



The Handsomest Young Man in Baghdad

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PASTE IF ANYONE HAS not yet met me,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá said, “or if anyone has some urgent business, call them. All others I will meet in the public gatherings because I have no time and it is impossible to see everyone individually.” It was the morning of June 12, 1912, at 309 West 78th Street in Manhattan, where ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was staying. And he was exhausted.

He was talking with one of his secretaries, Mahmúd. Perhaps polite New York society would have been piqued to encounter such forthrightness from ‘Abdu’l Bahá, but those friends who knew his life story would have understood completely.

When ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was twelve years old — he was known as Abbás then — he began managing the crowds who came to see his father. Bahá’u’lláh had returned to Baghdad from the mountains of Kurdistan in 1856. The family was in exile; as prisoners of the Ottoman Empire they weren’t allowed to leave the city.

On his own door Abbás hung a placard: “Those who come for information may apply within,” it read, but, “those who come only because of curiosity had better stay away.” On his father’s door he hung another. “Those who are searching for God,” it said, “come and come and come.”

The young Abbás had taken it upon himself to distinguish between crass voyeurs and truth-seekers, and to admit only the latter into his father’s presence. While some visitors were sincerely hoping to learn about his father’s religion, others were like inquisitive tourists, arriving to view an interesting exhibit. No doubt the same was happening to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in New York.

In 1903, his sister, Bahiyiyih, told the story of the early years to Madame Canavarro, a friend of Myron Phelps, who published it in his book, *The Life and Teachings of Abbas Effendi*, in 1904. She said that her brother’s only diversion in his unusual childhood was horseback riding, and that he grew to become a dynamic and proficient horseman. He had sky blue eyes, thick black hair, and a short, trimmed beard. “He was,” she said, “one of the handsomest young men in Baghdad.”

As a child of eight, Abbás faced down gangs of boys in the streets of Tehran who pelted him with stones. In Baghdad as a teenager, despite not having attended school, he challenged the city's scholars to debates in the mosques. "Who is your teacher?" they would ask him. "Where do you learn the things you say?" His reply was invariably: my father. He became known as "The Youthful Sage."

As a young man, Abbás continued to filter Bahá'u'lláh's seemingly endless visitors for the remaining seven years the family spent in Baghdad. He went on to argue the exiles' case in front of government officials in Constantinople, where the Sultan held the family under watch for four months. During the six years they faced starvation under house arrest in Adrianople, now Edirne, on the European side of the Bosphorus, 'Abdu'l-Bahá motivated them to survive. Then, for the last twenty-four years of Bahá'u'lláh's life in and around the Ottoman penal colony of 'Akká, he won the respect of the city by refusing to allow the group of exiles to see themselves as victims.

'Abdu'l-Bahá was finally released from prison in 1909.

In tomorrow's feature, the second in a series of three looking at 'Abdu'l-Bahá's youth.

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