



## ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s “Feast of Unity”

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THE ORIENTAL PASSENGER WAVED his arms on the steps of the train parked at Lackawanna station. He had to stall the train. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s attendants, “ten fez-wearing Persians,” as the *New York Times* put it, had already loaded their baggage on the train headed northeast from Montclair to West Englewood, New Jersey. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had not yet arrived. Missing the train could mean missing the event he had organized in nearby Englewood.

The distressed passenger pulled the bell rope, a job usually reserved for the conductor of the train to indicate an unplanned stop. Then one of the Persians – perhaps accidentally – knocked off the train conductor’s hat, distracting him. At last ‘Abdu’l-Bahá arrived in his car, the train halted, and his friends hustled him into the coach.

The feast was to be held at the estate of Roy Wilhelm, a wealthy coffee importer. He was a Wall Streeter, little interested in religion until 1907, when he traveled to ‘Akká to meet ‘Abdu’l-Bahá with his mother, who had insisted on the trip.

It was June 29, 1912, and between two and three hundred people gathered for ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s feast of unity. The guests arranged the tables in a large circle under a cluster of tall pine trees. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá walked among them and greeted them individually. Before they ate, he led them underneath the trees. He noted that most of the time “people are drawn together by physical motives or in furtherance of material interests,” but that “this meeting is a prototype of that inner and complete spiritual association in the eternal world of being.”

By the time ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had finished speaking, the food was ready. Then, as if on cue, thunder crashed from above, black clouds boiled up and big drops of rain pelted their tables. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá walked calmly to the end of the driveway, and stopped at a crossroad where a single chair stood. He sat in the chair and turned his face upward toward the sky. Soon, as if the weather was merely testing them, “the clouds began to race away; blue patches appeared above and the sun shone out,” Juliet Thompson wrote.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá told them that “This assembly has a name and significance which will last forever.” He paced back and forth as he spoke: “Hundreds of thousands of meetings shall be held to commemorate this occasion. . . .”

Once the friends organized themselves around the tables, a colorful Persian rice pilaf, sherbet, and many sweets were served. The food had been cooked in New York and transported to Englewood by ferry in large new garbage cans. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá did not sit down. Instead, he walked around the tables anointing each of his guest’s foreheads with attar of rose.

The sun began to set, but a group of fifty or sixty friends had no interest in leaving. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá sat on a chair at the top of the porch, and the others joined him on the steps and the lawn below. The summer skirts of the women made pleated circles on the grass, and the tapers in their hands kept away the mosquitoes. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá spoke again: “This association of ours is in order to bring about and proclaim the oneness of the world of man. . . .”

Juliet Thompson later wrote: “Before He had finished He rose from his chair and started down the path still talking, passing between the dim figures on the grass with their lighted tapers, talking till He reached the road, where He turned and we could no longer see Him.”

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### **FOOTNOTE / ENDNOTE:**

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