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Various Impressions of 'Abdu'l-Bahá

Alma Albertson

1907, 1908, 1909, 1910

... simplicity which any child could comprehend; yet his symbols and metaphors, drawn always from Nature, embodied that essence of wisdom and truth which baffles the learned and great.”

'Abdu'l-Bahá always answered all questions, however trivial, with the utmost courtesy and responded genially to every subject of conversation; yet we noticed that he gave the most commonplace subject a higher significance, and transformed material things into spiritual realities. If anyone mentioned that the food was delicious, he would say, “That is because your heart is full of love; when the heart is filled with love everything seems beautiful and delightful to us.”

A writer in 1907 [ed. Agnew] told of the table talks at 'Akká. 1907 'Abdu'l-Bahá spoke of the Persian dishes, which he said are simple but he hoped the spiritual dishes may be powerful. “The strength or power of the physical food is only for one night, but the power of the spiritual food strengthens and sustains us throughout eternity.

Often he spoke of the simple dishes, “This kind of food is not Persian. It is European, except that there is one Persian dish rice. At first there were no potatoes in Persia. This is something new with the Persians – imported from Europe. At first the Persians did not take kindly to the potato, saying it was an apple of Europe because of their fanaticism and because of the French name, pomme de terre. But now whenever they mention names all became glad and happy. How different it is that it has become so. See and realize the power of Bahá'u'lláh, what he has done.”

During dinner 'Abdu'l-Bahá followed the Persian custom and ate entirely with his fingers. He said, “In the East there are many peoples who never use a knife and fork. To eat with their fingers is the custom among them just as the Western nations have their own particular customs. We must each view with respect the customs of the other.” Then he referred to the food spiritual which requires neither knife nor fork, but brings peace and content.

“I notice you do not say Grace or thanksgiving before meals as is the custom in our country, Mrs. L—, a pilgrim, said to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, who replied that his

heart was always in a state of thanksgiving, and so often a Grace is said with the lips merely, while the hearts are far from thanksgiving.

Later he revealed this Grace for American Bahá'ís, now in general use: "O My God, Make Thy Beauty to be my food and let Thy Presence be my drink: let my trust be in Thy will, and my deeds according to Thy command: let my service be acceptable to Thee, and my action a praise to Thee: let my help come only from Thee, and ordain my home to be Thy Mansion, boundless and holy.

"Thou art the Precious, the Everpresent, the Loving." In the Master's home the children chanted the 'Holy Tablets' each morning early, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá drank his tea and sat looking out of the window.

The families had three meals a day, but 'Abdu'l-Bahá as a rule ate only one, and that very simple. On some occasions, if regime, 'Abdu'l-Bahá was visibly in the greatest spiritual strength and power, in strong contrast with the fear and terror of his followers. This situation was shortly followed by the downfall of the government that for forty years had held 'Abdu'l-Bahá a prisoner.

'Abdu'l-Bahá describes the schemes of the committee of investigation sent from Constantinople by the old despotic government under Sulţán 'Abdu'l-Ĥamíd to make away with him and to destroy the Cause.

4 - Last Days of the Imprisonment

To a journalist in London in September, 1911, 'Abdu'l-Bahá told the story of his last days of imprisonment, about "One year before the Turkish Sulţán 'Abdu'l-Ĥamíd was dethroned, he sent an extremely overbearing, treacherous and insulting committee of investigation. The chairman was one of the governor's staff, Arif Bey, and with him were three army commanders varying in rank.

"Immediately upon his arrival, Arif Bey proceeded to denounce me and tried to get proof strong enough to warrant sending me to Fezan, or throwing me into the sea. Fezan is a Caravan station on the boundary of Tripoli where, there are no houses and no water. It is a month's journey by camel route from 'Akká.

"The committee twice sent for me to hear what I had to say in my own defence and twice I sent back word: 'I know your purpose I have nothing to say.'

"This so infuriated Arif Bey that he declared he would return to Constantinople and bring an order from the Sulţán to have me hanged at the gate of 'Akká, He and his committee set sail with their report containing the following accusations: 'Abdu'l-Bahá is establishing a new nation of which he is to be the king; 'Abdu'l-Bahá is uplifting the banner of a new religion; 'Abdu'l-Bahá has built or caused to be built fortifications in Haifa, a neighboring village, and is buying up all the surrounding lands.'

An Italian ship about this time was sent by order of the Italian Consul, in order that 'Abdu'l-Bahá might escape. It waited three days in the harbor, and the

Bahá'ís implored him to go, but 'Abdu'l-Bahá said 'The Báb did not run away; Bahá'u'lláh did not run away; I shall not run away.'

It was shortly after this that the Young Turks became supreme, and all political prisoners of the Ottoman Empire were set free. 'Abdu'l-Ḥamíd went into prison as 'Abdu'l-Bahá came out, and Arif Bey was shot with three bullets, the general was exiled, the next in rank died, and the third escaped to Cairo where he was befriended by Bahá'ís.

In 1903, many pilgrims from various parts of Persia, India, and America came over to Egypt, where they remained for two months expecting to receive permission to come to 'Akká; but on account of the restless and agitated condition of the city, 'Abdu'l-Bahá sent them word to return to their respective countries.

One remarkable event that took place in the time of the trouble, however, was the performance of the marriage ceremony uniting Mírzá Anayát'u'lláh and Zola Khánúm. Mírzá Anayát'u'lláh was a brother of Mírzá Amín and Zia Khánúm was descendant the "King of the Martyrs" on the mother's side and of the "Beloved of the Martyrs" on the father's side. This marriage was contemplated; and the Master performed it on a night when nothing but disaster was expected. He said, "When in trouble we shall have our marriage, for in time of trouble do we Bahá'ís have our peace."

Several months later things had so changed as to make the previous time seem to have been in a former decade. 'Abdu'l-Bahá was free. The utmost liberty existed.

In a letter from Haifa, July [?], 1908, a Persian writer states: "Let me give you, O Friends, the greatest news of this day, the most glorious tidings now current in the Holy Land. I refer to an official proclamation Issued in Constantinople by the will of His Majesty, the Sultán, 'Abdu'l-Ḥamíd, that the Crown has granted the Ottoman Empire a constitution and that all the exiles and prisoners in 'Akká, as well as in other fortresses and penal towns are free. How incredible this sounds to the ears of those who for years have been here! And yet such was the burden of an official telegraphic message sent from Stamboul, or Constantinople, to the Governor, the Mulasherif of 'Akká.

"How does this seem to you? Yesterday a few of the old exiles of 'Akká, Muḥammadan gentlemen, formerly well known officials in the Turkish regime and who for their desire for constitutionalism were in prison, were now free. They came to Haifa and sailed for their respective homes. They were such a happy group.

"The Beloved, 'Abdu'l-Bahá (roohi fedah!), went to the Ridván for the first time after seven years' confinement. My dear father was at 'Akká yesterday and he was in the Lord's company. And such a great joy it was we are expecting hopefully the presence of the Beloved here in a few days."

When the new Sultán liberated the prisoners from the dungeon, he ordered them not to leave 'Akká. Their conduct had been so perfect that for more than forty years no judge had to intervene for them in any legal disputes.

Of the new Sultán, the Master said: “His Imperial Majesty, the Sultán ‘Abdu’l-Ḥamíd than, hath exercised the utmost justice toward ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. All the friends must pray from their hearts in behalf of their Imperial Majesties the Padeshah of the Ottomans and the Sháh of Persia.

5 – ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has New Freedom

After his release from confinement in the fortress of ‘Akká, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá made few changes in his daily life, but many more of his followers could visit him than formerly, consequently his duties and labors increased. He gave up his residence in ‘Akká, and lived for some months in the neighboring town of Haifa.

Someone had said to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “When the revolution comes in Turkey suppose you will leave these parts and go out into the world.”

‘Abdu’l-Bahá called attention to the canary bird in a cage across the room. “That canary,” he said, “knows no other home than the cage. If you open the door will fly out. He’ll fly around the room, but he will return to his cage.

Like the bird ‘Abdu’l-Bahá left his prison cage for a time, but eventually he returned to the Holy Land.

On January 26, 1909 the Military General, the mayor, the judges, and prominent men of ‘Akká came to his house for a banquet. Such a thing had never occurred before although separately each had honoured him and even, sought his advice and counsels.

Bahá’í pilgrims were not permitted to go around the town freely but must observe great privacy in coming in, and every precaution was necessary still to avoid the ever-alert spies and guards.

In 1910 it was reported that the Ottoman officials had opened two large Gateways through the thick, solid and ancient walls of the old fort of ‘Akká. Both led out on the green plain of Bahjí, where the Holy Tomb is located. One of these gateways is situated back of the old house of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, where one often walked, during the time of his confinement, to the fortress. Official men, architects and masons came from Constantinople for the express purpose of planning a beautiful city outside of the old prison walls, attributed to the influence of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.

“You knew it doesn’t make any difference what happens to one in the physical world,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá said, in 1920, “I was a prisoner in a Turkish prison for forty years.” Then he told how he slept upon the ground or upon the stone floor, how he was starved and chained and put into dungeons. “And yet,” he said, every day when I awoke in the morning I praised God that another day was before me in which I could serve Him in His prison. And every night when I lay down on the stone floor of the prison I thanked God that He had allowed me to serve His Kingdom one more day in His prison.”

‘Abdu’l-Bahá was anxious that in every possible way the believers in the East and the West should unite, that communication should increase and that an interchange of ideas should ensue in order that all might profit thereby and be helped.

6 – Pilgrims’ Visits after his Release

A pilgrim visitor, Mrs. Brittingham in 1909 recorded, “Day and night he is busy. Night after night while we were there, and he had met with and blessed us around his table (material and spiritual), he went from us to the public reception room to meet the various men of importance of ‘Akká who visited him, and Whom he frequently also entertained. While we were there, five Zoroastrians from India and several Egyptian pilgrims came. On Fridays and on Sundays (the Musl’im and the Christian holy days) many visit him through the day. On Friday morning we saw that wonderful sight of the poor and needy about his door, fed and cared for and. Comforted.

Dr. Moody wrote in the same year, “Mírzá Munír Morza Mahram, the aged cousin of The Báb and three vietny[?] Zoroastrians were among the friends who welcomed us in the courtyard.

Monever Khánúm came to us very soon and chatted with us for three-quarters of an hour. She asked for any of the former pilgrims and said that all were eager to hear of the progress of the Mashriqu’l-Adhkár (Temple) in America. In appearance she was just what I had pictured. Her wonderful eyes, her smile, were beautiful. So did Rúḥá Khánúm’s eyes seem to look into your heart also. The Greatest Holy Leaf (sister of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá) powerfully impressed one.”

It is the time of the fast of Ramaḍán and most of the household were keeping it, but dinner as served for us, a heap of fragrant jasmine blossoms lying beside each plate. We had this meal by ourselves.”

Of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá she said, “He seemed to float out of the room. His carriage was superb, the stately majesty of simplicity and naturalness. The light of the eyes and the love expressed in the face were so brilliant that it was only by favor of a flood of tears that I could continue to look into them.”

“When I told him of the thirty lost supplications, regretting the disappointment to each of the dear friends who had written,” Dr. Moody continued, “with a loving smile he said: “Tell them it is just the same as if they were all received. They are all accepted and you are favored to have been their messenger. Again I spoke of all the love that was sent and which I now laid at his dear feet. He answered: “You are a worthy messenger, and he arose and placed His hands on my shoulders and drew me to his side. I asked if I could come again in the future, and he replied, ‘Yes, and I only send you away so soon because the Black Sea gets cold and stormy soon and it is for your good that you are to go tomorrow, since the steamer leaves next day, but you will never be separated from me.”

Another woman pilgrim reported in 1909, “There were present the Greatest Holy

Leaf, the Mother Monever Khánúm, Zia Khánúm, and Túba Khánúm, and one by one the grandchildren came in until at last I had met and kissed and loved all the little ones, nine in all. It was a wonderful gathering to me. When T. arose from the floor I sat upon the divan, and dear Monever Khánúm sat with her arm around me as I held Botha Khánúm's beautiful little baby boy.

Monever Khánúm asked if I had made the white waist that I wore and I told her that I was like most of my Bahá'í sisters at home as I made my own clothes, did my own house work, etc., and yet we were all working hard for the Cause."

"The mother said: 'That is the life of a true Bahá'í, always busy. When we love the Blessed Perfection and turn our faces to him every act may become worship. When you do your housework, your cooking and cleaning, you are making a comfortable and pleasant home. Bahá'u'lláh had said that the home must be clean and orderly to be harmonious. To sit and read the Words all day and let the home duties go is contrary to the Blessed Perfection's commands. A few words held in the heart daily, and loving service, doing, each duty well, is best. Emma[?] religious sects of the East think they cannot worship God unless they are alone in the silence – they must concentrate. They are dreamers and not doers. But Bahá'u'lláh says we must be able to enter into the Holy Temple in our hearts where all is still at all times and under all circumstances, amid discord and confusion. When we are doing our simple duties it is then that the Holy Spirit can teach us if we have only the Love of God in our hearts."

The visitor told them of the conditions under which she had written most of her poems and songs, when in the midst of house work, especially when washing dishes (that which she liked least to do).

The mother said: 'That is as Bahá'u'lláh commands. The East has much to learn from the West. It must learn this great lesson, that true worship is as well as prayers and praise. Each organ of our body must be in order and perform its functions, must be properly used if we would have a healthy body. So it is with the spiritual faculties, they must be all developed."

In 1910 Dr. wrote:

"Two nights before 'Abdu'l-Bahá left, I witnessed for the first time in my life what the Divine Wrath is. I could understand how the Psalmist could sing, "Who can stand in the Day of His Wrath?" One of the Náqíqín had been actively trying to poison the minds of the Believers and had openly boasted of great services he rendered to the Blessed Perfection. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá spoke of this his voice became like thunder and his face like lightning, and I trembled and felt that the pillars of the world must be shaken. We have heard how the meek and gentle Christ spoke in His Wrath and denounced the Pharisees. So did. 'Abdu'l-Bahá speak of this traitor to the Cause. 'How dare he speak of serving the Blessed Perfection,' 'Abdu'l-Bahá cried, 'That Holy One Who served us, Who lay in chains in a dungeon for us, Who was crucified every day of His life for us when

I was a child I entered the dungeon – how dark and terrible it was and how the chains cut into the Blessed neck.’ ”

‘Abdu’l-Bahá said these last words with a sob in his voice that made our hearts break. Then he continued in a voice of thunder. “If the Blessed Perfection were present could this man stand before Him and say that he had served Him? The Blessed Perfection would have driven him from His presence at once serve Him! If we sacrifice a thousand lives in his path it is not enough.”

7 – ‘Abdu’l-Bahá Goes to Egypt

About two years after the revolution in Turkey which brought his freedom from prison confinement in ‘Akká, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in November, 1910, went down Into Egypt. Some friends of the Cause saw a prophetic fulfilment in this journey: “Out of Egypt have I ...