



Phelps, like so many others, fell in love with 'Abdu'l-Baha. Even when understanding failed him, his heart saw the truth, and he reported it as best he could. He gives us brief but memorable sketches of the Master:

A door opens and a man comes out. He is of middle stature, strongly built, He wears flowing light-coloured robes, On his head is a light buff fez with a white cloth -wound about it. He is perhaps sixty years of age, His long grey hair rests on his shoulders. His forehead is broad, full, and high, his nose slightly aquiline, his moustaches and beard, the latter full though not heavy, nearly white. His eyes are grey and blue, large, and both soft and penetrating. His bearing is simple, but there is a grace, dignity, and even majesty about his movements. He passes through the crowd, and as he goes utters words of salutation. We do not understand them, but we see the benignity and the kindness of his countenance.[2]

Phelps tells of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's love of mankind, of His charity, of His tolerance, generosity, and unfailing kindness. We read of a poor Afghan who for years accepted without thanks food and clothing given by the Master until one day he came to the Master's door and cried: "For twenty-four years I have done evil to you, for twenty-four years you have done- good to me. Now I know that I have been in the wrong." [3] We read of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's refusing to take a private carriage and riding to Haifa in a stage-coach to the surprise of the driver. Upon arrival, while the Master was still in the coach, he was approached by a fisherwoman who had caught nothing that day and had to go home to a hungry family. "He gave her five francs, and turning to the stage driver said: You now see the reason why I would not take a private carriage. Why should I ride in luxury when so many are starving?" [4]

The most valuable portion of the book is the story of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's life told by His sister, Bahiyih Khanum, known to the Baha'is as the Greatest Holy Leaf. Those eighty odd pages of narrative are the book's marrow and its justification. Bahiyih Khanum is simple and direct:

"My brother, Abbas Effendi, now our Lord, was born in Teheran in the spring of 1844, at midnight following the day upon which, in the evening, the Bab made his declaration. I was born three years later. He was therefore eight and I five, when in August, 1852, the attempt was made upon the life of the Shah of Persia by a young Babi, who through ungoverned enthusiasm had lost his mental balance. The events following this attempt are vividly impressed upon my mind. My mother, Abbas Effendi, myself, and my younger brother, then a babe, were at the time in Teheran. My father was temporarily in the country." [5]

When Phelps reports his own observations and impressions, they ring true. As a guide to the Teachings, however, he is quite unreliable. He claims, for instance, that "The body of doctrine which Beha'ism teaches, is not put forward in any sense or particular as new, but as a unification and synthesis of what is best and highest in all other religions." [6] Though the Baha'i Faith unifies and fulfills the great religions of the past, it does not synthesize. Moreover, the very basis on which its openness to and its acceptance of other

religions rests - the concepts of progressive revelation and of the relativity of religious truth - is strikingly novel. Today one would not read Phelps to understand the Baha'i Faith, but one is still moved by the record of his encounter with the Master.

HOWARD COLBY IVES, a onetime pastor of a Unitarian Church in New Jersey, set himself a more modest task than Phelps and achieved a much greater success. Ives did not attempt a biography of 'Abdu'l-Bahá or a detailed exposition of the Teachings. His is a tale of a personal search. A "modern" Christian, Howard Colby Ives had lost faith in many of the old certainties of his religion, He was not even certain that anyone could know the meaning of the words of Christ. In the home of Mr. and Mrs. Kinney on Riverside Drive in New York he heard 'Abdu'l-Bahá interpret those words in a way which differed sharply from accepted doctrine. Skeptical and impatient with the Master's assurance, he cried out, "That I cannot believe." Ives expected a rebuke. Instead, He looked at me a long moment before He spoke. His calm, beautiful eyes searched my soul with such love and understanding that all my momentary heat evaporated. He smiled as winningly as a lover smiles upon his beloved, and the arms of His spirit seemed to embrace me as He said softly that I should try my way and He would try His.

It was as though a cool hand had been laid upon a fevered brow, as though a cup of nectar had been held to parched lips; as though a key had unlocked my hard bolted, crusted and rusted heart. The tears started and my voice trembled, "I'm sorry," I murmured.[7]

Ives understood then that 'Abdu'l-Baha spoke to the soul. His logic was not the logic of the schoolman, ... His slightest association with a soul was shot through with an illuminating radiance which lifted the hearer to a higher plane of consciousness."[8]

Daily 'Abdu'l-Baha demonstrated to this new-found disciple the all-encompassing nature of His love. The Master lived among men, yet He transcended their limitations and rose far above their prejudices. In America where the rot of racism had eaten deep even to man's subconscious, He taught lessons of unity. A group of boys from the Bowery came to see 'Abdu'l-Bahá. The last youngster to enter the room was about thirteen years old.

He was quite dark and, being the only boy of his race among them, he evidently feared that he might not be welcome. When 'Abdu'l-Baha saw him His face lighted up with a heavenly smile. He raised His hand with a gesture of princely welcome and exclaimed in a loud voice so that none could fail to hear; that here was a black rose.

This significant incident had given to the whole occasion a new complexion. The atmosphere of the room seemed now charged with subtle vibrations felt by every soul...To the few of the friends in the room the scene brought visions of a new world in which every soul would be recognized and treated as a child of God.[9]

Gradually Ives himself underwent a transformation. The Master challenged him to

rise above his limitations and to follow Him in the service of God and humanity. 'Abdu'l-Baha at a wedding, 'Abdu'l-Baha speaking of peace in a Unitarian Church, 'Abdu'l-Baha traveling coast to coast, 'Abdu'l-Bahá patiently listening to others -- and in His every word, His every gesture a profound lesson. Ives was beginning to reflect the spirit of love and servitude. He discovered in himself a strength of which he had not even been aware.

When one sees with his own eyes human souls awakened, hearts touched with a divine afflatus, lives deeply affected ... by the Words taken from the prayers and explanations of these Divine Ones, and applied like a soothing ointment to the wounds of the soul, to doubt the Spirit from which they emanated would have been to doubt all the prophets of the past; would have been to cast discredit on the Sermon on the Mount .... "If this is not of God," I said to myself, "then there is no foundation for faith in God. I would rather be wrong with this great Faith than seemingly right with all the doubters and cavillers in the world." From the very depths of my being there came the cry as uttered by the firm believers of old: "My Lord and my God!"[10]

Portals to Freedom "covers" a minute segment of 'Abdu'l-Baha's life. It recounts some fascinating stories and anecdotes of the days the Master spent on the East coast. The value of the book, however, lies not in what it chronicles but in what it points to: 'Abdu'l-Baha, emerging from forty years of prison and exile, a victim of bigotry and despotism, opening to a Unitarian minister from New Jersey the portals to freedom.

MIRZA MAHMUD-I-ZARQANI, a learned Persian gentleman who accompanied 'Abdu'l-Bahá on His historic travels in Europe and America, left posterity a precious record in two large volumes that constitute a full chronicle. Mirza Mahmud was well prepared for his task. He had traveled and taught in the company of one of the greatest teachers of the Faith, Haji Mirza Haydar 'Ali. On 'Abdu'l-Bahá's request he visited India, learned Urdu, and was admired for his learning as Hakim Mahmud-i-Irani. Later the Master invited him to join the small group of secretaries and interpreters who accompanied 'Abdu'l-Bahá on His Western travels. Mirza Mahmud kept copious notes, recording everything he saw and heard. Upon returning to Haifa, he was urged by Haji Mirza Haydar 'Ali to rework his notes into a book. The result was the *Badayi-ul-Athar*, (The Wondrous Annals), The first volume was published in Bombay in 1914, the second in 1921.

'Abdu'l-Baha came to America on the invitation of the American Baha'is. Arriving in New York in April 1912, he visited Washington, D.C., and many other cities, among them Cleveland, Pittsburgh, Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia, Minneapolis, Denver, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. He sailed from New York aboard the *Celtic* on December 5. In Britain he visited Liverpool, London, Bristol. On the continent he stopped in Paris, Vienna, Budapest, Stuttgart, and Marseilles. Mirza Mahmud was present at most of the meetings, parties, interviews, dinners, and private conversations. His notes contain the texts of entire speeches taken down verbatim and later read and approved by the Master.

Thus the book has exceptional value. Having been authenticated by 'Abdu'l-Bahá Himself, it transcends the category of private memoirs and enters the realm of Bahá'í literature as a primary source of first importance.

Badayi-ul-Athar is a chronicle. (Some excerpts from it have long circulated among American Baha'is under the title of "Mahmud's Diary.") It does not analyze - it reports, faithfully and in detail. The very nature of a chronicle makes a summary impossible. Every day brings a new episode, often seemingly unconnected with the previous ones, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá and His entourage travel the length and breadth of the continent.

In New Jersey a clergyman asked Him to write a few words in an album. He obliged and penned a beautiful prayer which Mirza Mahmud instantly copied. At Stanford University He spoke to nearly two thousand students and faculty and received a standing ovation. In Nebraska he visited the wife of William Jennings Bryan, the latter being absent, campaigning for Woodrow Wilson. On another occasion 'Abdu'l-Bahá commented on presidential elections, saying that the man worthy of the presidency should have no ambition to surpass others but should rather feel that he has no strength to carry such a great burden. If the purpose of the office is the good of the public, the president ought to be an altruist, and, if he is an egoist, his election is harmful to the nation.

At Ella Cooper's home in Oakland He reminisced about the days of Baghdad and said that, when Baha'u'llah disappeared one day (retreating into the Kurdish mountains) a certain Aqa Abu'l-Qasim-i-Hamadani, a fellow exile, also disappeared. Later he was robbed and killed by some horsemen on the road. The news reached Baghdad. When his will was read, it was discovered that he had bequeathed his worldly possessions to a Darvish Muhammad. Those who knew how close Abu'l-i-Qasim had been to Baha'u'llah concluded that Darvish Muhammad must be Baha'u'llah and that He must be somewhere in the area of Sulaymaniyih. Friends were sent to seek out Bahá'u'lláh and beg Him to return to Baghdad.

Once, seeing a man selling college pennants, 'Abdu'l-Bahá asked for the banner of universal peace so that the world could march under it.

Shortly before He departed from the United States, a number of Baha'is in New York brought 'Abdu'l-Bahá gifts of jewels for His family. Previously He had refused all presents, Now, however, He expressed His gratitude. "You have brought presents for members of my household. These are most acceptable. But better than these are the gifts of divine love which are preserved in the treasuries of the hearts." Jewels, He continued, must be put in boxes on shelves and will eventually be scattered. The gifts of love will remain, and it is these that He will take back to His family. His household had no use for diamond rings and rubies. He had accepted the gifts but would leave the jewels in America to be sold and the money to be given for the construction of the temple in Chicago. When the friends continued to insist that He take the jewels to His Family, He said that He wanted a gift "that would remain in the World of the eternal and a jewel that has to do with the treasury of the hearts. It is

better thus." [11]

In Paris while speaking of world peace, 'Abdu'l-Bahá said that every good action must be motivated by a spiritual force. Mere knowledge of good and evil is insufficient. One may know the good but be dominated by passion or self-interest and do evil. When the representatives of the various nations met at the Hague and made speeches about peace, 'Abdu'l-Bahá compared them to wine merchants who talk about the evils of drinking and go on selling wine.

Everywhere 'Abdu'l-Bahá met numbers of famous people, including Theodore Roosevelt, Andrew Carnegie, and Alexander Graham Bell. He also met three outstanding Orientalists, Edward G. Browne, Ignatius Goldziher, and Arminius Vambery.

From Mirza Mahmud's unhurried narrative there emerges the panorama of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's triumphal tour of the West. Here indeed is a rich record of that annus mirabilis when the Baha'i Faith made its first impact upon the Christian world. No future historian will be able to ignore The Wondrous Annals. One may only wish that they might appear in a good English translation before long.

HABIB MU'AYYAD came to Haifa in 1907 and stayed there and in Beirut for several years. 'Abdu'l-Bahá sent him to medical school and took personal interest in his progress. Living close to the Master, Dr. Mu'ayyad felt the daily rhythms of His life, noted down details of His activities, and recorded the comings and goings of pilgrims, visitors, and guests. More personal and less systematic than Mirza Mahmud's great chronicle, Habib's Memoirs are full of fascinating observations.

He describes the construction of the Eastern pilgrims' house on Mt. Carmel and tells of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's solicitude for the comfort of the guests. He reports meeting the outstanding Baha'i teachers, the scholarly Mirza Abu'l Fadl, and the angelic Haji Mirza Haydar 'Ali. He tells how food was prepared for the pilgrims and how the Master ate with them.

The pilgrims played an important role in the life of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, especially after the Turkish revolution of 1908, when restrictions were removed and the Baha'i world gained a relatively free access to Akka and Haifa. All pilgrims and visitors, Dr. Mu'ayyad writes, asked questions but no two questions were alike. Some visitors were materialists, others religious bigots. Some were aflame with patriotism, others were proponents of the brotherhood of man. Some were Asian, others European. Some spoke of women's liberation, others defended female slavery and polygamy. Some spoke of the proletariat and communism, some of literature and poetry, some of the hadith, [12] some of history and philosophy. Arabs talked of Arab independence. Jews talked of the future of Palestine. Hundreds of persons laid before Him their problems. All left satisfied, full of love and joy, their tongues praising Him.

The poor could always count on 'Abdu'l-Bahá's help, He gave even to professional beggars whom He knew by name. Frequently He left His house alone

early in the morning to visit the poor in their homes. Dr. Mu'ayyad here repeated the story of the Afghan whom the Master befriended and who remained hostile for a long time but was finally won over.

Dr. Mu'ayyad reports 'Abdu'l-Bahá's conversations with visitors and with His entourage. Long before World War I the Master told a group of pilgrims of Jewish background that the Jew's would soon return to the Holy Land and would become a great people, envied by friend and foe alike. Such was the will of God and nothing could prevent this from happening. Palestine would become a center of science and industry, 'Akka and Haifa would grow into a single metropolis, and the desert itself would bloom." [13]

As a medical doctor, Mu'ayyad was much interested in the Master's physical well-being, noting carefully His eating and working habits, and on one occasion giving 'Abdu'l-Bahá a physical examination. The Master slept little and ate sparingly, His food consisting largely of bread, milk, cheese, and herbs. Frequently He remained awake late at night, chanting in a low voice. Listening outside the Master's room, the young doctor could make out only the words "O my God and my Beloved," which were repeated again and again.[14] 'Abdu'l-Bahá's health was exceptionally good for a man of His age and background. Years of prison, exile, and superhuman work had not sapped His strength. It is strange and thrilling to read Dr. Mu'ayyad's matter-of-fact clinical report and to learn that the Master's hair was abundant and His eyes were so good that He seldom used eyeglasses. In spite of rather frequent head colds, His nose, throat, and ears were free of pathological changes, His teeth had no cavities, the heart and lungs were normal, as were His nervous reflexes. 'Abdu'l-Bahá complained of occasional low fevers but believed that these were caused by news of troubles in the Bahá'í community. A bit of good news would quickly bring His temperature to normal.

However, 'Abdu'l-Baha's physical strength and stamina were as nothing compared to the strength of His character and will. When the enemies plotted His downfall in 1908 and His life was in immediate danger, an opportunity presented itself to leave 'Akka aboard an Italian ship. Such a course of action was advocated by a group of friends who had consulted on the subject. Having heard them out, the Master replied: "No. This would not be good for the Cause of God." He refused to flee in the face of danger, thereby reaffirming His innocence of the wrongdoings of which His enemies had accused Him.[15]

LIKE HABIB MU'AYYAD, Yunis Khan-i-Afrukhtih came to 'Akka as a young man. The trip from Persia was long and the route circuitous, taking him through Baku in Russian Adhirbayjan, Batumi on the Black Sea in Georgia, Constantinople, and Alexandria. From 1900 to 1904 he served 'Abdu'l-Baha as a translator and then, again like Mu'ayyad, was sent by the Master to study medicine in Beirut. Having become a doctor and traveled in Europe, he returned to Persia, his nine years of proximity to 'Abdu'l-Bahá forever engraved on his memory.

His Khatirat-i-nuhsali-yi-'Akka (Memories of Nine Years in 'Akka) are outstanding. Though not as rich a collection of facts as Mirza Mahmud's annals,

nor as personal as Howard Colby Ives' confession, they surpass both in the power of observation, acuteness of analysis, and, most important, quality of expression. Yunis Khan was a born writer whose art was formed under the influence of the Persian classics. Snatches of Hafiz, echoes of Rumi, add a literary dimension and grace absent from the writings of the others. Yet his style is free of that bane of modern Persian literature -- imitativeness. The voice is cultivated but the song is fresh, the language almost colloquial and always vigorous and direct.

In Yunis Khan's memoirs, as in Mu'ayyad's, one reads of the coming of pilgrims, among them the distinguished French Orientalist Hippolyte Dreyfus, Lua Getsinger, and Edith Sanderson. Yunis Khan was present when 'Abdu'l-Bahá resolved a number of problems posed to Him by Laura Clifford Barney. The Master's casual discourses were later published as *Some Answered Questions*, a book that has become a basic Baha'i text.

The effect of 'Abdu'l-Baha on the visitors, Yunis Khan writes, was related to their own personalities and the degree of their own spiritual development. The Master was the Sea, and those who immersed themselves received the most. The Sea was never the same. At times it was agitated and full of waves, at other times it was tranquil. True believers did not have to press for answers, 'Abdu'l-Bahá answered their unasked questions and solved their unstated problems. Finally there were those who had reached the station exemplified by an illumined soul in a story: They asked a gnostic (arif), "What do you desire of God?" He replied, "I desire of God that I might desire nothing." [16] But whether asked or not, the Master constantly taught the virtues of tolerance, forbearance, and love. The Baha'is must not return evil for evil but must shower love on all.

With great evocative power Yunis Khan describes a mournful procession marching to the shrine of Bahá'u'lláh on a November day to commemorate the passing of God's Messenger. 'Abdu'l-Baha walked at the head, followed by the Bahá'ís, each carrying a lighted candle and a vial of rose perfume. At the shrine they sprinkled the perfume among the flowers, set the candles in the ground, and stood still while 'Abdu'l-Baha chanted the Tablet of Visitation.

As a medical doctor, Yunis Khan, like Mu'ayyad, records his observations of 'Abdu'l-Baha's physical condition. His findings are almost identical with those of Mu'ayyad, who was to examine the Master several years later. Again like Mu'ayyad, Yunis Khan reports that the Master worked long hours, slept little, and ate sparingly (mostly bread, olives, cheese, and seldom meat).

Life at 'Akka and Haifa in the reign of 'Abdu'l-Hamid was full of tension and danger. Palestine was a tinder box. Tribes fought each other. Crime was rampant. The streets of 'Akka were too narrow for bandits to roam free, but in Haifa they were a constant threat. Shots were heard every night but murderers were never apprehended. Whenever 'Abdu'l-Bahá was in Haifa, the Baha'is feared for His life and watched His movements. Frequently He went to visit the

poor alone at night, refusing an escort or even a lantern-carrier. However, at a distance a Bahá'í would secretly watch His progress to the very door of His house.

One night it was Yunis Khan's turn to follow the Master. 'Abdu'l-Baha was returning home past midnight when in the dark three shots rang out from a side street. Having become inured to the sound of gunfire, Yunis Khan paid no attention to the first shot. The flash of the second shot sent him running toward the Master. He had reached the intersection, when the third shot was fired and saw two men running away. He was now no more than a step behind the Master. 'Abdu'l-Bahá walked on without changing His pace or turning His head. His tread was firm and dignified. He had paid no attention to what had occurred but quietly murmured prayers as He walked. At the gate of His house He acknowledged Yunis Khan's presence, turning to him and bidding him good-bye ("fi amani'llah" - under God's protection).[17]

If 'Abdu'l-Bahá's life was in danger, so were the lives of uncounted thousands of Bahá'u'lláh's followers in Persia. In the years after the Persian revolution of 1906 both the Constitutionalist and the reactionaries courted and attacked the Baha'is simultaneously. Each realized that the Baha'is were potentially a significant force, yet each knew that religious fanaticism could be easily evoked against them. When the Baha'is refused to serve either, both groups turned against them. The reactionaries claimed that the Baha'is advocated the establishment of a republic. While the constitutionalists accused them of favoring despotism. The massacre of 1903 in Yazd was still fresh in all memories. One can imagine how 'Abdu'l-Bahá felt, contemplating the possibility of both sides uniting against the Baha'is and exterminating the entire community, It was under such circumstances, Yunis Khan reports, that 'Abdu'l-Bahá insistently urged the Bahá'ís to stay out of politics, abstaining even from opening their lips on subjects that agitated the nation.[18] His position may have been misunderstood by E.G. Browne, who criticized the uninvolvedness of the Bahá'ís in Persian politics, but it saved countless lives, and perhaps prolonged the life of the Constitutional movement by dissociating it from the Baha'i Faith.

"How poor is the world's workshop of words," complained a Russian poet. "Where does one find the fitting ones?" Myron Phelps, looking at 'Abdu'l-Bahá across an ocean which stands for more than geographic distance. Howard Colby Ives, finding personal rebirth in the service of the Servant; Mirza Mahmud-i-Zarqani systematically recording the details of the Master's journeys; Habib-i-Mu'ayyad and Yunis Khan-i-Afrukhtih, young physicians privileged to listen to His heartbeat -- they all tried their best to capture 'Abdu'l-Bahá for posterity, but He would not be captured. In these profiles, in the long and short accounts, in chronicles and personal memoirs He remains forever the Mystery of God.

End Notes:

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