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## the Ascension

**William H. Hoar**

**1900**

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The story of my journey to ‘Akká would be incomplete, if I did not say a word about the manner in which the anniversary of the Ascension of the Manifestation is observed.

During this day no Bahá’í eats from morning until evening. An early breakfast is taken and the fast is not broken until after sundown.

In the afternoon of this day we went to the little Rest House erected by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, located near the Holy Tomb. Shortly after we saw, coming down the road, a cavalcade of soldiers and others, and in their midst rode ‘Abdu’l-Bahá reined in His little white Ass, at the gate of house, a young Turkish Officer dismounting from his horse, went to the side of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and falling to his knee, assisted Him to alight, after which he kissed His hand and remounted his horse. This devotion and attention to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was general. Everyone seemed to love Him. A Turkish gendarme is sent with Him whenever He goes for His protection not as a guard. He was at that time allowed absolute freedom; but so careful were the authorities of His welfare, that wherever He went, gendarme accompanied Him.

No Bahá’í sleeps during the night following this day. At Sundown a Feast is prepared, consisting of bread, fruit, tea and a fresh killed sheep. This meal is served by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s own hands. His guests are seated about the table and He Himself goes serving, first one and then another, not neglecting even the humble Turkish soldier who was His attendant and who loved Him, After the followers had eaten ‘Abdu’l-Bahá sat down and received food from their hands. After this Tea is served, and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá retires to the little upper room in the rest house before mentioned, and spends the time in meditation and prayer, frequently sending for one follower and then another for an interview.

Toward Midnight, He sent for me, and the experiences and emotions of the few moments spent with Him in the little upper room at Midnight, I can never describe or forget. After an interview, I returned to the other, and sharply at midnight, a procession was formed and with slow and reverential step marched to the Holy Tomb. Each one was provided with two candles which he carried in either hand. The Uncle of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, of whom I have already spoken, the brother of Bahá’u’lláh and myself were requested to head the procession. At

the word from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá we started, and as we went up the slope and came to the foot of the Hill on which the Tomb is located and then arrived at the top of the hill, I looked back and the scene in the soft moonlight and at that hour, of that band of devoted men, each possessed, I believe of the spirit of a martyr, was strange indeed, and produced in me a profound impression, such as I can never forget.

Arriving at the Tomb, some of the brothers, melted the wax from the candles, and stood them on the railings surrounding the Garden while others thrust their candles in the earth, after which they gathered around the little garden, seated on the earth in Oriental fashion, to await the coming of the dawn. The thoughtfulness of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá showed itself in my case, for knowing that I was an Occidental and unused to sitting as our Oriental brothers do, I was provided with a chair placed on a platform raised just above the ground and next to the Tomb. Then began the reading and chanting of the Tablets, first by one and then another, and then by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá Himself, until the dawn. The celebration of this day of the Ascension lasts from Dawn to Dawn, and ends with this ceremony at the Tomb.

After the chanting of a Tablet by one of the Brothers, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá sent word to me that He would like to have me sing one of the Christian Hymns. He had heard me, I presume, in my room humming a tune now and then, and thinking I could sing, asked me to sing a Hymn. You can refuse ‘Abdu’l-Bahá nothing, and whether I could sing or not, I would certainly made the effort in difference to His request. I sang for Him that grand old Episcopal Hymn: — “Weary of life, and burden with my sin, I look at heaven and long to enter in; But there no evil thing can find a home, and yet I hear a voice that bids me come.”

I sang several verses of this Hymn, and whether it was the influence of the scene or the cadence of my voice, different from what they were accustomed to, it affected them in such a way that many were sobbing, and when I had finished my Hymn, it seemed that all were weeping.

This night wore away until the coming of the dawn, when with a benediction and blessing from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, we were dismissed.

I had not been told what this occasion was, but noticing that something unusual was transpiring, I asked Amín about it, and he told me that it was the Anniversary of the Ascension of the Manifestation (Bahá’u’lláh) and how it was observed. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá doubtless thinking that the ceremonies of the day would be irksome to me, had not told me about it, but I, learning from Amín what was transpiring, asked ‘Abdu’l-Bahá if I might not participate in the proceedings of the day. He kindly consented; but fearing that I would not be able to last the night out, He had provided a place to which I might retire and sleep; but I disappointed them, showing as much endurance as any, without apparent effort, while we were sitting in the garden along towards midnight, Kermani, who is an exceedingly humorous character, was chaffing me about my ability to sit the night out; I assured him that I could. Once, after a lull in our conversation, I

chanced to look at Kermani, and noticed that his noble head was bowing and falling, and finally it sunk upon his breast in sleep. I watched him for a moment or so and then touched him upon the knee. Upon his awakening, I said to him, through Amín, ‘Could ye not watch with me, one hour?’ I shall never forget the benign look, he bent upon me as he said; — ‘O my brother, I have been watching these Seventy years’. My heart was touched for a moment I could say nothing. When I had recovered myself, I raised Prayer to heaven, that after Seventy years, I might be able to say as devotedly and truly that I had been watching all the years.

This was Thursday, the following Monday I was to take ship to Haifa on my return journey. Before my return, and in this interval ‘Abdu’l-Bahá graciously accorded me an interview in which I received His blessings and instructions to go back to my people and tell them of the things that I have seen and heard in that land.