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### **IN THE HOLY LAND<sup>1</sup>**

That 'Abdu'l-Bah<sup>2</sup> after forty years of imprisonment has been released and has made a tour of America and Europe, lecturing before millions in vast congregations and gatherings is a fact universally known. But since his return he, like a bird accustomed to his old nest, has returned to 'Akká and Haifa, two ports facing each other on the Levant coast. 'Akká is an old Turkish fortress and a military station with large walls around it, whereas Haifa is a beautiful little city, situated at the foot of Mt. Carmel, the cradle of Christianity and of Bahá'ism. It is mostly inhabited by pious Germans and Persians; and has a great future before it, being the port for most of the pilgrims to Medina, by the Medina railway.

From Port Sa'id by a Russian boat we were taken to Haifa. The city slopes down the mount Carmel. Its red tiles, green plains, white buildings, its past connecting with prophets of God added to a wonderfully invigorating air makes one feel that he is somewhere not on earth. High on the top of Mt. Carmel is 'Abdu'l-Bah's guest house and we were lodged there amidst men from the centre of Persia, from the cities and the tribes, from Rangoon and Baku, in fact travellers from all quarters of the globe, Jew, Hindu, Moslem and Zoroastrian. There had also come to 'Abdu'l-Bah's pilgrims from Chicago, Stuttgart, London and Vienna, but these were lodged mostly in the German hotels. The ladies only of all communities stay in his family.

At this time 'Abdu'l-Bah<sup>2</sup> was in 'Akká. It was the 6th of April and at night there was a spiritual gathering in the home of 'Abdu'l-Bah<sup>2</sup> at the foot of Mt. Carmel and various speakers addressed the gathering on the progress of the cause in the countries and cities which they represented.

### **A whole day with 'Abdu'l-Bah<sup>2</sup> in 'Akká**

Next morning the sky was blue, the air pleasant and I ran down the slippery Carmel to catch the 'Akká train to go to the presence of 'Abdu'l-Bah<sup>2</sup> and was joined by a Hindu pilgrim of Gujerat and 'Abdu'l-Bah's son-in-law, Áqá Mírzá Mohsen. We passed through the narrow winding streets and bazars of 'Akká

till we came to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s home – a small white three storeyed building – ; and were greeted by his servants and attendants who were mostly Zoroastrian Persians. Being seated in his drawing room, Áqá Mírzá Mohsen went up to inform ‘Abdu’l-Bahá of our arrival. In a moment he returned and beckoned us to follow him. We were soon in a small room at the corner of which sat a most majestic figure on a sofa – wide nostrils, piercing yet pitiful eyes, commanding yet sweet voice, merciful and kind, fixed eye brows with a serene yet strongly marked forehead, white fez and turban, white flowing robes with white locks of hair and white soft beard. Such was in appearance he whom now millions call “master.” He got up saying, “Marhabá! Marhabá!” and coming forward most warmly received and gripped my both hands. Then as if in a trance with rather closed eyes he said: – “You are most welcome. It was long I was expecting to see you. Your tour to India in December 1912 made me exceedingly happy. It made me rejoice to see that India was being prepared for the Bahá’ cause. I know of every one’s service and I am sure your services were the outcome of pure motive for God. Your reward shall be in the hands of Bahá’u’lláh. You must excuse me not writing you often and you must know that it has been because of the rush of work and the fatigue of the journey I have been under. God-willing you will be assisted to perform great deeds for the good of humanity.” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had been interrupted in his task of dictating tablets to his Secretary Mírzá Aḥmad Sohrab. Now after inquiring in a pleasant English after the health of my Hindu friend, he proceeded to finish his tablet. Finishing that he enquired of me about Karachi and its people. I replied his question and presented him with a copy of “The Modern Review” which contained an account of the last Theistic Conference and told him of how Mr. B. Temple (the Editor of the Sind Gazette) and Dr. Hisaram Vishindas had been from time to time useful to the cause in Karachi. He said: – “You must thank Mr. Temple on my behalf. He is a man of noble aims and I do well remember him.” Then turning the leaves of ‘The Modern Review’ and seeing a drawing of Buddha he was all changed into smile and then in a pleasant voice he said: – ‘Poor Buddha! How he is fallen in bad hands! Hands that at different moments paint him differently. Jesus Christ, for instance, is everyday sent up the cross in a new fashion and a new dress. I am sure the prophets never liked these things. These things are the outcome of narrow-mindedness. We are afraid lest such superstitious should creep in among the Bahá’ s also. For years the Persian believers requested Bahá’u’lláh for a photograph but he denied them. I myself were unwilling to be photographed but when in London, I found it quite impossible to escape the eye of the camera. One evening, I was to attend a gathering, in Mrs. Crooper’s home. Covering myself with my cloak, I hurriedly passed through the crowded streets to escape them, but the next morning, I found myself in a most ugly position, in one of the dailies. I therefore said; ‘Let them have the right photo.’ If photos are to be treated as objects of worship and adoration then, verily, their non-existence is better than their existence, but if they are simply to be looked at then the camera is a useful thing.” Ibn Abhá, an old Bahá’ worker and educationalist of Ṭíhrán who was present said that it would be well if a Tablet were written to that effect. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá replied that he had already written

many tablets forbidding the custom of respecting photographs.

### **‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s coming to India**

A number of invitations were then presented to him requesting him to come to India next winter. To these he replied in writing that India must be prepared for his coming and that he will come as soon as India becomes a magnet to draw him. During the twenty one days that I was with him, this request was oft repeated by me and others and at one occasion he said, “bohtachcha,” I wish there was an aeroplane and we would fly off to India but meanwhile let me see what others will do for the progress of the cause there.”

### **‘The Hindu crossing the sea.’**

My Hindu friend, who is a lawyer at Surat, said that according to his caste rules he ought to be excommunicated on his return to India, but it seemed to him providential that none of his relatives and friends had been annoyed or displeased with him for undertaking that journey. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá replied, “Your friends and relatives, nay, your father and descendants shall soon glory over this action of yours, that you have overcome such barriers and have come and lived among the disciples of Bahá’u’lláh. Very few have the really perceiving eye and the courage to take the initiative step. But when years pass and the whole drama is over men sigh for the bygone days and wish that they were living centuries back. Once upon a time I was travelling to Tiberius. In the desert, I found a number of Europeans collected and were kissing the stones, I said to them, ‘What means this kissing of stones?’ They replied: – History tells us that one of the disciples of His Holiness, the Christ while travelling in these parts sat on one of these stones. We, therefore, kiss all these stones that perchance we might kiss the right one.’ Now, thank God, we are all under the protective wings of His Holiness Bahá’u’lláh and are sure of what we do.”

Meanwhile coffee was served and some further pleasant talks took place. We were given leave to depart and were once more in the drawing room on the first floor. Having had our dinner, which consisted of soup, cheese, curd, and several vegetable dishes we had a short repose. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, then sent us a message that we might go to the Tomb of Bahá’u’lláh.

I knew that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is very fond of flowers and has all the varieties of flowers in his gardens. Returning from Bahá’u’lláh’s Tomb, I presented him with a bouquet of flowers called from the garden of Bahjí. This he gracefully accepted and handed over to his son-in-law to take for the friends at Haifa. We were seated and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá spoke and I translated for the benefit of my Hindu friend. He said – “No atom can succeed without help and assistance. Everything in this world depends upon the assistance of others. A weak man can through assistance become a strong man, a drop can become a sea. Man above all needs divine assistance for his spiritual progress. I hope that through the assistance of Bahá’u’lláh you will become the cause of the illumination of the

whole India. You must not consider your own capabilities. You must consider how great are the favours of God. Consider how the dark earth through the favours of the rays of the sun yields fragrant and beautiful flowers. Therefore I say that through the assistance of God any one of us can perform wonders. This is of the essence of faith and this is that upon which depends all success. Well has the Sadi of Shíráze said, ‘I was a worthless piece of clay and through the company of the rose I became amber.’”

Then with many an utterances of ‘marhaba’ i.e. bravo, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá got up, gave us leave to depart and attended to the huge post which was meanwhile brought in. At night there was a nice beautiful little gathering of ‘AkkáBahá’s in his drawing room. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá made me sit by his side and then said. – “Why do they call Mr. Shírází”. I replied that in India they do not like long names. He then said, why don’t they call you Mr.Irani? I said, that the Zoroastrians that came from Persia were known as Iranis. He replied: – “Zoroastrians are the real Iranis. Their blood is not spoiled by the mixture of Turkish, Russian and Arab bloods. Old Persians had high morals, but much of the loss of morality, in Persia is due to reckless intermarriages with other races.” From this it appeared to me that though ‘Abdu’l-Bahá proclaims the unity of races and nations he is perfectly conscious of the fact that unity and brotherhood do not necessarily imply the surrender of the national characteristics and that a fusion of the advanced with backward races does not necessarily bring about unity. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá then burst out into a torrent of stories of his early life and sufferings borne at the hands of the Persians and related some heroic deeds of some of those present. He also said that the Bahá’s must take care that they remain pure and polished and that no such savage deeds may pass from them. I enquired if in future the prophets of God will meet with the same opposition as those offered to Bahá’u’lláh, Muḥammad and Christ, he replied, “No the world will be so trained that no one will harm even his own enemy”. The night was spent in the home of a gentleman friend there and the next day ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was engaged in going afoot to most of his friends to bid goodbye. At 4-30 he accompanied by some of his servants, his son-in-law and two of his grandsons besides myself and his secretary, returned to Haifa by the train. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s great secret lies in living a life of action and not of words. You will not see a single man, Kazi or official poor or rich in the whole of ‘Akká who does not highly respect ‘Abbás Effendi as he calls him.

#### A drive with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in the Streets of Haifa

While ‘Abdu’l-Bahá passes every head is lowered in respect to him and I can never forget the kindness with which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá responds to them. From the station to his home it was my fortune to drive with him his carriage. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s carriage took a back road to avoid much notice, yet it would stop every now and then and you would hear ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in Turkish or Arabic inquire after the health of some one who was in bed or exchange courtesies with a Kazi or an official of the city.

### **‘Abdu’l-Bahá at Haifa**

The first day of his arrival at Haifa was occupied by the calls of his local friends.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá has always a busier time at Haifa than at ‘Akká. Early in the morning after his return from the green meadows he sends for various pilgrims, either one by one or in numbers and receives them. Then you see him come out into his garden, move amidst flowers and dictate long tablets to his secretaries. Sometimes he sits on one of the stairs of his house and talks on ‘arious subjects with the Bahá’ís who have meanwhile gathered at his house. You can never imagine a man more simple of expression, attire, and habit, yet so wonderfully able to command and direct men towards God. Then ‘Abdu’l-Bahá retires and perhaps hardly takes an hour’s rest and returns to his parlour, personally peruses the tablets which have been meanwhile copied fair by his secretaries, corrects and signs them, dictates their answers or sometimes replies in his own hand. His only rest lies in occasionally talking to some one who is present while he does all that work. Unless some one comes to call on him, his evenings are spent in returning calls which is the etiquette of the East. His Friday noons are spent in the mosque and Sunday mornings at the home at some of his resident European friends. Thrice a week all the Bahá’ís gather in his large drawing hall and hear him talk or reply to the various questions which are put to him at his own suggestion and chant some of the tablets of Bahá’u’lláh. An English lady who was staying in his family told me that there was quite a different charm about ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, when he was amidst his daughters and the members of his family. Even the little children of Haifa, and of his family pay quite a different kind of respect to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. When he returns from his walk in the evening children see him from the distance, stop their play, and inform others that the master is coming.

### **Interview with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.**

‘Abdu’l-Bahá often invited me and I was alone with him for nearly an hour each time. On one occasion he asked me to relate to him the particulars of my trip to Northern India. When I spoke of Delhi and of KhawjaHasaNizami his quick memory at once brought to mind their meeting and enquired of me how he was. I told him that he had translated in Urdu the copy of the Seven valleys he had presented him and that he was very kind to me. He said: – ”He is indeed a pure soul”. When I mentioned PromotholalSen of Calcutta he was at once carried back to KeshubNikketon in London and gave me a full description of him and told me to convey to him his gratitude and greetings. He asked me: “How are the people of India? Don’t you think it will be a good thing in India both for the British Government and for the Indians if Bahá’ism prevails? Wherever Bahá’ism has gone it has utterly removed racial, religious and political prejudices which are huge barriers to progress and are at the root of all differences and disagreements.” On another occasion we talked on the various religious and social movements in India. He said: “I believe Theosophy and BrahmoSamaj are doing good work in India and are removing racial and caste barriers.” Then

I told him that Mrs. Besant in her book called, the 'Changing World' states that 'Abbás Effendi who is a great spiritual teacher says that the world teacher is yet to come. He replied: – "I believe that Bahá'u'lláh was the world teacher and that for one thousand years there shall not come any prophet." None can surpass 'Abdu'l-Bahá in wit. At one time along with me was an old Bahá', who had for the last seventy years been in the service of the cause and we were talking of Afghánistán. 'Abdu'l-Bahá at once turned to the old Hájí Mírzá Haydar-'Alí and said: – "We want to send you to Afghánistán."

### **Spiritual Feasts at the tomb of the Báb.**

On Sunday afternoons and occasionally at other afternoons 'Abdu'l-Bahá receives the pilgrims in a large room adjoining tomb of the Báb on the top of Mt. Carmel where he discourses on topics pertaining to God and spirit and then after taking refreshments and tea all pay a visit to the tomb of the Báb. At one of these meetings 'Abdu'l-Bahá said: – "In past you must not imagine that the prophets spoke things which the people could not understand. They were very well understood by their contemporaries and hearers, but as time changed terminologies changed and commentaries arose which darkened the light of the truths they taught. Perhaps after a thousand years much of what is every-day language to us will need explanation and the simple truths we teach will be glossed." 'Abdu'l-Bahá is always anxious to make it clearly understood that he has no claim for himself but that of being the servant of Bahá spreading the religion of Bahá'u'lláh taught and being the appointed centre of covenant to avoid dissension and differences among the Bahá's. He impressed upon us that in every respect Bahá'u'lláh was quite different from all others including himself. He puts His teachings superior to that of his own. His power far ahead of our imagination and His understanding supreme.

### **A large dinner on Mt. Carmel.**

A pilgrim from Persia invited 'Abdu'l-Bahá and all the Bahá's to a dinner to be held on Mt. Carmel at 1 P.M. Now it thus happened that from 12 o'clock a huge shower of rain intercepted with hails began pouring down. Many thought that 'Abdu'l-Bahá would not be able to come at the exact appointed time all the way up the hill. The shower continued ceaselessly, but 'Abdu'l-Bahá exactly at 1 P.M. amidst the roaring of thunder came. Round his table sat to dine with him a hundred men, Jew Zoroastrian, Hindoo and Moslem. If one would wish to have an idea of the supper held by the prophet of Nazareth he should attend the dinners, which Carmel is now proud to hold again. This was truly the Lord's dinner. 'Abdu'l-Bahá ate little, but all the time was considering the comfort of others at the table.

### **'Abdu'l-Bahá finds God every-where.**

During these days an incident took place which I can never forget but I can hardly describe the influence it had on me. An English lady asked me to make

the acquaintance of the little English colony at Haifa and she said, "It would be well if you attend the church next Sunday morning.["] I promised her to be present there for I knew that 'Abdu'l-Bah's teaching was, "Associate with all the religionists in perfect harmony and concord". Adjoining to the English church is a school which was closed on account of Easter. I went to the church and I must admit that this was first time I had joined a Christian Service. The service was over, that lady, Mrs. Holbach, a well-known authoress was introducing me just outside the door of the church to some of her friends. Immediately there came a nurse telling Mrs. Holbach that 'Abbás Effendi was with Dr. Coles and wished to see them. They went up but the name of 'Abbás Effendi had a charm for all those who heard it and a gentleman said to the reverend gentleman standing by my side that he had read much of 'Abbás Effendi's sayings in Europe and would like to get an introduction to him. He also said that he had been to the tomb of Bah'u'lláh. The talk was getting interesting when Dr. Coles came running and saying, "who is Mr. Shírází here? 'Abbás Effendi wants him". Mrs. Holbach, it seems, had told him that I was there. I was soon in the Doctor's drawing room which was decorated with many a piece of old curious and Persian carpets and 'Abdu'l-Bah was seated in the centre. Here 'Abdu'l-Bah was quite in a different mood – -most happily talking and smiling. Besides, as a rule, when 'Abdu'l-Bah speaks others do not speak among themselves but here 'Abdu'l-Bah seemed to like that others should speak among themselves while he spoke to those near him. I told him that there was a gentleman below seeking introduction to him. He was sent for and 'Abdu'l-Bah spoke asking me to translate: – "In this world" He said there are two things which are the cause of man's elevation and progress: one is knowledge and the other is religion. Knowledge helps man to discover the reality of all things and to bring about universal happiness. But if knowledge is misused and is made the instrument of warfare, hatred, verbal fight and dissension then ignorance is better than such knowledge. So also religion should teach man to love his fellow man and to associate and co-operate with one another. But if you ever see that religion instead of uniting divides, instead of bringing about love creates hatred and strife then it is better to have no religion than such a religion. No one should for a moment believe that religion is opposed to science and reason. That science which contradicts true religion is no science, and that religion which teaches contrary to what science and reason teach is no religion."

The next day when I was alone with 'Abdu'l-Bah, he said: – "One can worship God everywhere, and if only the Christians would go to Moslem mosques and Jewish Synagogues, similarly if the Mahomedans would go to the church and the Jews to the Mosque all the quarrel between these three great religions would vanish. Toleration leads to association, association to sympathy, sympathy to love and where the light of love enters all the darkness of misunderstandings vanish. I can go to all Temples and worship God."

### **A day at ‘Bahjí.’**

“Bahjí” is an Arabic word, which denotes joy and is the equivalent of Sanskrit anad. This was a name given in the day of Bahá’u’lláh to a place two miles or so outside ‘Akká. and Bahá’u’lláh had a bungalow there in which he used to lodge his guests. But ‘Bahjí’ has also become the last resting place for Bahá’u’lláh himself; and I must give you an idea of a visit to ‘Bahjí’.

The meadows were green and pleasant. A huge rain had fallen the previous night, clouds were still hanging over our heads, and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and forty of us afoot started from ‘Akká station for ‘Bahjí’. We did occasionally pass small Turkish military encampments of the recruits that were being trained. Hardly half the distance had we gone than a huge shower came down and after a few minutes there was bright sun to dry us again. We all gathered in a garden and a small bungalow about fifty yards from the tomb of Bahá’u’lláh; and within an hour our dinner was brought in from ‘Akká – ‘Abdu’l-Bahá himself often cooks such dinners of the pilgrims – . While we were dining he walked round to see that we were all happy and then related to us of how when at Baghdád he had responded to the invitation of an Arab and had walked to his small cottage which was some ten miles away from the city, and though simple the Arab’s treat he had enjoyed it immensely. He then said: – “You must not look at the quality of the thing served at the table, you must always consider whether your host loves you or not. If he loves you and the food served is seasoned with love then there is no better food than that. After dinner Persian tea was served and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá sent for us to gather at the tomb of Bahá’u’lláh. It is situated at the right hand corner of a most lighted square building. In the centre of its compound is a beautiful little garden of fragrant flowers and the paths are covered with Persian carpets of rare types. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá soon entered from a door in the centre with a bottle of rose water in his hands pouring in every one’s extended palms and saying some appropriate words to each recipient. Then in a loud yet thrilling voice addressed Bahá’u’lláh as one who had suffered all his life for the good of humanity, universal peace, and brotherhood. The afternoon was spent by him in distributing sweets and fruits to us, and then sending us in his carriage which would carry nine persons at a time to catch the train.

### **The Last days with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.**

I had began to feel that I had stayed long with him: for few are allowed to stay more than nine days and though I would wish never to leave him, I thought I might express to him my further plans and ask his permission to leave Haifa. On the last two or three occasions that I was with him his talk was mainly on Sindh and he seemed to think that if Bahá’ísm is rightly presented to the people of Sindh they will at once perceive its spirit. He was also so pleased with the people of Sindh that he with this own pen wrote out a beautiful tablet to a Sindhi gentleman who is a learned professor at Karachi. He also advised me to have some literature in Sindhi.



### **Farewell meeting with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.**

It was Monday evening the 27th of April after 21 days of stay with him that I decided to start for Beirut. I was soon called to the presence of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to bid him good-bye. He enquired of me how long I would like to travel in Syria and Egypt. I told him that I would like to spend some two months. He said: “You must go back to India soon: This is not the time for the Bahá’ s to spend their days after long pleasure trips besides the monsoon shall soon set in. You may go by all means to Syria and Egypt but don’t take much time. Wherever you see Bahá’ s greet them on my behalf. Encourage the Bahá’ Students at Beirut to lead all other students both in deeds and in their educational achievements.” Then there was a pause. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá closed his eyes in meditation for some minutes and then spoke saying: – “I have many wounds, I do not speak of them and bear the pain in silence. You know well that I have to bear the brunt of criticisms and to be ready to escape the pitfalls that the Mahomedan, the Christians, and the Jews are constantly digging before me. Above all I have to bear on my shoulder the burden of the sorrows of a rapidly increasing community such as that of the Bahá’ s. Do you know what is the cure of my wounds? It is only when I hear that the Bahá’ s are up and doing and it is with feeling sure that I shall not die before seeing the objects of Bahá’u’lláh attained that some of my wounds are cured.”

Then he got up and like a mother hugging her child took me to his bosom with his cloak around me; and I felt that there could have been no happier moment in my life than that. I have simply attempted to describe these days. But the looks, the feelings, the earnestness and in short, the spirit of the Bahá’ s around ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is indeed very hard for me to describe. Love and brotherhood are words easily heard, but what these words are in reality when they manifest themselves is indeed very hard to conceive as hard as to have a clear conception of the idea of God.

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*1 N A lecture delivered at the Lodge of the Karachi Theosophical Society on the 13th June 1914.*