.

After finishing her mission in India she proceeded to Pakistan, where, in Karachi, she had meetings with representatives of religious and civil institutions of the country.

I followed her by prayers and received news of her tremendous victories on all fronts. Yet something in her life has remained a mystery to me. What passed in her dear heart during those last days, and what urged her to talk to the friends in Karachi of her sweetest reminiscences? Why did she share, on that particular visit, the memory of her four-day pilgrimage, about which she made no mention in India? Was it the ecstasy of her soul that prompted her to speak? Was she feeling within the very essence of her heart that her meeting in Karachi would be her last chance to be with the people of this world? Could her soul no longer endure separation from her Lord? She sang her last song, then began her flight to Europe.

"Welcome, a thousand welcomes my martyr pilgrim," were the first words of the Guardian when she entered his room. She sat enraptured with the joy of beholding the countenance of the Sign of God on this planet. Overcome with the emotion of the moment, she tried desperately to speak, but she