Mirza Abu'l-Fadl in America

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MÍRZÁ ABU'L-FADL IN AMERICA
By Ali-Kuli Khan and Marzieh Gail

[Written by Marzieh Gail on the basis of conversations with her father,
Ali-Kuli Khan.
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AFTERNOONS, he and I walked in the old cemetery in up-town New York. We walked up and down under the trees, with the gravestones around us. I would ask him about
life after death, and he would not answer. One day I burst out:
"The Master told me that I would learn things from being with you, and now I am not
learning. ... I ask you again: In this world we are known by our physical forms; how will we
he known in the next? The Master told me you would teach me."
He said: "Since you force me, I must answer. But you will not like what I shall say."
"Why not?"
"Because the answer is this, that you would not understand how life after death will be."
I said, "But I understand Schopenhauer, and Kant. I understand the Greeks. Why do you
say I would not understand?"
He answered: "The proof that you would not understand is this: that you ask"
Then he told me that on every plane of existence, one needs the use of a language to
describe that plane. On earth, he said, there is no language that will tell of the soul's condition
on a higher plane. Then he tried to describe immortality for me, in various ways. One
example he used was maturity: There is no language, he said, by which you can describe the
conditions of maturity to a child. The child must evolve into maturity before he can
understand it.

"How can we evolve into the understanding of immortality?" I asked.
"Through sustained devotion to the Cause," he said. "One gradually becomes aware.
You are serving; you are on the way. I pray Bahá'u'lláh to assist you to understand that
station. But it is not to be grasped through study. A man's knowledge of that condition is
expressed through his deeds. People feel that he has attained that knowledge. But no words
can describe it."
This journey to America was not by any means the first of Mírzá's travels. Born at
Gulpáygán, Persia, in 1844, Abu'1-Fadl was to spend some thirty years of his life in going
from place to place, at the behest of Bahá'u'lláh and the Master, to spread the Faith. Eastern
renders will not need to be reminded that he was an outstanding scholar; that he beaded one
of Tihrán's leading Arabic universities, the School of Hakím-Háshim, where he also lectured
on philosophy; that he was referred to as an authority by professors at the famed Al-Azhar in
Cairo—the thousand-year-old seat of Muslim learning—who brought him their works to
revise; that he was unexcelled in both old and modern Persian, was a master of Arabic, was
thoroughly versed in the cultures of both East and West. Following his conversion, the result
of eight months of debate in 1876, he became so fearless an exponent of the Teachings that
he was several times imprisoned and threatened with death. Before coming to the United
States, he had traveled, taught and written in Persia, Turkey, Russia, the Caucasus, Tartary,
Syria and Egypt; and he had even taken the Faith as far as the confines of China, He
attributed his teaching gift to a prayer revealed for him by Bahá'u'lláh: "I beg of God to
enable Fadl to teach His truth, and to unveil that which is hidden and treasured in His
knowledge, with wisdom and explanation. Verily He is the Mighty, the Bestower!"
If I had never seen ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi, I would consider. Mírzá
Abu'1-Fadl the greatest being I ever laid eyes on. When the Master told me I must leave Him,
and go to America, I sobbed. My grief took hold of me in the Persian way, and I beat my

head against the wall of the Master's house in 'Akká. Then 'Abdul-Bahá said "It is a real opportunity for you to be with Mírzá, because of his great learning and his great devotion to the Cause."

In those days the Master's helpers were few, and the burdens of the Faith increasingly heavy. My services as amanuensis and English translator were urgently needed, and I worked for Him night and day, but because He felt the American mission to be of supreme importance, He gave me up to that work. In the spring of 1901, I reached Paris with Lua and her husband, and found Mírzá there, with May Bolles (later Mrs. May Maxwell), Laura Barney, Juliet Thompson, Charles Mason Remey, little Sigurd Russell and other believers.

The Master cabled me to go on to the United States immediately. In New York, I received a second cable from Him, to go on to Chicago. Two months later Mírzá joined me there.

What had happened in Chicago was this: the Syrian, Khayru'lláh, had been teaching the Cause, adding to the Faith many beliefs of his own, such as reincarnation, dream interpretation, occultism and the like. He had written a book incorporating these beliefs with the Teachings, and had gone to 'Akká and asked permission to publish it. The Master told him to abandon his superstitious beliefs, saying further that he would become a leading teacher if he would give them up and spread the Faith. But he returned to America and published his book. A rift resulted among the believers; Mírzá Abu'l-Fadl and I were sent to heal the rift.

In Chicago we found Asadu'lláh, who had come to America with the two devoted Bahá'í merchants of Egypt, Haji 'Abdu'l-Karim and Hji Mírzá Hasan-i-Khurásání; although still a recognized teacher he was busily interpreting dreams for the believers and hemming them in with superstition. After listening to Mírzá for awhile, some of the believers said he was "cold and intellectual." They said Asadu'lláh was "spiritual," because he interpreted their dreams. They would walk down the hall, past Mírzá's door, and go on to Asadu'lláh. They

would come and tell us that they were personally led by the spirit, or had had a vision
warning them against a fellow-believer, and so forth. (Mírzá's name for them was
jinn-gir—"spook chasers.")
We saw that all this occult confusion would lead to divisions among the Friends,
especially as many of them were not yet well grounded in the Cause. We talked the matter
over and decided on the following procedure: when anyone came to us, saying he was guided
by the spirit to do thus and so, we would answer, "The Universal Spirit is manifested today in
Bahá'u'lláh.. If you have visions or experiences urging you to some action, weigh this action
with the revealed Teachings. If the act conforms with the Teachings, it is true guidance. If
not, your experience has been only a dream."
Mírzá held classes three times a day in Chicago, and in addition we taught once a week
at the Masonic Temple. Our house, a headquarters for Eastern Bahá'í teachers, was on West
Monroe Street. Some o£ the firm and devoted believers whom we met there were Thornton
Chase, his secretary, Gertrude Buikema, Miss Nash, Dr. Bartlett, Dr. Thatcher, Arthur
Agnew, Mr. Leish, Albert Windust, Mrs. Brittingham, Mr. and Mrs. Charles Toas, Greenleaf,
the brilliant attorney, and his young wife, Elizabeth. At the Master's written direction, Mr.
Peter Dealy came up from Fairhope, Alabama, to study scriptural prophecies and other
aspects of the Cause with Mí rzá.
My first memory of Thornton Chase, America's first Bahá'í, is his taking me to the
corner drugstore opposite our house and introducing me to Coca-Cola, which I hated. "This is
medicine," I told him. "No," he said, "this is a good drink; you will like it later on." His
prophecy has since been realized.
When my father, the early believer 'Abdu'r-Rahim Khán, was Lord Major (kalántar) of
Tihrán, and also head of the police, Mírzá had known him well. Once he told me the
following story: when he, Abu'1-Fadl, became a believer, he was on fire with the Faith. He
used to go to a coffee shop in the afternoons, sit there in an alcove a few

feet off the ground,
and publicly teach the Cause. One day an Armenian convert to Protestantism, who was
connected with the Protestant Mission at Tihrán, entered the coffee shop and said some evil
thing of Bahá’lláh. Mírzá was so incensed that he jumped down out of his alcove and struck
the Armenian. The man appealed to the Board of Foreign Missions, who sent to the Police
and demanded that Mírzá be punished. My father, the kalántar, said, "This is the sort of case
which I must handle myself." He then took Mírzá into his own custody; he told him that the
offense was serious; that he appreciated the nature of Mírzá's faith, but that the times were
dangerous and that in any event a man should control himself. He placed Mírzá in his own
office and sent for the Armenian. "Do you remember," he said to him, "how His Majesty
closed the Catholic Mission just a little while ago? Now you know what a high position
Mírzá Abu’l-Fadl enjoys among the clerics of Islám. His Majesty might well be angered at
any complaints against him, and then he would surely close the Protestant Mission as well,
and you would lose your job. Which do you prefer? That I punish Mírzá Abu'l-Fadl or that
you keep your job?" The charges were hastily withdrawn.
One day Mírzá called me to him and spoke to me in a very humble way. He said that,
being acquainted with my family and background, it was only with the greatest hesitation that
he was going to exact a promise from me: that I would cooperate with him in all matters
pertaining to the Cause, but that I would never interfere in his private affairs. I said, "Dear
Mírzá, since you know my family, you know well that none of its members would interfere
in the private concerns of such a glorious being as yourself." He answered, "Anyhow,
promise." So I promised, but I did not know what was coming.
In December, 1901, we left for Washington where Miss Laura Barney had arranged quarters for Mírzá and myself. Our rooms were on the top floor of a four-story apartment
house. He could not endure noise; in fact, during the three or four years when we spent the
fall, winter and spring in Washington, he changed his residence many times,

escaping from
noise. He had to concentrate on the book he was writing, and dreaded the downstairs, where
there might be dogs (he was very fond of cats, however) or other confusion.
His meals were to be provided by the landlady, but as time went on I discovered he was
living on practically nothing at all. He brewed, and drank all day long, a delicate Oriental tea;
he smoked Egyptian cigarettes (later he gave these up because some of the Friends criticized
his smoking and he did not wish to be a test to them); once in a while he ate a thin biscuit.
This was his nourishment. Naturally, in the unaccustomed cold and the strange surroundings,
he grew frailer and frailer. I had to beg him to keep on with his book—the Bahá'í
Proofs—which the Master had commanded him to write; but it was obvious that he was
getting too weak for the task, and meanwhile, since I had promised to keep out of his private
affairs, there was nothing I could do.
Mírzá was almost continually in a state of prayer. His mornings, noons and evenings
were taken up with devotions. Once I went to his door and found it locked. I rapped, there
was no answer. We forced the door, and found that Mírzá had fainted
away as he prayed, and that his jaws mere locked together. The reason he prayed with such
fervor, and such weeping, was his concept of the greatness of God and his own nothingness;
his belief that his very existence, bestowed on him by Divine mercy, was a sin in this Day
"whereon naught can be seen except the splendors of the Light that shineth from the face of
Thy Lord. . . ," I would say to him, "You, a holy being, weeping like this. If you are a sinner,
then what hope is there for the rest of us?" He would answer: "The day "will come when you,
too, will know the degree of devotion worthy to serve as a language by which we can praise
Hahi'u'llih."
Finally, a time came when Mírzá was dying. I went to Mrs. Barney, Laura's mother, for
whom Mírzá had great respect. I told her of my promise, explaining that I had not understood
why he exacted it; she promptly had a chicken cooked, and brought it to the house on De

Sales Street. On arriving, she asked the landlady if Mírzá had been accepting any food. "No," was the answer, "he pays for it but does not eat." She then went up to Mírzá. "They tell me downstairs," she said, "that you arc refusing food. How can yon write your important hook unless you eat?" From under his eyebrows, Mírzá darted his very small, very keen black eyes at me.

As soon as Mrs. Barney left he began: "You promised—"

I said, "The landlady told her." Mírzá said, "You had a hand in it." I answered, "I can't see you die." Mírzá said, "I shall ask you a question: which of two people would know better about a house? The man who has lived in it sixty years, or the one who has just come upon it?"

I answered, "Yes, the man may have lived in it sixty years, but he has never had any repairs made, and the roof and walls are falling to ruin, and the house is now almost unlivable,"

That is how it was. Mírzá sick from not eating, and unable to adjust to American food and American life. He would not let me serve him in any way. If we went shopping, he would not even let me carry the packages. Finally I wrote to the Master, because the responsibility for his life and work was more than I could bear, and I told of the difficulty of expediting Mírzá's book and described everything just as it was. Then I added that it might be a Persian attendant, who could prepare food for Mírzá and look after his needs, would solve the problem. When I had come through Port Sa'id on my way to America, there was a hoy around fifteen who worked in Ahmad Yazdi's store there. His name Was Ahmad-i-Isfáhání (later he took the name of Sohrab). This boy had begged me to request the Master to send him to America. I now suggested that he come here to look after Mírzá. The Master sent him here, to serve Mírzá and return with him to the East. However, when Mírzá sailed for home in 1904—with the MacNutts, Mrs. Julia Grundy, and the Woodcocks and their daughter—Ahmad-i-Isfahan í did not accompany him. He remained in the United States until

1912, when the Master Himself took him hack to the East, although he seemed loath to go.
Somehow, our work went on, Besides our classes, we would address Bahá'í gatherings in the old Corcoran Building opposite the Treasury Department. Mírzá would stand as he spoke, with me at his side. He was a great, spontaneous speaker; he talked with ardor, his voice varying according to his subject, and sometimes very loud. He knew no English, but had an uncanny way of finding out whether my translation was as he wished, and whether it was clear; he could tell from my gestures, and from the effect on the audience. He would speak perhaps five minutes at a time, before pausing for the translation.
When explaining a difficult point, he would repeat himself, to drive it home. One day a young believer came to him and said, "You know, dear Mirzl, we are an intelligent people. If you tell us a thing once, we grasp it. But if you keep repeating yourself, the way you did last night, people will surely criticize you, and us." He thanked her, very humbly. "It was only to make the matter clear," he said. "Hut I appreciate what you have told me. Now, just one question. What was I repealing, last night?" The young woman thought for a while; then she said, "I don't remember." "That is why I repeat myself," said Mírzá.
Mírzá was a master of reasoning—he built a wall around people and trapped them so that they had either to accept his statements or acknowledge their ignorance. All kinds of scholars matched their minds with him here, but I never saw him defeated. He was deeply read in Church history, European theology and metaphysics, works on which he had studied in Arabic at Al-Azhar. 1 remember once a churchman came to him and violently attacked the Prophet Muhammad. Mírzá said to him: "Your leading authorities state that none of the Jewish or Roman historians of the First Century even mention Jesus, and many do not believe in the historicity of Christ. Certain Christians inserted a reference to Christ in the writings of Josephus, but the forgery was exposed. Others buried a tablet in China, which said that Christianity had been brought to that country in the First Century.

This, too, was
exposed. But as for the Prophet Muhammad, He not only proclaimed the existence of a
historical Christ, but He caused three hundred million people to believe in Him; to accept
Him not only as a historical figure but also as the Spirit of God (Rúh'u'lláh). Was not
Muhammad, whom you condemn, a more successful Christian missionary than your own?"
Mírzá never encouraged any talk which might lead to inharmony. Once, a friend came
to him and said that another believer was doing harm to the Faith. Mírzá listened carefully.
Then he told me to translate his answer word for word:
"Do you believe that Bahá'u'lláh is the promised Lord of Hosts?"
"Yes."
"Well, if He is that Lord, these are the Hosts. What right have we to speak ill of the
Hosts?"
I had a hard time of it, getting Mírzá to write the Bahá'í Proofs. It seemed to me that I
had to extract every line and every page of it by force. The American Friends wonder why it
consists of "Introductions." This is not only the classic convention of Eastern scholars, but in
addition, Mírzá contemplated a greater book. What we have here is nothing compared to the
flow of his knowledge. The Master directed Mírzá to write the book and me to translate it,
and in spite of failing health and every difficulty he did not leave America until it was
finished. He was a careful, painstaking stylist, and yet he wrote very rapidly, with no
corrections, no crossing out. He would put up one knee, and lean his paper on it in the
Persian way, and write with a reed pen.
Mírzá was truly a divine scholar. He told me that he had read the Iqán. with "the eye of
intellect" seventeen times through, and it had seemed to him a meaningless string of words.
That later, he had read it with "the eye of faith," and had found it the key with which he could
unlock the secrets of all the sacred books of past religions. His work, the Fará'id, which deals
with these subjects, has not yet been translated into English. The Master, in a tablet to the
Washington believers written after Mírzá's death in 1914, says of him, "His

blessed heart was
the spring of realities and significances, allaying the thirst of every thirsty
one."
That the work went forward slowly was not always Mírzá's fault. We had a
great deal to
do—classes—meetings—innumerable visitors to see. Speaking of visitors,
whenever they
brought flowers and fruit to him, he was violently displeased. He would say:
"Why do they
bring these things for me? I am only the slave of the slaves of
Bahá'u'lláh!" I would not
translate these expressions of his humility, because I knew that our guests
would only
attribute them to pride. I would thank the givers, and explain to Mírzá why I
could not
translate what he had said.
On trains and in other public places people would look at Mírzá and he would
smile at
them, with those keen, deeply set, jet-black eyes. I never knew a man who saw
every corner
of a thing the way he did. And he was never mistaken. I remember one year I was
reading
Lavater, the German physiognomist, although I knew that Goethe himself had
given the
subject up, saying it was not a science. That year I saw an old man at Green
Acre who looked
something like Emerson; lie had the same high forehead and projecting nose,
although his
jaw was weak. I told Mírzá that according to the principles of Lavater the
man was a genius.
Mírzá looked at me and smiled. "He is far from being a genius," Mírzá told
me. "He does not
even Have the intelligence of an average man." "How do you know?" "By my
knowledge of
physiognomy." "Well, judging by my knowledge of physiognomy, he has both high
intelligence and philosophic grasp." The next morning, following our class, the
man asked a
question which at once exposed his remarkably low mental level.
The future must evaluate what Mírzá brought to the Cause in America. I have
written
these lines only to suggest a little our life here together; only to set down
phases of his
journey that hardly anyone else was aware of. The future will appreciate how,
when Mírzá
returned East, I was overwhelmed by the Master's command to carry on his work
in this
country.

It is a long time now since he died, and the Master and the believers mourned his going.
But I can see him still, as if he were here before me. A rather tall, spare figure, in a white
turban and light-brown robes. Beautiful hands—artistic and sensitive, but at the same time
intellectual and executive hands. A high forehead, somewhat high cheek bones, an ascetic
look, a faint smell of rose water. And then the small, very black, very keen eyes.
Yes, but really to know his greatness, you had to watch him when he was in the presence of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Then his knowledge reduced him to nothingness, and you thought
of a pebble on the ocean shore.

— Mirza Abu'l-Fadl in America (Used by permission of the curator)