

LIFT THE VEIL

A PLAY ABOUT THE BÁB

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1N = First Narrator, **2N** = Second Narrator, **Q** = Quddús, **T** = Ṭáhirih, **A** = ‘Alí Khán

SCENE ONE

1N - Every age requireth a fresh measure of the light of God. Each Divine Revelation hath been sent down in accordance with the needs of that age. Divine Revelation is progressive.

The holy, heavenly Manifestations of God have been the Teachers. They are the divine Gardeners Who transform the jungles of human nature into fruitful orchards and make the thorny places blossom as the rose.

On 23 May 1844, the Báb declared that He was the Promised One, the new Messenger of God. The first 18 souls who through their own efforts, sought and recognized the Báb were called the Letters of the Living and they were the first 18 disciples of the Báb.

The Persians among whom the Báb appeared were known throughout the world for their religious fanaticism, their gross ignorance and savagery.

Our first scene is set in the city of Shíráz in Írán, formerly known as Persia, in 1844.

2N - One night the Báb was talking to the first Letter of the Living, Mullá Ḥusayn. The Báb told him that there were now 17 Letters of the Living and there remained only one more to complete the total of 18. These Letters of the Living would arise and proclaim His Cause and establish His Faith. Tomorrow night the remaining Letter would arrive to complete the number of His chosen disciples.

During the evening of the next day, as the Báb was returning to His home, followed by Mullá Ḥusayn, (*Quddús walks out from behind a curtain*) there appeared a youth, dusty and travel-stained. This youth knew Mullá Ḥusayn, and knew that he also was looking for the Promised One.

Q - I am that youth, whose name is Quddús. I asked Mullá Ḥusayn whether he had attained his goal of finding the Promised One. Mullá Ḥusayn tried to calm my agitation and advised me to rest for the moment, promising that he would enlighten me later. But I refused to heed his advice. Fixing my gaze upon the Báb, I said to Mullá Ḥusayn: “Why seek you to hide Him from me? I can recognise Him by His gait, (how He walks). I confidently testify that none besides Him, whether in the East or in the West, can claim to be the Truth. None other can manifest the power and majesty that radiate from His holy person.”

2N - Mullá Ḥusayn could not believe what he was hearing. He quickly proceeded towards the Báb to tell Him about the conversation he just had with this youth. The Báb told Mullá Ḥusayn not to marvel at Quddús’ strange behaviour, because He had in the world of the spirit already been conversing with Quddús. The Báb had been awaiting Quddús’ arrival and asked Mullá Ḥusayn to summon Quddús to His presence. In this way Quddús became the Eighteenth Letter of the Living.

IN - Later in that same year of 1844, the Báb went on pilgrimage to the holy shrines of Mecca and Medina in Arabia. The Báb took Quddús with Him, as His only companion, and an Ethiopian servant, as His personal attendant. One of the recorded traditions of Shí‘ah Islám states that when the Promised One appears He will announce Himself at the Ka‘bih, the Black Stone, in Mecca.

Q - In October of 1844, the three of us traveled to Búshíhr, a city west of Shíráz on the Persian Gulf, where we boarded a sailing vessel bound for Jaddih, near Mecca. The boat was crowded with Muslim pilgrims. The voyage was long and arduous, lasting about 2 months. From the time we embarked at Búshíhr to the day we landed at Jaddih, the Báb and I were absorbed in our work. (*Quddús kneels down and motions as if he is writing on a paper*) He dictated and I took down whatever prayers and epistles He revealed. The high seas tossed our sailing vessel and made most of the pilgrims on board sick. Even when our fellow-passengers were seized with panic during the violent storm nothing disturbed our calm confidence or turned us from our purpose.

Once we arrived in Jaddih, the Báb put on the traditional clothing of a pilgrim and mounted a camel, and we continued our journey to the holy city of Mecca. Despite the Báb’s wishes that I also ride, I preferred to accompany Him on foot (*Quddús walks and motions as if holding the bridle of a camel*) and hold the bridle of His camel in my hand. I was ready at all times to provide for His needs and to ensure the means of His protection and safety.

One day we stopped near a well to offer our morning prayers. (*Quddús stops walking*) The Báb had left his saddlebag containing His writings and papers on the ground nearby. (*Quddús kneels down as if saying prayers*) While we were saying our prayers, a roving Bedouin suddenly appeared, snatched the saddlebag and ran off with it into the desert. (*Quddús suddenly looks over his shoulder*) The Báb’s faithful servant started to run after the thief. The Báb, without interrupting His prayers, made a sign with His hand for His servant to abandon the chase. The Báb later on affectionately assured him saying, “Had I allowed you, you would surely have overtaken and punished him. But this was not to be. The papers and writings which that bag contained are destined to reach, through the instrumentality of this Arab, such places as we could never have succeeded in attaining. Grieve not, therefore, at his action, for this was decreed by God, the Ordainer, the Almighty.”

IN - On many similar occasions, the Báb sought to comfort His friends by such reflections. By words such as these He turned the bitterness of regret and resentment into radiant acquiescence in the Divine purpose and into joyous submission to God’s will.

Q – In Mecca the Báb performed all of the prescribed rites of worship expected of a Muslim pilgrim, with dignity and reverence. (*Quddús walks reverently around a big circle and then stops*) Then the moment came, when the Báb stood against the Black Stone, the Ka‘bih. He took hold of the ring on its door and called out loudly and clearly: (*Quddús motions as if taking hold of the ring*)

I am that Qá’im whose advent you have been awaiting.
I am that Qá’im whose advent you have been awaiting.
I am that Qá’im whose advent you have been awaiting.

A sudden hush fell over the great crowd of pilgrims that were present. The full implication of those momentous words eluded the vast majority of pilgrims there. But the news of the Báb’s claim to be the Qá’im, the Promised One soon spread far and wide.

The Báb, then, wrote a letter to the Sherif, the chief religious figure of Mecca. The Báb set forth, in clear and unmistakable terms, the distinguishing features of His mission, and called upon the Sherif to arise and embrace His Cause. I delivered this letter to the Sherif myself. (*Quddús stretches his arm forward as if hand-delivering the letter*) A few days later, I returned for his reply. The Sherif had not bothered to read the letter, because he was too busy. (*Quddús walks behind the curtain*)

SCENE TWO

2N- Our second scene is set in Qazvín, Persia, the home of Ṭáhirih, the only woman Letter of the Living. She was considered by some, the Persian Joan of Arc, and a leader for the emancipation of women.

(Ṭáhirih is sitting on a chair behind a curtain that is thin enough, so as to be able to see her silhouette. Next to her is a small side table with a lamp that she just turned on. She is wearing a chador/niqab with her face covered.)

T – I am Ṭáhirih and I was born in 1817 in Qazvín, a city in Persia, which at that time was one of the main centres of the Muslim religion. My father and uncle were well-known priests and teachers of Islám. My brother also liked discussing religion, so from an early age I loved listening to religious stories. I begged my father to give me permission to listen to his classes, even though women were not allowed to attend religious classes. He finally granted me permission, provided that I always sit behind a curtain, so that none of the men would know I was there. My father often said that he wished I had been a boy, because if I were a boy, I would have followed in his footsteps and added glory to the family name.

One day when I was visiting my cousin's house, I found a book there, that explained that the time was near for the coming of a new Prophet of God, who would fulfil the promises of all the religions, and especially of Islám. I was so excited and wanted to learn more. *(Ṭáhirih stands up, still behind the curtain)* After pleading with my cousin, he lent me some writings from the great scholars and modern thinkers, Shaykh Aḥmad and Siyyid Kázim, (who explained more about the coming of this new Prophet of God.) My father was furious and criticised and denounced their teachings. *(Ṭáhirih waves her arms around as if in a heated discussion, still behind the curtain)* I had many heated discussions with my father about questions such as the Advent of the Promised One and the Resurrection and the Day of Judgment.

After that, I ceased to debate and contend with my father. *(Ṭáhirih sits down again and moves as if writing a letter)* I began a secret correspondence with Siyyid Kázim, regarding the solution of complex theological problems. Both Shaykh Ahmad and Siyyid Kázim, were so logical and convincing in their arguments, that I longed to meet them. But, Shaykh Aḥmad had died a few years before, and Siyyid Kázim lived in Karbilá, 'Iráq, a long distance from where I lived in Írán. Karbilá was one of the holy cities of Islám and many people who could not go to the Holy city of Mecca, would instead go to the shrines in Karbilá. My sister and I were finally allowed to go to Karbilá to visit these Muslim shrines. My father was aware that if I went to Karbilá I would also visit Siyyid Kázim, but he hoped that by seeing the sacred shrines, I would change my mind and become a true Muslim again and not keep talking about the coming of a new Prophet.

1N – Ṭáhirih set out for Karbilá, the city in 'Iráq, *(Ṭáhirih comes out from behind the curtain)* hoping to meet Siyyid Kázim, the great scholar and modern thinker, but he passed away only 10 days before her arrival. *(Ṭáhirih falls to her knees, bends over and cries)* She was overcome with sadness and wept for days. So disappointed was she about not meeting her new teacher, that Siyyid Kázim's family invited her to stay with them. They let her read all of his writings, many of which had never been published. *(Ṭáhirih sits up and motions as if reading a book)*

2N - While in Karbilá, she had a dream that she saw a young man, a descendant of the Prophet Muḥammad, in the heavens. *(Ṭáhirih looks up, as if dreaming)* A few days later, she learned that her sister's husband was soon to leave in search of the Promised One. Ṭáhirih gave him a letter to give to the Promised One, *(Ṭáhirih stretches her arm out, as if giving the letter)* declaring her belief in Him. Her sister's husband did find the Promised One, the Báb and became the sixteenth Letter of the Living. When the Báb read Ṭáhirih's letter, He immediately declared her to be the seventeenth Letter of the Living.

1N - While still in Karbilá, the foremost stronghold of Shí‘ah Islám, (*Ṭáhirih moves as if writing a letter*) Ṭáhirih was moved to write lengthy epistles to each of the Muslim scholars residing in that city, who relegated women to a rank little higher than animals and denied them even the possession of a soul. She wrote epistles in which she ably vindicated her high purpose and exposed their malignant designs. Ṭáhirih had already become famous all over Írán as the most beautiful and most well-educated woman in the country.

T - Soon everyone in Karbilá, that holy city in ‘Iráq, knew that I had become a follower of the Báb, and I openly taught His Faith. I celebrated the anniversary of the Birth of the Báb, instead of commemorating a Muslim holy day, and for that was put under house arrest for three months, waiting for news of further punishment for my actions. While under house arrest, I received news that the Báb had called a conference of His leading followers to take place in Badasht, Írán. At that time Bahá’u’lláh was a leading Bábí, a follower of the Báb, and would be present at the conference. I was overjoyed and wanted to go. But I was still under house arrest, so I wrote a letter to the Governor, who finally allowed me to leave and told me that I was free, but must leave ‘Iráq the very next day. This made me so happy as I was eager to be on my way to the conference in Írán.

2N – On her way from ‘Iráq to the conference in Írán, she continued teaching the Faith and many people began to investigate the Truth for themselves.

T - There were a total of 81 Bábís at the conference, but The Báb was not able to attend, because he was in prison. Quddús and Bahá’u’lláh were among those present at the conference. It was the beginning of summer and the believers consulted comfortably and freely in the gardens at Badasht. Every day, Bahá’u’lláh would reveal a new Tablet or explanation, which one of the Bábís would chant for everyone to hear. In these tablets, Bahá’u’lláh gave each person present a new name for the New Day. He Himself accepted the name Bahá, which the Báb had already given to Him. Bahá’u’lláh gave me the title Ṭáhirih, which meant the “Pure One”.

1N - At that time in the early development of this new Faith, the Báb had not yet revealed to His followers His full importance. He had not yet told them that He was the beginning of a whole New Era, as the Promised One, and that laws would necessarily have to change. It was left to Bahá’u’lláh and Quddús to announce the advent and beginning of this new Dispensation, this new, independent religion. However, there were faint hearts in the Bábí ranks and because Ṭáhirih had always been bold enough to assert that this was indeed a new day, she had previously been met with opposition from her fellow-Bábís. Any announcement at Badasht would have to be emphatic and unhedged, to make a persuasive impact. And this is what it was, in a most dramatic way.

2N - Before Bahá’u’lláh and Quddús could announce the advent of this new Dispensation, Bahá’u’lláh fell ill and was confined to His bed. Quddús, as soon as he heard of Bahá’u’lláh’s indisposition, hastened to visit Him. The others also gathered around Bahá’u’lláh’s tent, all the believers, except Ṭáhirih. Being a woman, she was not permitted to be in the presence of the men, unless she was covered. (*Ṭáhirih motions as if sending her messenger on*) But Ṭáhirih sent Quddús a message, to say that because Bahá’u’lláh was ill, Quddús should come to see her instead, (so that they could talk about making this great announcement of the advent of the new Dispensation.) Ṭáhirih’s messenger explained to Quddús that if he refused, then Ṭáhirih would come to him. Quddús did refuse Ṭáhirih’s request. This did not surprise anyone, because Quddús was visiting Bahá’u’lláh, but what happened next did surprise everyone. Because Quddús would not come to see her, Ṭáhirih came to see Quddús! And not only did she come into the garden of Bahá’u’lláh where all the men were, but she came with her face unveiled, (*Ṭáhirih takes her veil off and shouts, as she is walking*) and as she came she shouted these words,

T - The Trumpet is sounding! The great Trumpet is blown! The universal Advent is proclaimed! (*Ṭáhirih stands still with her arms still in the air*)

1N - The men believers in the tent were panic stricken and shaken to the depths of their being to see her like this. To behold her face unveiled was to them inconceivable. Even to gaze at her shadow was a thing which they deemed improper, inasmuch as they regarded her as the noblest emblem of chastity in their eyes. Fear, anger, bewilderment, swept their inmost souls, and stunned their faculties. Táhirih had called upon them to break with the past, with its religious dogmas, its traditions and ceremonies.

After the uproar subsided, Bahá'u'lláh asked one of the believers to read a passage from the *Qur'án*, which tells of the Day of Resurrection when new laws and customs are called for.

2N - This was a great turning-point in the religious history of the world. It was a sudden, startling and complete break from the dark forces of fanaticism, of priesthood and of religious orthodoxy. It was not marked by pomp nor pageantry. In this modest setting, there was only a single woman and a handful of men. They were devoid, with few exceptions, of wealth, prestige and power. The Báb, Himself was even absent, as he was in prison. The trumpeter of this new Dispensation was a lone woman. She sounded the clarion-call of the new Order.

In this way, the object of that memorable conference was attained. The new Dispensation was announced! The universal Advent was proclaimed and the great Resurrection was made manifest!

1N - Not long after the conference, Táhirih was sentenced to death by two Muslim priests. She became the first Bábí woman martyr. At her death, she turned to the one in whose custody she had been placed, and boldly declared: (*Táhirih turns around and says clearly*)

T - "You can kill me as soon as you like, but you cannot stop the emancipation of women." (*Táhirih then return behind the curtain and turns off the lamp*)

SCENE THREE

2N - For our third scene, we journey back to the Báb, when He was incarcerated in the castle prison of Máh-Kú.

The Prime Minister Áqásí had ordered the Báb to be imprisoned at Máh-Kú, believing that few, if any, of the Bábís would dare to venture into this remote, inhospitable and dangerously-situated corner of Persia and that, isolated from His followers, the influence of the Báb would speedily dwindle and die altogether. He gave orders that the Bab should be kept in strict confinement and that absolutely no one should be allowed to visit Him.

(*‘Alí Khán comes out from behind the curtain and looks from the right to the left, as if to make sure no one is trying to get into the prison without his permission*)

1N - The governor of the prison and chief jailer, ‘Alí Khán, was a rough and simple man. He was anxious to please the Prime Minister, who had been his life-long associate. The Prime Minister, being from Máh-Kú himself, knew that he could normally rely completely on the loyalty and obedience of the people of Máh-Kú.

A - No, no one is allowed to visit my prisoner! I am ‘Alí Khán, the chief jailer. I have to follow the Prime Minister’s instructions carefully and keep the Báb in strict confinement. I only allowed the two brothers, Siyyid Husayn and Siyyid Hasan, to be with Him. I even denied the Báb a candle.

2N - Despite the strictness of His confinement, the influence of the Báb was felt in Máh-Kú from the moment of His arrival. The guards reported on the extraordinary character of their Prisoner: they told the townspeople of His gentle charm, His wisdom and His tender love. Soon the peasant farmers of the area began to gather each day beneath the castle walls, anxious for a glimpse of Him. They begged for His blessing on their daily work and when they quarrelled or had disputes to settle, they implored each other beneath the castle walls, to tell the truth in His name.

A - (*‘Alí Khán tries hard to stop them, he motions with his arms, but he could not stop them.*) Stop this! Stop this!

1N - One morning before anyone was awake in the prison, a furious knocking began at the prison gate. (*‘Alí Khán knocks hard*) The guards were startled, for they had been given orders that no one was to enter before sunrise. They were even more startled to hear the voice of the chief jailer, ‘Alí Khán, calling them to open the door.

A – Open the door! Open this door!

1N - When the startled guards hurriedly opened the prison gates, they were astonished to see ‘Alí Khán standing submissively on the threshold, his face expressing humility and wonder.

(*Very courteously, ‘Alí Khán begs to be allowed to enter the presence of his Prisoner.*)

A - Please, let me enter His presence! Please, let me enter!

1N - He could not hide his agitation: his hands shook and his limbs trembled as he walked towards the Báb’s prison cell. The Bab rose to receive him. (*‘Alí Khán bowed reverently and flung himself at His feet*)

A - Deliver me from my perplexity. I beseech You, dispel my doubts, for the weight has well-nigh crushed my heart. I was riding through the wilderness and was approaching the gate of the town, when, it being the hour of dawn, my eyes suddenly beheld You standing by the side of the river engaged in offering Your prayer. With outstretched arms and upraised eyes You were invoking the name of God.

I stood still and watched You. I was waiting for You to finish Your devotions, so that I could approach and rebuke You for having left the prison without my leave. In Your state of rapture, You remained wholly unaware of my presence.

Suddenly, I was seized with fear and decided not to interrupt You, so I proceeded to the guards to reprove them for their negligent conduct. I soon found out, to my amazement, that both the outer and the inner gates were closed. They were opened at my request. I was ushered into Your presence and now find You, to my wonder, seated before me. I am utterly confounded. I know not whether my reason has deserted me.

2N - The Báb answered, “What you have witnessed is true and undeniable. You belittled this Revelation and have contemptuously disdained its Author. God, the All-Merciful ... has willed to reveal to your eyes the Truth. By His Divine interposition, He has instilled into your heart the love of His chosen One, and caused you to recognise the unconquerable power of His Faith.”

A - (*‘Alí Khán humbly begged the Báb to grant him a request*) Please, I beg You, grant my request. A poor man is yearning to attain Your presence. He lives in a mosque outside the gate of Máh-Kú. I pray You that I myself be allowed to bring him to this place that he may meet You. By this act I hope that my evil deeds may be forgiven, that I may be enabled to wash away the stains of my cruel behaviour towards You and Your friends.

2N - The Báb granted his request and (*‘Ali Khán hurries off the stage*) ‘Alí Khán hurried away to bring the poor man to the Báb. ‘Alí Khán became, from that day, so devoted to the Báb that he did all he could to make the Báb’s time in the prison more tolerable. He presented Him with gifts of the choicest fruit (*‘Ali Khán brings fruit onto the stage*) available in the neighbourhood and he came every Friday to pay Him a respectful visit. The prison gates were still locked at night but in the daytime all were allowed access. Many Bábís began to travel to Máh-Kú from all parts of Persia. The Báb allowed each pilgrim to stay for three days and then sent them away with instructions to carry on the teaching work. (*‘Ali Khán walks off the stage with the fruit*)

1N - After some time, the Prime Minister heard reports of these events. He was bewildered and furious that such events could occur in his own birthplace. He fumed and raged in helpless frustration and struggled to think what action he should take next. He had been unable to isolate the Báb from His followers, and in his attempt to do so he had unwittingly been the cause of introducing the person and the teachings of the Báb to his own birthplace. He had moreover, unintentionally, by isolating the Báb from His family and relatives, provided Him with the comparative peace necessary for Him to reveal and record His teachings.

A – (*‘Ali Khán comes back on the stage to tell of the poor man again*) I remember that poor man once telling me that, “the voice of the Báb, as He dictated the teachings and principles of His Faith, could be clearly heard by those who were dwelling at the foot of the mountain.” (*‘Ali Khán looks up, as if looking toward the mountain*) The melody of His chanting, the rhythmic flow of the verses which streamed from His lips caught our ears and penetrated into our very souls. Mountain and valley re-echoed the majesty of His voice. Our hearts vibrated in their depths to the appeal of His utterance.”

1N - Hearing all of this, the Prime Minister Áqásí ordered the Báb to an even more remote, inaccessible prison, the fortress of Chihríq, (*‘Ali Khán walks off the stage*) thinking surely this time the influence of the Báb would speedily dwindle and die altogether.

2N - Far from dying, the Báb’s teachings spread to all parts of Persia and beyond. The Báb had come to prepare the people of Persia for the coming of Baha’u’llah. It was very necessary to prepare the way, because at first people are never ready to accept such big changes. They want to keep the old ways, that they have always known. For this reason, many of them did not want to listen to the Báb. But despite this, in just nine short years, the Báb’s message did spread throughout Persia, and did prepare the way for the coming of yet another Messenger of God, Bahá’u’lláh.

1N - Today, the light of the Báb’s message has gone around the planet and burns more brightly with each passing year. Men and women on every continent and island are hearing the message of the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh and are finding in their teachings nourishment for their souls, the renewal of their highest ideals and aspirations and a joyous confidence in the certainty of a peaceful and happy future for the human family.

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