



## The Amazing Race

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THE GOOD DOCTOR GRABBED hold of a steel pole a few feet from the ground and leapt onto the caboose of the speeding freight train. Air whipped through his dark hair and the dark trees blurred before him. Nobody believed he could do it. It was nine o'clock in the evening and 'Abdu'l-Bahá's entourage was set to leave Lake Mohonk at ten o'clock the following morning. This gave Dr. Zia Bagdadi exactly thirteen hours to travel from Lake Mohonk to New York and back again.<sup>1</sup>

'Abdu'l-Bahá kept several beautiful Persian carpets in his New York apartment. On the final evening of the Lake Mohonk Peace Conference he decided to make a gift of one of them to Mr. Albert Smiley, the conference president. Only one thing stood in his way: one hundred and eighty miles. Still, 'Abdu'l-Bahá entrusted Dr. Bagdadi to the task.

With a key to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's room on his person, Dr. Bagdadi held on tight. Straining to pull himself up, he was trying to catch his breath when he was spotted by a conductor.

Then . . . more trouble. A conductor spotted him, angrily protesting his stowing away. But once Dr. Bagdadi produced a business card, with the credentials "Dr." inscribed on it, he relented, unaware that this doctor's "urgent mission" involved delivering an oriental rug to a man named Smiley.

Mrs. Grace Ober and her sister, Ella Robarts, who minded 'Abdu'l-Bahá's New York residence when he was away, were woken up rudely at two o'clock in the morning. They found a droopy-eyed Dr. Bagdadi trying to get in. Presumably, 'Abdu'l-Bahá hadn't given him the right key.<sup>2</sup> He declined their kind offer of a meal, dashed into 'Abdu'l-Bahá's room, rolled up one of the most precious looking carpets, and stole off into the night.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Zia Bagdadi, "'Abdu'l-Bahá in America," *Star of the West* 19, no. 6 (September, 1928): 181. This account is adapted from Dr. Bagdadi's own telling; Details of the train's appearance are based on photographs from the era; Posed portrait of Dr. Zia Bagdadi, photograph, n.d., from National Bahá'í Archives, Wilmette, IL.

<sup>2</sup> Bagdadi, "'Abdu'l-Bahá," *Star of the West*, 181. Writing many years later, Dr. Bagdadi remembers 'Abdu'l-Bahá giving him a key, but also recalls having to wake up the ladies to let him in. If his recollections are accurate he either received a key to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's room, but not to the apartment, or 'Abdu'l-Bahá had given him the wrong key.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 181–182.

Dr. Bagdadi arrived at the Lake Mohonk train station with an hour to spare, but he still had to make it to the Mountain House. This last leg of the journey had been a glorious little excursion filled with song three days ago.<sup>4</sup> Now it was a frantic race against time. The doctor's large dark eyes scanned for a vehicle. A mail carrier caught his eye, driving a wagon, and he begged the driver to take him the rest of the way.<sup>5</sup>

Back at the Mountain House, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Mr. Smiley were shaking hands and saying their goodbyes. Dr. Bagdadi came rushing up.<sup>6</sup> It wasn't so much the doctor's disheveled appearance that surprised Mr. Smiley, nor even the gift of a Persian rug, but the gift of *this particular* Persian rug.

"Why this is just what I have been seeking for many years!" Mr. Smiley exclaimed. "You see we had a Persian rug just like this one, but it was burned in a fire and ever since my wife has been broken-hearted over it."<sup>7</sup>

Mr. Smiley eventually bequeathed that well-traveled, stealthily-retrieved, heroically-delivered carpet to the Lake Mohonk Mountain House. It still hangs there today.

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<sup>4</sup> Ahmad Sohrab to Agnes Parsons, 15 May 1912, Agnes Parsons Papers, National Bahá'í Archives, Wilmette, IL.

<sup>5</sup> Bagdadi, "'Abdu'l-Bahá," *Star of the West*, 182.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

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### **FOOTNOTE / ENDNOTE:**

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