

Bahá'u'lláh: The Baghdad Years & First Day of Ridván
As told from the perspective
of Ázíyih Khánum, His Wife, and Bahíyyih Khánum, His Daughter

A Dramatic Reading by Marlene Macke *

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Part I – The Baghdad Years

Ázíyih Khánum

In 1853 my beloved Husband was released from that horrible pit, the Síyáh Chál in Tihrán, on condition that He remove Himself from Persia. After four long months chained in that filthy dungeon, He had suffered untold physical impairment, but the children and I sensed that His spirit was unbroken. In fact, His spirit had soared to new heights. I didn't ponder it at the time as there was too much else on my mind. The government officials gave us a month's reprieve for Him to regain some level of health before our journey of exile, and I made what meagre preparations as I was able.

Bahíyyih Khánum

We left Tihrán in January 1853 for Baghdad, my beloved parents, my dear brother, 'Abbás who was eight or nine years old, myself, six years old, and other members of our extended family. It broke my mother's heart to leave behind my frail three year old brother, little Mihdí.

Horses and mules struggled to carry us over the snow-bound mountain passes. Amid the howling blizzards, our clothing proved completely inadequate to protect us and we nearly starved from lack of provisions. I didn't know at the time that my dear mother was pregnant, as not one word of complaint or worry passed her lips. And my poor, dear Father was far from healed from the ravages of the torture and deprivation suffered in the Black Pit.

* See more about this document at https://bahai-library.com/macke_dramatic_readings

Ázíyih Khánum

When we arrived in Baghdad some three and a half months later, we lived in a tiny house of two rooms. It was here I gave birth to my fourth and last child, ‘Alí-Muhammad. Very hard times continued to afflict us and we had barely means to live. Most people would have been shocked to learn that my beloved Husband sometimes helped with the cooking.

Bahíyyih Khánum

No Persian nobleman – in fact no Persian man of any class – would have dreamed of stepping foot into a kitchen, let alone assisting with the cooking. Women in our culture were seen as little more than servants, chattels, the bearers of the children. But my Father could see that hardship had worn out our sweet Mother and He wished to lighten her burden. We always knew He loved and respected her very much. Their marriage was a model of what a truly spiritual union could be between husband and wife. Little did we know God’s laws for the new age would proclaim, as cornerstone principles, the high station given to women and the equality of women and men.

Ázíyih Khánum

Beside the help and companionship of my dear Husband, my spirits were brightened by some visits. Five years earlier, my Husband and I had the privilege of hosting Táhirih in our home in Tihrán. Apart from her fame as a gifted poet, Táhirih fearlessly endorsed the Báb as the Mahdi, the Prophet of a New Age. I learned so much from her. Imagine my delight to host some Arab ladies who had been taught by Táhirih when she had passed through Baghdad. Engaging in elevated discourse about spiritual realities with these wonderful women alleviated the physical trials in my life.

Bahíyyih Khánum

However, my uncle, Mírzá Yahyá, Father's younger half-brother, caused us much distress. Of course, as a young child, I didn't know exactly what my uncle was up to. Later, I learned the Bábís, dispirited and virtually leaderless after the cruel martyrdom of their Lord the Báb, turned increasingly to my Father for advice and comfort. This enraged Yahyá. Insane jealousy drove him to undermine and covertly criticize Father. Within a year the situation was very nearly intolerable. We woke up one morning to find Father gone.

Ázíyih Khánum

We were devastated. The children were too young to comprehend why their Father had left without warning. He had constantly taught the Bábís to live in love and harmony with one another. But Mírzá Yahyá's sneaky invective caused such discord in the community. I think Bahá'u'lláh believed if He removed Himself from the community, the strife might abate.

Bahíyyih Khánum

Uncle Yahyá tormented us the entire time Father was absent. He kept us virtual prisoners in our home. When my adorable baby brother got sick, Uncle refused to let us call a doctor or even permit neighbours to help us. Our beautiful baby died. Uncle wouldn't even allow anyone to properly prepare the body for burial. He paid a man to take away the body and we never knew where my youngest brother was laid. My mother, my brother 'Abbás and I clung together and wept and wept.

Ázíyih Khánum

My baby dead. My Lord gone. Afflictions from Mírzá Yahyá pelted us like stones each and every day. I feared that even God had forsaken me. Then, after nearly two grim years, we began to hear stories of a much admired holy man, a Dervish, living in the mountains of Kurdistán. The description sounded just like my Husband. ‘Abbás prayed through a whole night, beseeching God to return our Lord to us. The very next day a new rumour suggested the exact whereabouts of this Dervish. My son begged one of the family members to go find my Husband and bring Him home to us.

Bahíyyih Khánum

At last! At last! He was coming home. I waited, breathless with anticipation. We heard a footstep. A ragged, travel-stained stranger walked in. Then He smiled. My mother, brother and I arose as one and embraced Him. Mother, always so calm and gentle, wept silently in relief. ‘Abbás clutched his Father’s hand as if he would never again let Him go. Then he threw himself to Father’s feet and begged to be allowed to lay down his own life for our Father. The surge of tender love for my family nearly overwhelmed me.

Ázíyih Khánum

While my Husband had been absent, my children and I were not the only ones to suffer at the hands of Yahyá. He continued to attack the Bábí community. Alas, the faithful Bábís were thoroughly demoralized and many had drifted away. Saddened to learn of this untenable situation with the very future of the Bábí Faith hanging in the balance, Bahá’u’lláh spent the first several days secluded in our home. He must have been mapping out in His mind how He could regenerate the nearly extinct Bábí community.

Bahíyyih Khánum

Fortunately, we now lived in a larger, if still humble and ill-furnished, house. The Bábís swarmed to Him with such joy, like bees to reviving, life-giving nectar. Soon streams of Bábís flowed from far-off Persia to gain my Father's presence. Then I realized the leaders of Baghdad, some of them even Muslim clergy, were venturing to our house. Having met Him once, many left as devoted admirers. We could see the pilgrims, seekers and visitors treasured His wisdom and wise counsel. Keeping the samovar filled with hot water and replenishing the platters of sweets and fruit for all the guests increased our toil from early morning to night, but we were happy. Father was home.

Ázíyih Khánum

The British Consul General in Baghdad offered my Husband British citizenship and relocation to India. My heart leapt at this opportunity. Could we really move far away from this dangerous environment where fanatic Muslim clergy still held such sway? My heart fell when Bahá'u'lláh gracefully declined the offer. Then the Ottoman authorities offered our family Turkish citizenship, and this He accepted.

For the seven years after His return from Kurdistán, my children and I lived a life of serving Bahá'u'lláh and the multitudes of guests to our home. Almost daily, He frequented the bazaars and coffee shops of the city, and He liked to walk along the bank of the Tigris River. I observed His spiritual eminence and love for every person touching nearly every human heart. His guidance and example regenerated us all. Witnessing the resurgence of the Bábí community gave us all such joy.

Bahíyyih Khánum

Mother, ‘Abbás, and I did, however, fear for His safety. Enemies still lurked in the city. Father’s moral ascendancy and influence infuriated them so much that they commissioned an assassin to murder Him. He made two attempts, one at the public bath and one while Father walked beside the river, but the coward lost his nerve both times when he came into Father’s presence! My favourite uncle, Mírzá Músá, horrified Mother when he related all this to her. She begged Father to have a bodyguard but He refused. However, the local Bábís took it upon themselves to guard our home through the nights, and kept a close watch on Him whenever He left the house.

Ázíyih Khánum

I began to sense that another chapter of our lives might soon open. I recalled the veneration dear Táhirih had for my Husband when she was our guest in Tíhrán in 1848. I reflected how I had perceived a noticeable elevation of His Spirit when He back from the Black Pit. I now realized that His solitude in the mountains some seven years earlier had strengthened Him for what was to come. Now, I witnessed the blooming of His spiritual power, marvelling at the magnetic effect it had on people. Secretly, hopefully, I realized the Báb’s prophecy heralding the imminent advent of another Prophet might, in fact, be manifested in my Husband.

Part II – First Day of Ridván

Bahíyyih Khánum

In 1863, my dear Uncle Mírzá Músá rented a field on the outskirts of the city beside the Tigris River. Father and several of His companions planned to spend the two week festival of Naw-Rúz as a peaceful interlude by camping in the countryside. We were surprised when the whole party returned just five days later. Then we were devastated to learn that an official Decree had arrived from the Sultanate of the Ottoman Empire, ordering Father to move to Constantinople.

Ázíyih Khánum

When I think back on it, it seemed that the Hand of God was clearly evident. Bahá'u'lláh revealed the Tablet of the Holy Mariner five days into the Naw-Rúz sojourn, a momentous Tablet foretelling the trials to come. After my Husband's secretary chanted the Tablet to the companions, Bahá'u'lláh told everyone they had to return immediately to the city. Then, while the men were taking down the tents, a servant arrived with a message for my Husband: He was invited to meet the Governor on the morrow. The future was set in motion.

Bahíyyih Khánum

The Governor of the city had become a devoted admirer of Father. We learned that, since January, five Decrees for the removal of Father from Baghdad had been delivered to him, but he had bravely ignored the first four. He was that loathe to see Bahá'u'lláh move away. Finally, however, the Governor accepted that he was in no position to ignore an official Decree. However, in his personal grief of my Father's impending departure, the Governor could not bring himself to impart the news directly. He sent his deputy governor to deliver the Sultan's Decree.

Ázíyih Khánum

My Husband was to be exiled to Constantinople within the month! Confusion and fear for the future overwhelmed the Bábís in Baghdad. Friends came to our home weeping helplessly, “What shall we do? What is going to happen to our Beloved?” Floods of other townsmen poured into the house to spend what precious minutes or hours they could with Bahá'u'lláh. It was hopeless. We women could not keep up. We were constantly refilling the samovars and baking more trays of sweets. And the men’s parlour was simply too small to accommodate all those who wished to pay their respects to my Husband. We ladies were drowning in the seemingly insurmountable circumstances.

Bahíyyih Khánum

Mother and I shall invoke eternal blessings and gratitude to the Governor. He sensed the predicament we faced in accommodating all the visitors. He graciously offered his own private Garden, located on a lovely island in the Tigris River, as a temporary abode for the men in the family. Bahá'u'lláh agreed to the arrangement. At Father’s departure from our home, the Bábí friends and companions crowded around Him, weeping, grief-stricken, even prostrating themselves on the ground. For some time, Father remained in our courtyard, consoling them with words of love and comfort. He promised to receive them all later in the Garden.

Ázíyih Khánum

My dear son ‘Abbás later told us that even on the short walk between house and river, the peoples of the city, men and women, rich and poor, young and old, men of learning and culture, princes, government officials, tradesmen and workers crammed the streets and rooftops to demonstrate their

grief and regret at His departure.

Bahíyyih Khánum

At the river's edge, Father addressed His disciples who had gathered around Him, saying: "O My companions, I entrust to your keeping this city of Baghdad, in the state ye now behold it, when from the eyes of friends and strangers alike, crowding its housetops, its streets and markets, tears like the rain of spring are flowing down, and I depart. With you it now rests to watch lest your deeds and conduct dim the flame of love that gloweth within the breasts of its inhabitants."

Father was then ferried across the river accompanied by my beloved brothers, 'Abbás, eighteen years old that year, and Mírzá Mihdí, fourteen. A number of male companions were present, as well.

Ázíyyih Khánum

On entering the Garden, the call to afternoon prayer was raised from the mosque and the words 'Allah'u'Akbar' (God is the Greatest) reverberated through the Garden. They say my beloved Husband appeared in the utmost joy, striding majestically down its flower and tree-lined avenues. I imagine the fragrance of the roses and the singing of the nightingales created an atmosphere of beauty and enchantment that surely delighted His heart.

Bahíyyih Khánum

My brother also told us later how, upon His arrival in the Garden, Bahá'u'lláh declared to His companions His station as the Manifestation of God for this Day. ‘Abbás recounted how the friends swooned with rapture at this announcement. Although Father was being exiled to far-off lands and knew the sufferings and tribulations in store for Him and His followers, yet through this historic Declaration, He changed all sorrow into blissful joy. Truly, He later told us, He spent the most delightful time of His ministry in the Garden of Ridván. In one of His later Tablets, He referred to that first day in the Ridván Garden as the ‘Day of supreme felicity’, and called on His followers to ‘rejoice, with exceeding gladness’ in remembrance of that day.

Ázíyih Khánum

Now I knew my intuition about my Husband had been correct. While the manner of the Declaration of Bahá'u'lláh's Mission is not clear, nor is the identity of all who heard Him recorded, one fact is clear. During His ten-year sojourn in ‘Iráq, even when Bahá'u'lláh's letters and Tablets had alluded to His station, He had never designated Himself as ‘Him Whom God shall make manifest’. It was in the Garden of Ridván that He unequivocally did so. He announced Himself as the One Whose advent the Báb had proclaimed, for Whose sake He had sacrificed Himself and for Whom He had established a covenant with His followers. No wonder the companions who were in His presence became ecstatic. They had just witnessed the most spiritual event imaginable, the public announcement of God's Prophet for this new Day, this promised Age.

Bahíyyih Khánum

The enemies of Bahá'u'lláh must have thought that they had bested my Father with this exile from Baghdad. But their gloating satisfaction turned to bitter ashes in their mouths. Even they sensed the victory that proceeded from the Garden of Ridván. With the public declaration of His ministry, Bahá'u'lláh turned the exile into the most joyous event of His life.

Meanwhile, we ladies were given the reprieve we needed. We sang with joy at the news and messages coming back from the Garden as we readied the provisions and packed our few belongings for the journey. I looked back on the past ten years, when as a frail child of six years of age, I had arrived in Baghdad. No longer was I a child, I would leave Baghdad a woman. Yes, we were preparing for our next exile but this time with joy in our hearts. We would still face hardships and heartache, but now we were confident of God's protection. We had just witnessed the renewal of His Covenant with mankind, through the embodiment of His chosen One, my Father, Bahá'u'lláh, the Glory of God.

Part III – 9th Day of Ridván, 1863

Ázíyih Khánum

With the departure of the men in our Family for the Garden of Ridván, the crowding of our home by my Husband's guests ceased. We ladies quickly packed our belongings and readied ourselves to move to the Garden. However, the river was in flood, and we were unable to cross safely until nine days had elapsed. This time allowed me to reflect on my dear children, my sons 'Abbás, who chose the name 'Abdu'l-Bahá after His Father died, my precious Mírzá Mihdí, and my incomparable daughter, Bahíyyih Khánum. I did my best to give reading and writing lessons to 'Abbás, but there was never time for Bahíyyih Khánum to learn her letters. Even as a little girl, she was ever my helper in the household tasks.

Bahíyyih Khánum

I did everything possible to relieve the burdens on my dear Mother. As an example, I took responsibility for keeping the samovar filled so that we were never without tea. One incident resulted in a great family joke. An old lady came to visit and I prepared the samovar. When full of water, it was a heavy burden for me to carry upstairs and with my thin arms, I was not the most robust young girl. The old lady said, “One proof that the Bábí teaching is wonderful is that a very little girl served the samovar!” Father, especially, found this amusing and said to me, “Here is the lady converted by seeing your service at the samovar!” It was good to laugh together.

Ázíyih Khánum

I did sometimes worry about the future of my lovely daughter. Normally she could have been married with a family of her own by this time. However, like ‘Abbás who had begged my Husband to be allowed to serve Him, Bahíyyih Khánum wanted nothing but to serve my Husband and me. She made it clear to us she did not want to marry so that she could devote her life to our Family. She implored her Father that He grant her request to remain unmarried. And my Husband acquiesced in her wish. Suitors in our community would have been honoured to marry into our Family, but Bahá’u’lláh turned them all away. In fact, I learned that He had told one of the friends that no man was worthy to marry such purity as His daughter.

Bahíyyih Khánum

At last! We ladies were able to cross the river and join our beloved Family in the beautiful Garden. Truly, this green and verdant island mirrored paradise. We learned that every morning just before dawn, gardeners had cut armfuls of roses from the bushes that lined the four avenues of the garden, and piled them in the centre of the floor of my Father’s tent. The heap of roses was so great that His companions, gathered to drink their morning tea, were unable to see each other over the flowers.

Great numbers of friends and admirers from the city came to the island every day to pay their respects to Father. Notables and dignitaries, men of learning and culture, and many ordinary people too, were among the throngs. The Bábís who accepted my Father's declaration also came to visit Him during the daytime but only those who had no family ties were permitted to stay for the night. Some of them kept vigil around His tent.

Ázíyih Khánum

My Husband loved that Garden so much. On the ninth night, when many of the companions were asleep, He left His tent at midnight. Bathed in the soft moonlight, He paced up and down the flower-lined avenues. He listened to the enrapturing song of the nightingales and voiced odes of His own. We learned later that one of the friends overheard Him say, "Consider these nightingales. So great is their love for these roses, that sleepless from dusk till dawn, they warble their melodies and commune with burning passion with the object of their adoration. How then can those who claim to be afire with the rose-like beauty of the Beloved choose to sleep?"

Bahíyyih Khánum

When we were still in our home, we had cooked food and sent it over to the Garden every day. After we moved to the island, meals were prepared in the home of one of the friends and sent to us. Other preparations were underway. The construction of howdahs was in hand, the covered seat which was set on the back of a mule in which two people usually were accommodated, mostly the women and children. One howdah was especially built for my Father and He would use it quite often on our coming journey to Constantinople.

However, we were truly delighted with another development. We learned that the Governor had a very beautiful horse, a red roan stallion of the finest breed, which he wanted to send to his son in Constantinople, and he asked Father to take the horse and use it on the journey. And Father agreed! My Father loved horses and was a very fine rider.

Ázíyih Khánum

Once we ladies had arrived in the Garden, the departure was scheduled for three days hence. The authorities appointed a detachment of soldiers to accompany our party on the journey to Constantinople, outwardly a protection from thieves and attacks on the roads. Then the Governor, who loved Bahá'u'lláh, offered to provide funds for the journey but my Husband declined his generous offer, saying we had all we needed. When the Governor insisted on being of some service, my Husband asked him simply to be considerate to the friends left behind in Baghdad and treat them kindly. The Governor agreed and he also wrote a letter to the officials on the route, instructing them to provide the travellers with all necessities and courtesies. My Husband took the letter but en route, He arranged to pay for all provisions instead of taking advantage of the Governor's letter.

Part IV – 12th Day of Ridván, 1863

Bahíyyih Khánum

The day of departure had arrived. Friends and companions assembled in huge numbers to say farewell, amid their tears. The details and arrangements took most of the day. The mules were loaded and the howdahs were settled upon them. We ladies and the younger children took our seats.

Toward sunset, the red roan stallion was brought out for Father. Seeing Him in the saddle and truly ready to depart Baghdad aroused the crowds to heart-rending, unbearable cries of distress. I had no doubt that the splendid beast had a lot to do with setting the scene. There had always been horses available to my Father, but until then, He had chosen to ride donkeys. My Father's majesty was truly unveiled to the people when they witnessed Him on that majestic stallion. They threw themselves into the path of the horse's hooves in feeble attempts to delay His departure. Later one of the friends said, "it seemed as if that heavenly steed was passing over sanctified bodies and pure hearts".

Ázíyih Khánum

Another symbol of His new Station of divine authority was now in evidence. When He left our home twelve days earlier, He wore a táj, a tall felt hat usually worn by the leaders of the Súfí religious order. He wore the táj for the rest of His life. We used our most exquisite embroidery to adorn them.

But the táj and splendid stallion were merely outward symbols of His newly revealed Station.

The ten years in Baghdad had drawn to a close. For the past seven of those years, Bahá'u'lláh had rebuilt the Bábí community into one with its foundations reinforced, its spirit exalted and its outlook transformed. He had won conspicuous victories over those who would have harmed, even destroyed, Him.

The time had come to further advance God's Plan for this Age, to reveal the Divine Mission entrusted to Bahá'u'lláh. It is a plan which the future great grandson of Bahá'u'lláh would define as "one and indivisible, whose Source is God, whose author is Bahá'u'lláh, the theatre of whose operations is the entire planet, and whose ultimate objectives are the unity of the human race and the peace of all mankind."