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## Table Talks

**George T. Winterburn and Mrs. Winterburn**

**February 5th 1904**

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### **Extracts From a Letter After a Visit to ‘Akká**

We arrived at Haifa early in the morning of Friday, February 5th, and, as it was not wise for us to attract any attention, we were not met by any of the believers; but, after getting through the customs, we looked up one of the believers in his little store, and he conducted us to the house of Mírzá Yazdí. He served us tea and by some rapid means let the believers know that we were there. Among others, there came to see us Mishkín-Qalam, the writer, a man seventy years of age, who with love in his eyes said that he had been too unwell to leave his home for some days, but that the news of our arrival had so cheered his heart and strengthened him that he was able to come and bring greetings to us and to express his love for us. This is only one example of the love and kindness shown to us by the believers throughout the Orient. Aḥmad Yazdí, at Port Sa‘íd, and the little circle of believers with him, Muḥammad Yazdí, at Alexandria, — everyone, had only the desire to show us some kindness, to be of use to us, regarding their own business always as the secondary {{p25}} thing, the thing to be laid aside the moment that they have the opportunity of serving another believer in the Cause.

After a visit of an hour or so with these pure souls in Haifa, the carriage was sent for and we left for ‘Akká. The drive is along the shore of the bay and takes about two hours. Starting from Haifa we are facing ‘Akká all of the way. At first, it is just a white city on the water, but, as one gets nearer, the minaret and domes become distinct, and the buildings and walls begin to take shape.

Soon we were there, under the walls, through the gate, up the narrow streets, built for defence; then through the second line of fortifications by means of a second gate, twisting around right-angled corners, with streets just wide enough for the wagon and its three horses, with pedestrians close up to the walls to get out of the way, and so on to the house of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. There loving greetings were awaiting us and many willing hands to carry luggage and parcels for us. We were conducted up the long flight of stone steps to the second story, and shown into the room where ‘Abdu’l-Bahá usually receives His visitors. After a little delay, spent with Mírzá Yúnas Khán, the interpreter, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá came

to us with kindly inquiries as to our health and our journey, with an apology that all that He could offer us was the hospitality of the prison. With kind words and wishes He {{p26}} left us, and we were taken to lunch and then shown our rooms.

We left during the afternoon of Thursday, February 11, and of the days between I hardly know where to begin nor how to tell you about it all. We saw ‘Abdu’l-Bahá every day at luncheon and at dinner, and some days He would come to us for a little while in the morning or for a few minutes in the afternoon, and once He spent a long time with us at night after dinner. At the table, between courses, or when He was not eating, He would talk to us, giving us the teachings, the proofs of this great Manifestation. Always His words came with graciousness, with kindness and encouragement, and over and over again did He impress upon us the necessity of service in the Cause. For myself, I had not those great experiences of emotion that some visitors to His Presence have been seized with; but a great peace fell upon my soul, a tranquility and a surety took possession of me, such as comes nowhere else. That is the pervading atmosphere of the Holy House, a calm security that no cataclysm can shake; a love that encircles one, that is expressed by every person there, the great love of service, of doing something for another, of losing one’s self completely in the absolute love that comes only from God. The love shown us there I can never forget. May God grant that I may be able to carry the message of it to others! The solution of all the {{p27}} world’s misery, of all the social and economic questions of the day, is in that love for which Bahá’ísm stands, which it touches, which is its basis, and which all Bahá’ís should be constantly giving out.

It was not considered wise to permit us to go out very often, nor to visit the homes of any of the believers in ‘Akká, but the friends came to us in the home of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, and from all of them came that great spirit of love and unity.

Of one experience I must tell you. While we were in ‘Akká there was also visiting ‘Abdu’l-Bahá a man from Bombay, one who had been a Zoroastrian. He was accompanied by his little son, a child of perhaps eleven or twelve. He heard that two Americans were there, and he begged to be allowed to see us, because in the sacred book of the Zoroastrians, written thousands of years ago, it was prophesied that a new world should be discovered, and that in the “last days” people from this new world should meet with the people of Zoroaster, that they should meet in the worship of the same God, in the same place. To him it was the literal fulfillment of the prophecy, and he wanted to see us. He was a tall man with a great simplicity of manner, that simplicity that comes of great earnestness. He said: “I can not tell you how happy I am to see you, or what my heart feels to meet you here. My words can not express it, but I would give my life for you.” He added that he should always remember having seen us. Neither shall we ever forget that meeting. {{p28}}

### **In the Presence of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá**

“You are going now to your greatest test,” said a friend, as we drove to the station to begin the trip to ‘Akká, the “White City by the Sea.” The words were unintelligible to me then, and it was not until some weeks later that their real meaning became clear. Scarcely heeding them, in fact, in the happiness of making the start, they were forgotten until their truth came back to me when the visit at ‘Akká was slowly moving into our past.

Six days in ‘Akká! Six days in the presence of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá! Six days in an atmosphere of the most perfect love and peace that it has ever been mine to know. Others may have spent six weeks there, six months. That is nothing, for time is nothing in the presence of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. If a thousand years are but as a day in the sight of the Lord, it may be equally true that a day may be as a thousand years. We lived a lifetime in those six days. The outside world disappeared. The past had never been. There was no future. It was as if the moment in that Presence were all of life, and that it was eternal. “Prayer, peace, {{p29}} glory, and praise” enveloped us from the moment that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá took our hands in His in a welcoming grasp until He said, “Go back and serve!” and we left His physical presence perhaps forever in this world.

Before starting on our journey I had feared being overwhelmed with sadness at the sight of the imprisonment of our Beloved Master; so I had prayed earnestly that I might be enabled to look into His dear face with smiles only. Once in ‘Akká the prayer was as completely forgotten as if it had never been uttered, but I found myself wondering at the readiness with which I smiled into those eyes that always smiled back at me in tender love. It was not until ‘Akká was fading into the distance beyond the blue waters of the Mediterranean, that I remembered my prayer and marveled at its complete realization.

The entrance into the Holy Presence came as simply and naturally as into that of some dear friend. We wondered somewhat, my husband and I, for we had thought it impossible to meet Him whom our hearts so revered and loved without being overcome with emotion. Hours passed, we met Him face to face, felt the touch of His hands, basked in the light of His smile, and still we had not been overcome by any mighty wave of irresistible feeling; and still we wondered. Days passed. The life in ‘Akká had received us, had taken us into its loving arms, and still we were wondering when and how was to {{p30}} come that mighty sweep of power. It did not come. The dominance of the Lord spoke to us only through His love, everywhere triumphant. The influence of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá expressed itself in the peace around us that was always unbroken. His wisdom was manifest in the reverence of the gray-haired men who bowed before its decisions in unquestioning acceptance. The efficiency of His teachings was illustrated in the eagerness of those who had been Zoroastrians, Muḥammadans, or Christians to all live together there in perfect love and unity, under His sheltering care; and in their determination to carry with them to the ends of the world the same peace and harmony that wrapped them in its folds in that

dreary, but glorious, little prison city, ‘Akká.

The day of departure came. The doors of the home of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá closed upon us. The grim walls and the defiant gates of the crumbling old city of the Crusaders were behind us. The world and the service upon which we had been sent were before us. Slowly driving away, two questions perplexed us: What was the “greatest test” to which we had been subjected? We had been unconscious of it. Why had we not felt some overwhelming conviction of the sanctity of that Presence in which we had spent six such bliss-filled days?

In a moment we almost laughed at our simplicity in asking ourselves the latter. What experience could have been more overwhelming {{p31}} in its conviction than the steadily cumulating proof of those six days? For now we realized, as it had been impossible to understand while still in the presence of our Beloved Lord, that every hour, every interview with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, every observation of the life around us, had brought conviction to the reason, to the judgment, to the emotions, to the whole mental, moral, and spiritual nature, that this was indeed the Messenger of the Lord for whom we searched, sent to show the world the way into life eternal. We realized at last that when we first entered His presence so quietly, it was as if we had been taken gently up by the first swell of a great tidal wave, raised so tenderly that we had been scarcely conscious of the uplift; we had been carried on and on, higher and higher, until, as the tidal wave may sweep over coast, rocks, and even cities, we had been carried high over all worldly consciousness, and it had become to us as if the world were not. As this realization came to us, we prayed that we might never again be upon that lower spiritual level where we had been when that wave lifted us and bore us so high into the realms of absolute, common-sense, unquestioning conviction. “By their works ye shall know them,” Christ said would be the final proof of the Manifestation of God in the last days, and it was through the works of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and of those who serve Him that we had attained to the heights of our conviction of the truth of this Manifestation of God. {{p32}}

There still remained the question, What had been our “greatest test?” It had sunk into insignificance. That incorporation of the living spirit of God in a human body could never be a stumbling block now to our steps. We had met a man, it is true, a man with all the needs and elements of humanity; but it had been to realize how perfect an instrument of the Lord the human body may become. How else could God have spoken to us so forcibly as through those human lips that let fall divine wisdom? As through those human eyes, whose glances bore into one’s soul a conception of the love and tenderness of God? As by that human tongue that never uttered a harsh or unkind word? As through that stately form, unbowed by all the grievances of the world or by the sufferings of long years of prison life and deprivation? Surely, if man is the greatest work of God, man must also be the most perfect messenger of God to man.

There had been but six days in ‘Akká; but the human world was behind us, before us was the world of God. They were separated by a conception of timeless eternity made comprehensible to us by the visit in the presence of the Master.