

A GIFT OF LOVE

Offered to the Greatest Holy Leaf

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PREFACE

Towards the end of his life, my husband, the Hand of the Cause Abú'l-Qásim Faizi, had a great longing to prepare a small booklet on various topics related to the life of the Greatest Holy Leaf, and dedicate it as a gift of love to her memory on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of her passing. The Universal House of Justice encouraged him and felt that this was "a truly highly meritorious project" and a "noble undertaking".

But the condition of his health and his failing memory made it impossible for him to concentrate on writing. He started the work many times but could not continue, and this caused him much suffering. Once he wrote:

O my Lord! Grant me the strength needed to begin this work. For me it is infinitely hard. I am like unto one who is at the edge of a frozen lake and invited to plunge in.

After he passed away, I gathered all the scattered notes he had jotted down at different times for this project, and tried to piece them together. I found that, in order to prepare a coherent whole, it was necessary to decide on an order of topics, to add certain words and phrases of my own and, in some instances, to fill in a few gaps.

The final form this work has taken is, of a necessity, my choice; but it is from my husband's writings and descriptions that the choice has been made. Whenever it was impossible to avoid adding my own words, every effort was made to keep to the original style of the author himself.

It should be mentioned that my husband's personal recollections of the Greatest Holy Leaf were closely linked to his memories of the Guardian of the Cause. Every time that he mentioned the Greatest Holy Leaf, he dwelt at some length on the Guardian and the effect that Shoghi Effendi had on him when he came on pilgrimage to Haifa as a young student from Beirut. His love for the Guardian became the motivating force of his being, and his whole life thereafter became a constant effort to please his beloved.

It was to the Guardian that he and some of his fellow-students from Beirut owed the privilege of meeting the Greatest Holy Leaf, for it was not customary in those days for men to be admitted to the presence of the ladies of the household.

Although my husband met the Greatest Holy Leaf only two times, and no conversation took place between them on those occasions, the impression made by her saintly presence on his sensitive heart was such that the very mention of her name filled him with the tenderest feelings of reverence and devotion.

It is a great pity that he was unable to complete his labour of love in her sweet memory. Even so, what he has left with us captures the imagination and inspires the heart with deep feelings of affection and admiration for the one of whom Bahá'u'lláh has said:

Verily, she is a leaf that hath sprung from this preexistent Root. She hath revealed herself in My name and tasted of the sweet savours of My holy, My wondrous pleasure. At one time We gave her to drink from My honeyed Mouth, at another caused her to partake of My mighty, My luminous Kawthar. Upon her rest the glory of My name and the fragrance of My shining robe.¹

Gloria Faizi
June, 1982

¹ *Bahíyyih Khánum, The Greatest Holy Leaf* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1982)
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A Gift of Love Offered to the Greatest Holy Leaf

Grief-stricken by the sudden passing of our beloved Guardian, I sought shelter beneath the slopes of a far-off range of mountains. I needed a fresh spirit of patience and endurance to withstand the many difficult tests ahead.

A strong and yet mysterious force drew me out of the dust of despondency and opened my tearful eyes to the splendour of God's creation: the indescribable beauty of the firmament above, and the charm of the mountains resting calm and serene on the banks of a lake which stretched endlessly before me.

I inhaled the fresh air of the early hour of dawn. The quiet solitude of that hour and the infinite beauty of the scenery around filled my heart with awe and reverence for the Creator.

I turned my eyes to the majesty of the lofty mountains to learn from them the lesson of steadfastness if sorrows were to darken all horizons. Suddenly a moving image startled me! It was a figure clad in black which seemed to follow the turns and twists of the elevated mountain paths, dim in the morning mist. Was it a vision, or a hallucination caused by my intense grief? Or was it a mental realization of my deep longing to catch one more glimpse of the lost Beloved?

Many a time I had followed that magnetic figure when he climbed the mountain of God, his rhythmic and determined steps enhancing the charm of his royal gait. It was he who had breathed life into my withered bones.

And now an immeasurable distance separated us from each other. In no time the clouds, like a mass of cotton wool, their fringes on fire with the rays of the rising sun, enveloped that distant figure. The mountain peaks concealed him, nature sheltered him and the far-off horizons shielded him from the realm of man, the intruder.

Unbearable pangs of loneliness swept over me. Dazed and dejected, whither could I turn my heart? I asked myself:

Is this all we crave for?

Are these the only gifts we receive:

a swift glance, a sigh, a teardrop?

And when possessions are plundered
and all doors are shut, what remains?

Only dismay which holds fast sway over us.

At that early hour of morning, the lake seemed fast asleep, cradling the mountains in its bosom. Not even a ripple disturbed its serenity. It was like a large mirror reflecting the glory of the firmament and the exquisite beauty of its surroundings.

The sun was slowly rising and one could feel the presence of the birds amongst the thick foliage. It would take them some time to beautify themselves before they made their appearance. A single bird, however, appeared on the topmost branches of a lofty arbor, but before it started singing its morning devotions, it had to make its ablutions. It spread its wings like a pair of ethereal Japanese fans to sustain its equilibrium. Then it swooped down to the water, yet its flight never broke the prevailing silence.

The bird touched the surface of the lake with the tip of a wing and then took its flight to the pinnacle of the heavens above.

By the touch of its wing, the bird, like an accomplished artist, had created ever-widening, harmonious circles which covered and ornamented the vast surface of the lake. The ripples, like well-trained soldiers, hastened to reach the shore. They rolled on and on. They seemed greedy and ready to confiscate the rich banks of the lake, but it was not so. Having reached their destination, they came back unstained by the red soil of the shore. Nor did they carry with them even a blade of grass as they returned, translucent and unsoiled to the bosom of the lake — now aglow in the first rays of the sun.

The lake finished its game of circles and retained its calm to reflect the image of the rising sun, the mountains remained firm and unshaken, while the bird continued its upward flight. Its morning prayer was a celestial song which reverberated in all directions. The entire creation was awakened by the sweet melodies of that song. The bird soared higher and higher until it was reduced to a tiny dot.

That beautiful bird reminded me of one of the statements of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. The Master said there are souls ushered into this

world who keep themselves utterly detached from the defilements of this earthly life and return to their Lord absolutely pure and unsullied. They are like certain birds which swoop down but barely touch the surface of the earth before they fly back to their heavenly nest.

Whenever I ponder upon this wondrous statement of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, my thoughts are immediately drawn to His own beloved sister, the Greatest Holy Leaf, who is to me the exalted personification of all the sublime qualities of detachment. She came from the firmament on High and, though she touched the world of dust, she was not defiled by it. She lived on this planet but was never attached to this world. Though in the physical temple and surrounded by the pressures and cares of earthly life, she remained absolutely detached. Nor did she show any tendency towards the mundane habits of human life or any inclination to its material bonds.

Throughout her tempestuous life, the progress of the Cause of God was her only aim for which she sacrificed all she had. She left no material riches. She had none. But we are embued by the perfume of her heavenly life which is the celestial legacy she has left for every Bahá'í.

Bahíyyih Khánum, daughter of Bahá'u'lláh and designated by Him as the Greatest Holy Leaf, was born in Tīhrán in 1846. She was two years younger than her illustrious brother, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and three years older than the Purest Branch. As I think of her now, my mind goes back to her childhood and, beyond that, to the time when the family of Bahá'u'lláh enjoyed fame and every comfort in their native land, Iran.

The mansion in which Bahá'u'lláh was born is still considered one of the luxurious and magnificent dwelling places raised during the reign of the Qájár dynasty. It is situated in the proximity of the palaces of the Qájárs and the central square of the capital.

This mansion belonged to Mírzá Buzurg-i-Núrí, the father of Bahá'u'lláh, who was a Vazír or Minister of the Sháh. The Vazír traced his lineage to the ancient kings of Iran, and he was distinguished amongst the rest of the courtiers for his literary and artistic merits, especially his exquisite calligraphy. He was a very handsome person and his dignified presence commanded awe and reverence. He attracted people by his generosity, piety and nobility. He was known as the shelter of the oppressed, and victims who suffered the ill treatment of cruel government officials in far away regions of Iran would throng to the doors of his mansion, seeking help and justice.

The residence of the Vazír had a spiritual influence on many people and, at the time of the birth of the Supreme Manifestation of God, Bahá'u'lláh, one of the neighbours dreamt that an extraordinary Child had been born in that exalted abode.

'Abdu'l-Bahá, the Greatest Holy Leaf and the Purest Branch were born into this noble household and they spent the first years of their lives surrounded by every wealth and comfort. But the day came when the solid foundations of the family of Bahá'u'lláh were shaken by severe adversities. They became the target of the wrath of a fanatical mob. Cruel hands were lifted up against them and voices were raised to insult and humiliate them. One day they heard the thunder of drums, bugles and cymbals in the street outside their house; then suddenly, a furious, savage crowd, shouting abuses and cursing the followers of the Báb, broke open the doors and

descended upon them. The inhabitants of the house came under the brutal treatment of a mob inflamed with wrath against all Bábís. Like a terrible storm the wild crowd swept through their richly furnished house and, when they had left, there remained nothing but a barren, empty place, the desolate ruins of the beautiful home.

The reason for these disastrous events was to remain a mystery for the small children of Bahá'u'lláh for many years to come. At that time 'Abdu'l-Bahá was not yet nine years old, the Greatest Holy Leaf was six and the Purest Branch was only three.

As long as the members of the family of Bahá'u'lláh had been under the shadow of His protection, they had had no worries, but now rumours reached them that Bahá'u'lláh had been chained, taken through the streets of Tíhrán and finally doomed to enter the most despicable of the prisons of the world — the Síyáh Chál! His wife and children thought He was lost to them forever.

Bahá'u'lláh had come to be known as the strongest defender of the Báb's religion at a time when the Bábís were unjustly suspected and mercilessly accused of plotting to assassinate the Sháh. The attack on the followers of the Báb was a sudden upheaval which focused on Bahá'u'lláh the attention of all the authorities in the land and the mass of its population.

The Muslim clergy, in the guise of protectors of their Faith, sanctioned monstrous actions and freely issued cruel verdicts against the Bábís which were contrary to the explicit decrees of their Holy Book, the Qur'án. Blasphemous falsehood became the rule of the day. There was no authority which could control these unbridled priests, nor was there any fair-minded and courageous person in command to punish their glaring disobedience to the texts of the Book they professed to believe in. No wonder that one of the Imáms of their Faith had prophesied that the clergy living in the days of the Promised One would be "the most wicked of the divines beneath the shadow of heaven".¹

We should know that the Shí'ih Muslims had theological institutions to which students were drawn from surrounding areas. The graduates of these institutions became centres of authority around which clustered a large group of individuals. The lives of

¹ *The Kitáb-i-Íqān* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1981) p. 247

these people were safe as long as they obeyed such centres of authority, but as soon as a word was uttered against anyone who dared to disobey these religious leaders, that person, his entire family and property, would be in immediate danger. He would be persecuted, his possessions would be plundered and his house razed to the ground.

The influence of the clergy was felt all over the country and the masses were completely under their control. Religious leaders discouraged the opening of schools in Iran because they wished their followers to remain illiterate and offer them blind obedience. Thus they suffocated the people in the dark and poisonous atmosphere of sheer ignorance so as to satiate their own thirst for power. In brief: life and death, wealth and poverty and every detail of the people's lives were under the strict rule of the clergy and they had no right to question the decrees issued by their ecclesiastical leaders.

The sovereign, Nāṣiri'd-Dīn Sháh, was surrounded by religious potentates. He was afraid of their influence and their satanic plans and, as the Persian proverb goes, "he did not dare to even drink a glass of water without their sanction". But after the attempt on his life, the Sháh himself was so enraged that he said if he knew that a tree had been planted by a Bábí he would uproot and burn it! No one dared approach him for the purpose of removing misunderstandings and assuring him that the Bábís had never plotted against him. All doors were shut in their faces, and the followers of the Báb had no chance to prove their loyalty to the Crown.

The clergy needed no further encouragement. They unanimously spread the verdict that the Bábís should be mowed down by the order of the Sháh. They shouted the ugliest and most ignoble accusations against the new Faith from the top of their pulpits in the mosques where thousands of their followers gathered to hear them. They flung down their turbans in indignation and cried, "Do you call yourselves Muslims? Are you not ashamed to face your Prophet? How can you rest when the Bábís are multiplying around us? Anyone who kills even one of these infidels will reap abundant reward in heaven!"

The illiterate and ignorant followers would unite to please their religious leaders. One of them would cry out, "Let us go and burn the home of a Bábí," and within a short time the house would be burned down and its inhabitants dispersed on the streets. In those

days, friends and neighbours, members of one family or profession were like a rosary in the hands of a clergyman. All of a sudden he would break the thread that held them together and would scatter them in all directions.

The people of Iran had not been ferocious by nature, but their so-called divines changed them into beasts. They were pushed towards insanity and savagery until they became like wolves with an insatiable thirst for blood. Even the youth and children were encouraged to wave banners, beat drums and take part in devilish activities.

All the forces of the government and the clergy now became concentrated against the small Bábí community dispersed in different quarters of Tīhrán. Exchange of news became impossible and the fate of every believer was unknown in those days of terror.

The tide of hatred spread quickly from the capital throughout the whole country. Blind prejudice and sheer animosity drew bloodthirsty crowds to the home of anyone who was suspected of being a follower of the Báb. That moral force which controls beastly conduct in man had been slain in these people. They grew rich by plundering the homes of defenseless individuals. They became intoxicated by the sight of the blood of the innocent. At the instigation of the clergy, they went so far as to carry the decapitated heads of their victims through the streets of the town and then throw each head back to the bereaved family.

The account of an incident will suffice to show the attitude of the clergy in those days: A crowd of people captured a man who was branded as a Bábí and took him to the house of a priest so as to obtain a death-warrant and be able to kill their victim with a clear conscience. The priest was having his afternoon siesta when he heard the angry crowd clamouring outside his door. He did not so much as sit up to have a look at the man he was about to sentence. He cried out to the mob not to bring him in. If the man was a Bábí, he said, they could kill him. Then he went back to sleep while the savage people tore their victim to pieces in the street.

The clergy in Iran, inflated with pride, established the throne of their authority on the corpses of the followers of the Cause of God in order to consolidate the foundations of their supreme authority. Their thirst for the blood of these innocent souls was insatiable and they were determined to avail themselves of every opportunity to claim as many victims as they could.

The early period of our Faith was the ripe season of trials and tribulations. They were replete with severe tests which, like a hurricane, struck down many strong and deeply rooted trees. The religion of God went through the process of purification and His true lovers were called upon to demonstrate their faith.

Thousands of greetings and salutations to those invincible, dauntless and steadfast souls who waxed eloquent in the midst of persecutions, when surrounded by their ferocious enemies. They displayed the utmost courage and, whenever they had the slightest chance, proclaimed the advent of the Beloved of the World and tried to explain the verities of the Cause of God, though they received no response except foul accusations, blasphemous curses and indescribable torture. If they were not cut to pieces with knives and daggers on the streets, they were chained and forced into dark prisons where they were made to drink poison, face bullets or receive the stroke of the sword of the executioner. These heroic souls kept the doors of heaven open for any who were thirsty for the Water of Life.

On the day when Bahá'u'lláh was taken to the Síyáh-Chál and the brutal mob looted His house, His relatives and the servants of His household fled the place in terror. Bahá'u'lláh's small children were left alone with their mother, the saintly and gentle lady, Ásíyih Khánum.

To save her children from further assault, Ásíyih Khánum took the youngest in her arms, told the other two to follow her, and hurried through unfamiliar streets and narrow, dusty lanes to a part of the town where they would not be easily recognized.

The writer, in his childhood, lived in the quarter where the mother and her children had taken shelter years before. He recalls how the local inhabitants encouraged their young people to embitter the life of the Bahá'ís by throwing stones at their children and cursing them on their way to the Bahá'í school. He also remembers the streets and lanes through which Ásíyih Khánum and her children must have passed on the day they left their home to find a refuge in another part of the town.

Coming out of the central section of the capital where the palace of the Sháh and the mansions of the ministers are situated, they entered the covered bazaars of Tíhrán where there is little light even during the day. From the bazaars they emerged into a crowded area where people used to have religious gatherings and, issuing forth from this

dangerous section of the road, they came to a large district which is called *Sangilaj*. Here they found a place to stay until their banishment from Iran.

To the end of His life 'Abdu'l-Bahá recalled the courage with which His gracious mother set out to save her children from the ferocious people around them.

Isfandíyār was a gem from Africa, pure and untarnished, and yet firm and steadfast as a diamond under all pressures and persecutions. He manifested his inherent qualities when faced with perils which endangered his life as a Bábí. His wonderful countenance reflected the rays of love and courage.

Isfandíyār was a servant in the house of Bahá'u'lláh and, as a fruitful tree planted in good soil, he yielded a spiritual harvest. His love for Bahá'u'lláh was unlimited and, though many Ministers and other high government officials coveted him as a servant in their household, he remained ever-faithful to his own Master.

At the time when the persecution of the Bábís began in the capital and Bahá'u'lláh was taken to the Síyáh-Chál, the enemies of the new Faith were looking for Isfandíyār so that they could force him to betray the followers of the Báb whom he had seen in the house of Bahá'u'lláh. The Sháh had commanded many people to find Isfandíyār and they were searching for him everywhere. But when he heard of the misfortune which had befallen the family of his beloved Master, nothing could keep him away from them.

We can imagine Isfandíyār standing among the ruins of his Master's house, drowned in an ocean of tribulation, his heart heavy with the weight of anguish. He seemed to have lost everything in the world. He did not think of all the rich furnishings, clothes and jewels which had been looted from the house of Bahá'u'lláh. But the thought of his Master in the Síyáh-Chál and the members of that noble family now dispersed and at the mercy of their foes was more than he could bear. "Where are the children?" he asked himself. "What has befallen their saintly mother?" Isfandíyār decided to find them, but there was no trace of the family in the surrounding neighbourhood. *No one knew where they had gone or what fresh misfortune had overtaken them.*

Isfandíyār pondered, planned and came to a decision; then he rose up like one of the lions of his own continent. But bravery alone was not enough and here is where we discover the purity of his heart. He put his trust in divine guidance and, as he went out to trace the steps of his lost ones, a mysterious force directed his steps and led him to his goal. It seemed as though he had become invisible as he walked

on the streets and passed through the market-place, because no one recognized or molested him.

The joy of the children at their reunion with Isfandíyár was great, for they loved him dearly. Speaking of him years later, 'Abdu'l-Bahá said, "Whenever I think of Isfandíyár I am moved to tears although he passed away fifty years ago."¹

After her home was looted, Āsíyih Khánum had little to give her children to eat and they went hungry most of the time. She did not know whom to turn to or how to provide for them. Worst of all, she had no more news of her beloved Husband and wondered what had befallen Him in the Síyáh-Chál. She was surrounded by grave danger and in need of assistance and yet, when she saw their faithful servant standing before them, her first thoughts were for his safety. She said to him, "There are a hundred policemen seeking for you. If they catch you they will not kill you at once but will torture you with fire. They will cut off your fingers. They will cut off your ears. They will put out your eyes to force you to tell them the secrets of Bahá'u'lláh. Go away! Do not stay here!"²

Isfandíyár was deeply touched by her noble expressions of true concern, but he refused to go away. He told Āsíyih Khánum he could not leave until he had paid the family debts to shopkeepers from whom he had bought supplies. He could not bear to hear the fair name of his Master belittled in the market-place, and he did not leave until he had sold a few things he had and paid Bahá'u'lláh's debts to the last penny.

'Abdu'l-Bahá spoke most lovingly of Isfandíyár during His tours of Europe and America. He praised him as "the essence of love, radiant with sanctity and perfection, luminous with light."³ He crowned his head with the diadem of eternity when He said, "If a perfect man could be found in the world, that man was Isfandíyár."⁴

¹ *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982) p. 426

² *Ibid*

³ *Ibid*

⁴ *Ibid*

Ásíyih Khánum now lived in an obscure corner of the town where she kept her children by her side all day, fearful for their safety. But one day, when they were hungry and there was no food in the house, she sent her eight-year-old son, ‘Abbás, to the house of an aunt to ask for a little money. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá recounts how He was recognized as the son of a Bábí and chased by a group of boys on His way back. He had to run for His life and when He reached home and threw Himself into the house, He was completely out of breath. But He had managed to bring back a small coin which His aunt had tied in the corner of a handkerchief.

The children pined after their Father and longed to have as much as a single glance of His face. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá repeatedly begged to be allowed to go to visit His Father until the faithful Isfandíyár volunteered to take Him to the Síyáh-Chál.

They went through long, crooked streets and dimly-lit, covered bazaars. They passed the famous district of *Galú-Bandak*, which was the midway point to the prison, and reached a very crowded, busy street at the end of which was the gate to the Sháh’s palace. A few rooms had been built for the royal guards above the arched gateway, and in the evenings primitive musicians beat their drums and blew their trumpets there. Through the palace gate one could see a beautiful, spacious garden and a large pond of crystal-clear water with a fountain in the middle. There was a cannon near this pond which was claimed to be one of the booties of war brought from India by Nádír Sháh many years before. But the cannon had been gradually elevated in rank and had become a shrine for the ignorant people. Women would tie colourful pieces of cloth to its wheels, make vows and beg the cannon to grant them the realization of their wishes. Such was the depths of the misery and ignorance of the people who failed to see the light of the Sun of Truth which had risen from their country.

The Síyáh-Chál was not far from the palace of the Sháh and, when they reached the place, Isfandíyár was shown the way down to the door of the dungeon. He took ‘Abdu’l-Bahá on his strong shoulders and slowly descended the steep, narrow steps. The entrance to the Síyáh-Chál was in complete darkness, but before they could reach it, they heard the commanding voice of Bahá’u’lláh: “Do not bring the

child here.” They had to go up again and wait for the time when the prisoners were taken out for a short while each day.

When they saw Bahá'u'lláh, He was tied to a number of other prisoners and stooped under the weight of an extremely heavy chain which hung around His neck. Lack of food and the absence of the least means of sanitation in that foul prison had left their terrible marks on His body, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá was heart-broken as He looked upon His beloved Father.

His little sister, Bahíyyih, too had her share when, after four long months of suspense, Bahá'u'lláh was released from the Síyáh-Chál. Can we ever imagine the pangs of bitter grief which filled her heart at that tender age when she saw her Father at last? His clothes were torn and soiled; His hair and beard unkempt. He was so weak that He could only walk with great difficulty. His back was bent and His neck was blistered and swollen from the galling weight of the chains He had borne day and night for four months. He was ill from the foul air He had breathed in that dark dungeon and His eyes were not yet accustomed to daylight.

As she looked on unbelievably, Bahíyyih little realized that, from now on, she would be called upon to share her Father's sufferings. She would be raised and educated in the school of adversity, and the rest of her childhood would be spent as though in a rudderless boat tossed about by the storms raging around them. But, through all those years of repeated exile and persecution, imprisonment, poverty and illness, she stood firm by her Father's side, never wavering in her loyalty and devotion to Him and His Cause.

Bahá'u'lláh had not yet had time to recover from the ordeals He had suffered in the Síyáh-Chál when He was banished from Iran. It was rumoured that the Sháh could not rest on his throne until Bahá'u'lláh and His family had left the country. The decree of the Sháh was immediately confirmed by the flattering courtiers around him and enthusiastically applauded by all the religious dignitaries of the land. The hysterical cries of these relentless enemies of the Cause were raised from every pulpit. Their ignoble accusations against the Bábís knew no limits. “The religion of the Báb,” they said, “is worse than the outburst of a terrifying epidemic sweeping over our country, and the Sháh is determined to wipe it out.” The news of the banishment of Bahá'u'lláh and His family filled them with joy and excitement. They congratulated each other as they passed on the

news: "The Bábís are banished, and this supreme victory is won by no less a personage than the Sháh himself!" They showered exaggerated titles upon the sovereign, calling him the Protector of the Religion of God, the Supporter of Islam in the world, the Shield and Shelter of all true believers.

The small band of Bahá'u'lláh's friends were immersed in an ocean of poignant sorrow. They had leaned on Him in their weakness, and had received the light of His guidance. Now that He was leaving them, they did not know whom they could turn to for help.

But the Sun of Truth, which had risen in Iran, was destined to reach its zenith in other lands and shed its light from the prison-city of 'Akká. Bahá'u'lláh was to ascend the throne of fame and glory, while the Sháh, now filled with pride, was doomed to perish and leave no trace.

The day came when the family of Bahá'u'lláh set out from Ṭīhrán, never to return to their homeland. The two older children, 'Abbás and Bahíyyih, had thought that their worries were over now that their Father had come back, but when they realized that their little brother, Mihdí, had to be left behind in Ṭīhrán, there was no end to their sorrow. They missed the innocent look of his large black eyes and the sweet smiles which always adorned his heavenly face. Their beautiful mother had surrendered her will to the Will of her Lord and was content to follow her beloved Husband wherever He went, but for her, too, the parting with Mihdí was heart-rending. How could she explain to him the reason for this sudden, cruel separation as he followed her with his eyes?

An Arab poet has said that the ground where lovers bid each other farewell is set aflame by the fire in their hearts.

Once, when I was in a meeting in Baghdad, I met a wonderful person. His name was Jalíl. He was tall, well-built and wore a long, spotless, Arab gown. He had a penetrating, warm voice which rang out like a bell when he chanted the Arabic Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh. I was drawn to this man and felt a deep love for him in my heart.

After the meeting, Jalíl approached me with a smiling face and conversed with me in pure, beautiful Persian. I was astonished at his command of the language, and asked, "How is it that you speak such fluent Persian?" He said, "Our mother spoke to us in the language of Bahá'u'lláh. If any of her children addressed her in Arabic, she would not answer."

"Was your mother a Persian?" I inquired. He said, "No, our mother was born into an Arab tribe." Then he added, "When the Ancient Beauty resided in Baghdad, the ladies of His household had to remain inside the house almost all the time. Bahíyyih Khánum was only a child and felt lonely being by herself all day. Our mother, who was a young girl of the same age, became Bahíyyih Khánum's playmate and learned Persian from her."

I was eager to know more, and Jalíl continued: "The two girls became inseparable friends. Bahíyyih Khánum called her playmate 'Ḥabíbatí' (my dear one). Our mother lived in the house of Bahá'u'lláh almost all the time and her parents were very happy. This went on for almost ten years. Then Bahá'u'lláh and His family were exiled from Baghdad, and Bahíyyih Khánum had to leave for an unknown destination. Ḥabíbatí was heart-broken and no one could console her in her grief.

"After the family left, she became like a bird without wings. She would sit in a corner all day and lament in the anguish of her separation from her beloved companion. She was not embittered. She just sat chanting prayers and reciting sad poetry. Imagine! She was not sorrowing for an ordinary friend. No, the one who had left her was the daughter of Bahá'u'lláh! Even pilgrims who met Bahíyyih Khánum for only a few days grew to love her. Ḥabíbatí, who had been her close companion for many years, could not bear to be parted from her and she suffered from this separation all her life.

"Our mother was illiterate, but she would at times dictate letters for Bahíyyih Khánum. Every word of her letters was a drop of the

blood of her heart, a gem of pure love offered to her exalted beloved.”

Jalíl related another moving incident in the life of his mother. He said that they sometimes held meetings in their home. Though their house was very modest and the gatherings quite simple, the friends vied with each other to be present at those meetings. Many prayers and Tablets were chanted and the meetings went on till after midnight.

Ḥabíbatí sat in a small adjacent room by herself and prepared tea and coffee for her guests. One night, when the meeting had come to an end and the friends had dispersed, her children found Ḥabíbatí in physical agony and unable to move from her seat on the floor. “When I was serving tea,” she told them, “this large pot of boiling water spilled over my leg.” They removed her clothes and saw that she was severely burned. “Why did you not call us?” they asked, “The burn should have been attended to immediately.” “What!” she said, “Did you expect your mother to cry out for help and disturb a meeting held in the name of Bahá’u’lláh?”

Ḥabíbatí was blessed with wonderful children who were stalwart, enthusiastic members of the Bahá’í community in Baghdad. She died very peacefully, and her long years of separation from her beloved Bahíyyih Khánum came to an end at last.

Bahíyyih Khánum grew to be a beautiful young woman. By the time she began to carry the load of her mother's family responsibilities, she came to be known as Khánum "the lady of the household". Many asked for her hand in marriage but she preferred to remain single. Incessant pleading did not change her plan of life. She was determined to spend all her days and every ounce of her energy in the service of the Cause of God.

Khánum was a solace to her Father and, though she was not physically strong, she followed Him through all the stages of His exile. She faced every deprivation and endured every hardship, firm and unshaken in her faith.

To fathom a life which was lived under the shadow of the Supreme Manifestation of God is indeed beyond the scope of man's imagination. These inadequate lines written in memory of the most exalted woman of the Universal Faith of Bahá'u'lláh, are put down with the hope that we may become acquainted with the walks of life trodden by great souls and learn the essence and reality of our stupendous Cause. Thus, love will find its way easily into our hearts and show us the road we must follow when bewildered among the many paths of life.

The Greatest Holy Leaf showed magnanimity when confronted with savagery, endurance and perseverance when burdened with sorrows, and never failed to be gentle and loving towards those who poisoned her life. She suffered with absolute acquiescence the bitter stages of exile from country to country, the many changes of residence, the lack of the barest necessities of life and, above all, the merciless acts of cruelty committed by those who were in charge when she and her family were in prison. She remained a moving spirit of detachment and passed through the darkest periods of her life with unparalleled dignity.

In the Most Great Prison where the guards, bereft of any kind of clemency, made conditions as difficult as possible for them, she never complained. The filthy environment and the appalling conditions within the prison walls, and the never-ending sickness around her could not embitter her life or induce her into a state of inactivity. She desired nothing but to follow 'Abdu'l-Bahá in the path of servitude. When their fellow-prisoners were in distress, she

tried to alleviate their suffering; when they were ill, she helped 'Abdu'l-Bahá to care for them.

Khánúm had boundless love for her younger brother, Mihdí, the Purest Branch. She suffered bitterly when he fell through a skylight in the prison and died in pain before her very eyes. She suffered, too, when the followers of Bahá'u'lláh, who had walked on foot for many months to reach 'Akká, were forbidden to meet their Lord, or when a fellow-prisoner was not allowed to buy a little milk for his dying child. But she suffered in silence.

Years later, whenever pilgrims asked Khánúm to tell them of those days, she would smile and say they should talk of happy times, for those sad days were over.

After Bahá'u'lláh passed away, the Greatest Holy Leaf held fast to His Covenant and became 'Abdu'l-Bahá's staunchest supporter. Her greatest joy was to be near Him and assist Him in His work. She demonstrated the same qualities of faith during the Master's lifetime as she had shown in the days of her Father and, in the midst of the fresh calamities heaped upon them through the machinations of the Covenant-breakers, she never wavered from the straight path though the road she trod was strewn with many thorns.

Khánúm was a jewel around which revolved the life of every member of the family of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. The Master Himself could not be parted from her for long. We can see this from some of the words He wrote to her when only the distance between Haifa and 'Akká separated them from each other:

Thou didst leave for 'Akká to remain but two days or so and then return, but now thou hast been gone from us for quite a while. We have stayed behind in Haifa, all alone, and it is very difficult to get along....

In any case, no matter how things are, come thou here today, because my heart is longing for thee.¹

The tender and celestial relationship between 'Abdu'l-Bahá and His sister is beyond description. Their hearts were cemented together in their love for the Ancient Beauty. They shared every joy and, when sorrows abounded, Khánúm was ready to lighten her Brother's

¹ *Bahíyyih Khánúm, The Greatest Holy Leaf*, p. 13

burden by taking on more than any other person around Him could endure. In a letter to her, the Master writes:

O my well-beloved sister, O Most Exalted Leaf!

. . . There is no way but to endure the toil and trouble of God's path. If thou dost not bear these hardships, who could ever bear them?¹

And again, contemplating the extent of her tribulations, He says: Dear and deeply spiritual sister! At noon and eventide, with the utmost ardour and humility, I supplicate at the Divine Threshold, and offer this, my prayer:

'Grant, O Thou my God, the Compassionate, that that pure and blessed Leaf may be comforted by Thy sweet savours of holiness and sustained by the reviving breeze of Thy loving care and mercy. Reinforce her spirit with the signs of Thy Kingdom, and gladden her soul with the testimonies of Thy everlasting dominion. Comfort, O my God, her sorrowful heart with the remembrance of Thy face, initiate her into Thy hidden mysteries, and inspire her with the revealed splendours of Thy heavenly light. Manifold are her sorrows, and infinitely grievous her distress. Bestow continually upon her the favour of Thy sustaining grace and, with every fleeting breath, grant her the blessing of Thy bounty. Her hopes and expectations are centred in Thee; open Thou to her face the portals of Thy tender mercies and lead her into the ways of Thy wondrous benevolence. Thou art the Generous, the All-loving, the Sustainer, the All-bountiful.' . . .²

¹ *Bahíyyih Khánum, The Greatest Holy Leaf*, p. 13

² *Ibid*, page v

The life of the Greatest Holy Leaf cannot be separated from that of either the Master or the Guardian. With the passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Khánum lost the support she had depended on all her life. She was now called upon to shoulder fresh responsibilities which required all her strength. But the love of the Guardian of the Cause surrounded her; and in him she found her joy and comfort.

Ever since Shoghi Effendi's childhood there had always been a very close relationship between him and the Greatest Holy Leaf. When the Master passed away the Guardian became Khánum's only love in life. Her thoughts were centred in him, and his happiness and comfort was all that she desired.

In the literature of the East many stories are told about two lovers, Laylí and Majnún. Because of the intensity of his love for Laylí, Majnún could think of nothing else. Once a man went to him and complained about his partner in trade. He talked for hours and explained the details of their dispute. At the end he asked Majnún, "In your judgement, which of us is right?" Majnún's reply was "Laylí". This is given as an example of true love because nothing could distract the lover from the thought of his beloved.

In *The Seven Valleys*, Bahá'u'lláh recounts another story about Laylí and Majnún: Majnún was found looking through a pile of dust. They asked him what he was searching for, and again his reply was "Laylí". Such extreme concentration of thought is considered the sublime sign of selfless love.

This was the quality of the love which the Greatest Holy Leaf had for the Guardian. Once, when tea was being served to a group of pilgrims visiting Khánum, the girl who carried the large tray piled with teapots, cups and saucers, dropped it on her way to the room and a terrific noise resounded through the house. Khánum put her hands on her heart and exclaimed, "Where is Shoghi Effendi?" When she was assured that he was upstairs and all right, she calmed down and told the attendant, "Do not worry about the cups and saucers. We have others in the house."

The Guardian reciprocated Khánum's feelings, and the love and reverence he had for her was far beyond anything he showed toward all others.

Every afternoon the Guardian would go up Mount Carmel to visit

the Shrines and spend some time with the pilgrims. If he was later than usual in coming back, Khánum would grow restless and send someone to bring her news that Shoghi Effendi was on his way to the house. The Guardian would visit her in the evenings and would often have his dinner in her room.

It was not very long after the passing of the Master when a pilgrim, by the name of Rawháníyyih, came to visit the Holy Land. She belonged to a family of early believers from a Jewish background. Rawháníyyih was a charming person and she chanted prayers with a voice which was penetrating and full of sweet resonance. Her beautiful chanting brought much comfort to the heart of the Greatest Holy Leaf and, when the Guardian heard of this, he asked Rawháníyyih to extend her stay for a few months after the days of her pilgrimage had come to an end.

The sweet stream of Khánum's love purified the hearts and uplifted the souls of those who came in touch with her, and the spell of that love was cast on all the pilgrims who came to the Holy Land.

One of the Persian believers once recounted to the writer that when he came on pilgrimage with a group of fellow-believers, he brought along his wife who was not a Bahá'í. In those days the journey to Haifa was long and difficult. Coming from Iran, they had to travel by car for days and cross a stretch of hot desert between Baghdad and Damascus. Some of the travellers, under the hardships of the journey, grew somewhat short-tempered and were rude to the Muslim woman. She was very sad at heart but did not say anything.

Then the day came when the pilgrims found themselves at the door of the Master's house. It was the custom for the womenfolk to be led into a room where they would have the privilege of meeting the daughter of Bahá'u'lláh. But on that day, they found Khánum waiting expectantly outside. The pilgrims hastened to meet her. She greeted them all but was still waiting outside. Waiting for whom? Finally they saw the Muslim woman slowly approaching, full of uncertainty and concern. The Greatest Holy Leaf advanced toward her and took the woman in her arms. Then, holding her by the hand, she led her into the room and invited her to sit next to herself. When all the pilgrims had taken their seats, Khánum took off her own ring and put it on the finger of her guest of honour. This brought tears to the eyes of everyone in the room as they learned a lesson in universal love.

The husband of the Muslim woman told me that his wife did not embrace the Faith, but she would never part with the ring, and she died with the name of Khánum on her lips.

I was a new Bahá'í when I first came to Haifa as a pilgrim in 1927. I was young and inexperienced and my knowledge of the Faith was limited to a few elementary books I had gone through in Bahá'í classes in Tíhrán.

I waited in the garden of the Master's house to be called to meet the Guardian and it seemed an infinitely long while before someone came to invite me in. The room I entered was beautiful though very simply furnished, and I thought I could sense the heartfelt prayers of countless visitors resounding and vibrating in that place.

I sat facing the door when suddenly the Guardian came in unannounced and without the least ceremony. He was in the prime of youth, with a heavenly countenance and a divine majesty. I was overcome by emotion and could not move. The Guardian, seeing my plight, came forward and said, "Let us embrace like two brothers." My head rested on his shoulder and tears filled my eyes as I received my spiritual baptism.

From the moment I saw the Guardian, I lost my heart to him completely. I came to realize how a single glance of the Beloved can change the entire course of a person's life. I understood the meaning of pure love and stepped into a world which cannot be fathomed through the knowledge prevalent among men.

The Guardian showered his love upon me. He asked about my studies at the American University of Beirut and encouraged me to concentrate on the study of English, Persian and Arabic.

The beloved Guardian had advised the Persian Bahá'í youth to come from Iran to Beirut for their higher education and a number of us, coming from different walks of life, gathered in Beirut during the twenties. Most of us were at the American University and we had formed a weekly gathering in the house of the Iqbál family to study Bahá'í history, principles and other aspects of our Faith.

The guide and leader in all our activities was Hasan Balyuzi who was indeed a true brother to each one of us. Every word of guidance he uttered was a gem; whatever standards he set we followed. Hasan assumed no rank or title, but he was like a candle which threw light on the path to honour and success. Had it not been for him I, as a new Bahá'í, would have been lost in my strange environment. His

warm, sweet voice still rings in my ears and his love is imprinted on my heart forever.

At Hasan's suggestion, the Bahá'í students in Beirut wrote to the Guardian and asked if they might be permitted to come on pilgrimage to Haifa, a few at a time, during their Christmas or Easter holidays. The Guardian graciously granted us this favour and there was no limit to our youthful enthusiasm and happiness.

We came to Haifa each year with hearts brimful with the love of our young Guardian who was himself a fountainhead of love. He welcomed us and inquired about each student's welfare, his studies and the news he had received from his parents. He remembered his own contemporaries at the American University of Beirut. He asked about them from the relatives they had amongst us, and sent them his love. Once he said, "Tell them that I never forget them."

The Guardian did his utmost to make us happy and hopeful about our future. He taught us the lesson of detachment and breathed in us the spirit of servitude to the divine Threshold.

We loved him beyond measure and never wanted to part with him. The days we spent in the Guardian's presence were like rays of sunshine penetrating the rest of our dark lives, and the memory of those blissful days is still a source of spiritual nourishment and inspiration.

Every afternoon we would go to the door of the Master's house to wait for the time when the Guardian, exhausted from the burden of his work and heavy correspondence, would come out to go to the Shrines on Mount Carmel. We could discern the signs of fatigue from his tired eyes as he emerged from the house, but his heavenly countenance was always smiling when he greeted us. We followed him up the mountain and listened to the sweet stream of the utterances of the Sign of God as he shared with us news he received each day from the Bahá'ís of the world. He uplifted our spirits with the glad tidings of the progress of the Cause and helped us to understand the grandeur of our Faith.

As we walked through the gardens around the Shrines, the Guardian spoke to the few gardeners, asked after their health and gave them his instructions. One day he told one of the gardeners to gather fruit for us students from the trees around. Then, turning his wonderful gaze on us, he added with a heavenly smile, "I am sure you must have a good appetite."

The gardens were not so extensive or developed in those days, but the Guardian had a clear vision of what should be done and he pursued a definite course of action, never wavering in his determination. He did not rest until he had changed the rugged mountainside into a garden of paradise and had completed the construction of the Shrine of the Báb in accordance with the wishes of his beloved Grandfather, 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

What a bounty it was to accompany the Guardian to the Shrines! When he approached the resting places of the Báb and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, it seemed as if he was in Their presence and was advancing towards Them carrying the hearts of thousands of supplicants with him to Their sacred Thresholds. When he chanted the Tablets of Visitation, it was no ordinary chanting. It was the lamentations of a Nightingale of the Abhá Kingdom caught in the cage of this material world. No one who has heard the Guardian chanting can ever forget that celestial and soul-stirring voice.

After visiting the Shrines, we would accompany the Guardian part of the way back; then he would ask us to go to the Pilgrim House and rest while he himself went back to the pile of work on his desk.

One night we stayed awake, standing on the balcony of the Pilgrim House and watching the light in the upper room of the Master's house where the Guardian worked. We wanted to know when he would go to bed and we stayed up until two in the morning!

The next day when the Guardian met us outside the Master's house, his first remark was, "You should go to bed early at night. I am sometimes obliged to stay up because I have much to do." How considerate he was towards others, and how utterly unmindful of his own rest and comfort!

The Guardian, though burdened under the weight of his multifarious obligations, would invariably sacrifice his own few hours of leisure to uplift the spirits of the Bahá'ís around him. In those days there were two meetings for the men in Haifa each week, one in the Pilgrim House close to the Shrines and another in the Master's house.

On Sundays, when the men gathered in the presence of the Guardian in the Pilgrim House, the women would cluster around the Greatest Holy Leaf in another building close by. On Wednesdays, when the Guardian sat with the men in the room where 'Abdu'l-Bahá used to receive His visitors, the Greatest Holy Leaf would often sit in an adjacent room where she could hear the Guardian as he spoke to the friends.

These were wonderful gatherings which we students from Beirut attended as pilgrims. All the Bahá'ís who lived in Haifa and the surrounding areas would be present. The gardeners and caretakers of the Shrines came in very simple, clean, white garments which we knew they had set aside for these meetings and which contrasted well with their weather-beaten, shining faces. Among them were Ustád Abu'l-Qásim, the embodiment of love and detachment, who had served in the Holy Land for many years; Yadu'lláh-i-Saysání, a vigorous young man from Ādharbáyján; and Ismá'íl Āqá, the faithful gardener of 'Abdu'l-Bahá with whom the Master had shared His sorrows and concerns.

When 'Abdu'l-Bahá passed away, Ismá'íl Āqá could not bear to go on living and he cut his own throat. Fortunately, he was found in time and taken to hospital. There they stitched the wound but Ismá'íl Āqá jerked his head and split the wound open again and again. He had decided that he did not wish to live after his beloved Master had left this world, and the doctors could do nothing about it. When the Greatest Holy Leaf heard of this, she sent him a message saying that she longed to see him working in the Master's garden once more, and he allowed his wound to heal.

We students loved Ismá'íl Āqá and we sometimes gathered around him as he worked in the garden. He would say to us, "When you are on pilgrimage, fix your attention on your Guardian. There are many

others here, but you have only one master.¹ Try to make him happy. The load of work and responsibility on his shoulders is more than one person can carry.”

The meetings in Haifa were often attended by a number of elderly pilgrims from the East who had endured many hardships in the path of God. Indescribable feelings stirred my heart whenever I looked at these veteran soldiers of the Army of Life. These men had been on many fronts and had fought innumerable spiritual battles with courage and self-sacrifice. They had withstood the opposition of fierce enemies of the Cause and had gallantly defended the Faith against the cruel Covenant-breakers in the days of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. And now, after long years of service, they were gathered beneath the shadow and protection of their youthful commander, their beloved Guardian. As they sat in the meeting room with their eyes fixed on the entrance, waiting for his arrival, God knows what waves of memories of bygone days surged within their pure souls.

Some of them had known Shoghi Effendi long before he was appointed Guardian of the Cause, and had realized that he was unique even in his childhood. There seemed to be a mysterious connection between them and the Guardian. Suddenly one would see them arranging their clothes and preparing to stand up to receive him, and then within seconds one would hear the rhythmic footsteps of the Guardian approaching from the hall. Their eyes glittered with the light of pure love, and the rest of the world did not exist for them anymore, when he stepped into the room and lifted up his hand in greeting.

Imagine the spiritual atmosphere prevalent in that heavenly gathering with the Guardian of the Cause present and the Greatest Holy Leaf sitting close by, behind the open door leading to the adjacent room! Those meetings were indeed a sign and token of celestial feasts. Prayers and Tablets were chanted; then the Guardian spoke, encouraging the believers and giving them news of the spread of the Faith of Bahá’u’lláh throughout the countries of the world. Sometimes he would ask the group of students from Beirut to sing Bahá’í songs to cheer the hearts of the friends.

¹ Ismá‘íl Āqá was referring to Shoghi Effendi’s brothers and cousins who later became Covenant-breakers.

One day, when the meeting had just begun, the beloved Guardian turned to me and said, "Will you chant something?" I was taken by surprise, but I had to obey him. Fortunately I had a collection of Tablets in my pocket. I took it out and started to chant one of the beautiful, long Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh in which He teaches man how to tread the path that leads to reunion with the Beloved.

After chanting about two pages, I stopped and whispered, "It is a very long Tablet." The Guardian smiled and said, "Yes, it is one of the early Tablets revealed in Baghdad." Then he turned to one of the very old believers and remarked, "Ḥájí Ḥusayn, it is a long time since you heard such chanting!" He addressed me once again and said, "You have a warm, resonant voice. Do you chant in your meetings in Beirut?"

The day after that, when the group of students was following the Guardian up the Vineyard of God, he said, "The Greatest Holy Leaf heard your chanting last night and would like to hear you again. Will you all go to her and make her happy?"

This rare, heavenly bounty was offered to us so suddenly that we could not immediately grasp its significance. But our joy was boundless and we spent more than half a day deciding on a suitable program of prayers, poems and songs which we could present to the daughter of Bahá'u'lláh.

After the elapse of half a century, I still remember very clearly and vividly, the impression of those few blissful hours when I had the bounty of feasting my eyes on the beauteous countenance of the Greatest Holy Leaf.

The tender charm of that personality possessed my entire being. Its fascination has never faded, nor has its influence waned. Every detail is remembered, every nuance of that experience is faithfully retained, untouched and unaltered by the passage of time. This most precious memory scintillates in the treasure-house of my heart and soul as an immortal relic of infinite grace and loveliness.

Whenever the dust of despondency, rising from the path of my life, veils or dims the lustre of my joy, tears of longing shed in remembrance of the Greatest Holy Leaf wash away that dust and cause the light of happiness to shine and envelope my being.

Like a wealthy man who opens his safe at midnight, counts his diamonds with the utmost care and satisfaction, and gently removes the dust from his gold coins, delighting at their touch, I too find happiness in dwelling upon my treasured recollections in the midnight of loneliness and deprivation. I remember those precious incidents of my life and cover them with my tears of thanksgiving and gratitude, thus keeping them forever clear and untarnished.

In the world of my imagination, I once more follow our beloved Guardian up the slopes of Mount Carmel and breathe in the fresh air of the paradise surrounding the Holy Shrines. And I find myself in the presence of the Greatest Holy Leaf — the one who was called upon to tread the path of living martyrdom. Such is my spiritual sustenance. Time and distance have proved too feeble to weaken my grasp from the hem of the Sign of God on earth or to deter my gaze from beholding the beauty of Khānum's celestial countenance.

When our small group of students from Beirut was ushered into the presence of the Greatest Holy Leaf, she was seated at the upper end of a large room, facing the door. The wife of the Master, Munīrih Khānum, sat next to her and other ladies of the household sat on either side in a semi-circle, but the mother of the Guardian, Ḍiyā'iyih Khānum, stood behind the Greatest Holy Leaf with her hands resting on the shoulders of her beloved aunt. We students were given seats facing this beautiful audience.

The Greatest Holy Leaf was very frail at that time; the many years of toil and suffering had left their marks on her, but her graceful personality, her delicate smile and her heavenly blue eyes made a lasting impression on us all. For us who had not had the privilege of beholding the majestic countenance of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, seeing the Greatest Holy Leaf was an unexpected bounty because she greatly resembled the Master. Her penetrating eyes, especially, reminded us of 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

Khánum sat still, her lily-white hands resting gently on her lap. She was a queen who inspired love and reverence, and at her throne of grandeur we offered our grateful hearts. Her glance was full of love, but she did not speak to us. The Master's wife, Munírih Khánum, spoke on her behalf. She greeted us when we arrived, and thanked us warmly, in Khánum's name, at the end of our program of prayers, songs and Bahá'í poems. Then we were served tea and we left the Master's house exhilarated with joy because we had had the honour of creating an hour of rest and pleasure in the life of the Greatest Holy Leaf.

We arrived at the Pilgrim House later in the evening and found that Khánum had sent us boxes of nuts and special sweets. We had known of Khánum's extreme generosity, a trait she had inherited not only from her Father, but from her gracious mother as well. We knew how she always gave gifts to everyone who came to see her, and we remembered having heard that once, when some Arab ladies had arrived unannounced, and Khánum had found her store of gifts empty, she gave them the only thing she could think of — large handfuls of cube sugar — to take away!

The day after we had visited Khánum, when we were walking towards the Shrines with the Guardian as usual, he turned around and asked us, "Did you go to Khánum yesterday? Did you chant prayers and sing songs for her? Did she like them?" We bowed and answered him. Then, with a celestial smile of contentment he said, "I, too, had left the door of my room wide open." We knew that the Guardian had also enjoyed our humble program.

The next time a group of us were coming from Beirut, we prepared a one-act play called *The Light of Faith in the Darkness of the Dungeon* which depicted the sufferings of one of the martyrs in Iran. We asked the Guardian in Haifa if he would permit us to show it in the Master's house. His immediate reply was, "No, it would sadden the heart of the Greatest Holy Leaf." Such delicate expressions of concern for Khánum's feelings touched the depths of our hearts because we knew how much the Guardian loved her. But he allowed us to go to the Master's house once more and entertain the Greatest Holy Leaf with songs and poems.

This time we had begged one of our fellow-students to bring his *târ*¹ with him to Haifa. He had learned to play the instrument from one of the great masters in Iran and he had a lovely touch — "his fingers were sweet" as we say in Persian. Our friend was very reluctant to bring his *târ* along and said it was not the proper thing to do, but we managed to persuade him to bring it.

Khánum was delighted with the program we had prepared for her. Among other things, we sang a group song with the refrain, "O 'Abdu'l-Bahá, my hand is stretched out in longing to reach Thy robe." It was a simple, but deeply moving song. I chanted a Tablet revealed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá which is addressed to a man who had suffered all kinds of tribulations in the path of the Blessed Beauty. In the Tablet, 'Abdu'l-Bahá recounts the blessings we have in this Cause, and after each section He repeats, "Why, then, should we be sad?" When I finished chanting, Munírih Khánum said the Greatest Holy Leaf would like to have a copy of this Tablet. I was very thrilled to know that Khánum was pleased with my choice. Later, in the Pilgrim House, I spent hours in order to choose the right kind of paper and pen with which to write, and made copy after copy before I was pleased with one which was sent to beloved Khánum.

After our program had come to an end, Munírih Khánum spoke to us on behalf of the Greatest Holy Leaf and told us how much Khánum had enjoyed listening to our chanting, music and songs. Then she said something which touched our hearts and brought tears to our eyes. The Greatest Holy Leaf, she said, would love to hear one

¹ A Persian string musical instrument

of the songs which labourers sing in Iran as they go home in the evenings on their way back from work. She asked if there was anyone among us who knew those songs. We were surprised that Khánum should still remember songs which she must have heard on the streets of Ṭíhrán during her early childhood. Perhaps the sight of a group of young Persians, or the music of the *tár*, had taken her back to those days.

One of us, who sang well, began to sing for her in a beautiful penetrating voice. The songs Khánum had referred to are known as *kúchih-bāghí*. They have a sad tune which fills the heart with poignant emotion. Who knows what memories and reminiscences of bygone days that nostalgic tune awakened in Khánum's tender heart that evening! We, too, were carried back to her years of exile and imprisonment, and to the times of sorrow she had known — not so much because of her own deprivations, but because of the tribulations suffered by those she loved.

In my reverie, I saw her as a little girl, clinging to her mother when their house was being looted in Ṭíhrán, and crouching in a corner when she had no bed to sleep in during the bitterly cold nights of that terrible, long journey to Baghdad. I saw her as a young girl saying farewell to the loving companion of her childhood when she was taken from Iraq to Turkey; as a gracious woman attending to the needs of her fellow-prisoners in 'Akká; and as a gentle lady comforting 'Abdu'l-Bahá when He was bowed down under the weight of sorrow heaped upon Him by the Covenant-breakers.

The sun had set and the light in the room was fast fading. All I could now see through the mist of tears was the long, delicate white scarf on Khánum's head and the soft, white hands on her lap. Those hands had a strange effect on me. They appeared to me as the wings of a white bird flying over the dark city of 'Akká, bringing the message of strength and courage. I saw Khánum's hands removing the chains placed around her Father's neck, and drying her mother's tears when the Purest Branch was dying. And again I beheld them raised in prayer when she heard the lamentations of Bahá'u'lláh in His cell the night He had offered His beloved son as a sacrifice in the path of God: "Mihdí, Mihdí!"

Had it not been for all those bitter tests, these hands, as white as a lily, as strong as the grip of destiny, would not have been able to hold the reins of the affairs of the Bahá'ís around the world for almost two

years when 'Abdu'l-Bahá had passed away and the Guardian was absent from the Holy Land.

As I bowed my head in gratitude to the daughter of Bahá'u'lláh, I did not realize that this was the last time I would ever see her on this earthly plane.

Our pilgrimage came to an end. Once again it was time for us to part with the Guardian and leave our paradise to go back to studies in Beirut. The hired car was waiting outside the Master's house where we had gathered that morning to say goodbye to Shoghi Effendi. Our hearts were heavy and, as the Guardian entered the main hall, we wept without shame. He put his arms around each of us and whispered words of comfort, "Do not be sad, you will come back again ... Be happy, concentrate on your studies."

In Beirut, we heard from the Guardian through his powerful messages to the Bahá'í World. These were like a balm for our aching hearts while we counted the days of the year, waiting for the time we could go back to him again.

That was a fateful year. Some months after we left Haifa, the Guardian said his last farewell to the Greatest Holy Leaf when he was going away from the Holy Land for the summer. I have heard that he held her in his arms longer than usual. She asked him to decide on a resting-place for her and he answered that the place had already been assigned. What can one say of the relationship between heavenly souls?

It was the end of summer, and the Guardian was back in Haifa. With throbbing hearts we waited for him at the foot of the stairs in front of the Master's house.

Coming down the steps, the Guardian's first words to us were: "Do you know that the Greatest Holy Leaf has passed away?" With what depths of sorrow those words were uttered! It seemed as though the Guardian himself was reluctant to believe it. The tone of his voice was a reminder of his great loss, for the last remnant of the Heroic Age of the Bahá'í Dispensation, and the solace of his own life, had left this world.

As he led us up the mountain path this time, the Guardian turned left before coming to the gardens around the Shrine of the Báb. A new garden had sprung up here around the resting-place of the Greatest Holy Leaf. We followed the Guardian as he circumambulated that holy spot. Then we stopped for a few moments of prayer.

The blue Mediterranean stretched out before us and we stood facing, across the water, the Qiblih of the Bahá'í World, the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh in Bahjí.
