

A Tribute to Bahíyyih Khánum by Marjorie Morten

She was the daughter of Bahá'u'lláh and Ásíyyih Khánum and the sister of 'Abdu'l Bahá. She was named Bahíyyih. To the followers of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh she was known and revered as The Greatest Holy Leaf. To those she lived among she was Khánum which is to say, Lady. It is this Khánum the woman, her pervading spirit, who lives on in the hearts of all who knew and loved her, -- Khánum, moving serene and steadfast through the days; showing goodness in a simple sharing of each day's portion and leaving for us to take and share in turn precious morsels of the substance that was for her the daily bread of life.



Khánum 1895

When you think of the traits and ways that made up her lovely behavior she comes to

you at first, perhaps, as she welcomed you among her guests, -- gracefully erect and poised, controlled yet at ease, -- putting others at ease, without familiarity, -- and with the mild dignity, simplicity and unselfconsciousness of a great lady. Her graciousness and courtesy reflected the courtly Persia of another day. Even with her family she observed some of the punctilio of that day, gestures that for her were a part of a living ritual rather than a dead form; delicate values of human relationships that outlast all form and fashion and that expressed her innate respect and consideration for every fellow-being.

And those restraining customs which in the East still hedged about a lady of her rank and station you saw as you came to know her that she accepted as she would inclement weather that kept her indoors; saw that she had molded her life to the bounds of her sphere, pouring into it the resources of her own spirit, and had found scope for all her qualities. Her balance, sense of fineness and fitness and practical judgment she displayed in creating order and grace in the household, and all the elements that make for well-being she blended in an ambience of harmony. Her strong will was never used to override and her decided opinions were never pressed upon another. Her ways were gentle. Others might break the shell with a blow; it was for her to unsheath the kernel with infinite care and skill. In her you met with no exactions, no biddance; she beckoned, smiling, and would have no one come heavy-footed or bent to her will. So quietly did she make her influence felt that you were scarcely conscious of its working.

And she shed her creative sympathy in the form of tender interest in every detail in the

lives of those around her, entering into their hours in the small and filling them with happiness. At the moment you did not recognize this sympathy as sympathy, but enjoyed it in pleasure. It is a charming Persian habit to wrap a gift in an embroidered silk or linen cloth, as fine in its way as the thing enclosed. So, always, she gave a gift within the gift. You took the happy warmth of contentment you felt when you were with her and only later came to realize that this was the fine wrapping of a deeper joy, a richer core. One of the endless glimpses of this two-fold blessing we had one day when we were with her in Àkká and she lay ill of fever, while all the house was filled with hushed preparations for a wedding that evening. Just before the simple ceremony she sent for the young girl, -- hardly more than a child, -- who came trembling and tearful. She blessed her with a smile, touched her white cotton dress and the veil and wreath of orange flowers we had improvised for her in western fashion, and said softly, "How very pretty!" The little bride forgot her fears at that word of approval and went to her marriage with a blessing she was not yet able to understand.

Among the Persians a mother in admonishing or consoling her child calls it *mádar* mother. This tender expression she used generally to all those who were close about her. Her murmur of, "*mádar ayb nadárad,*" *Mother, never mind,*" - was an assuaging echo in the house. To each one she was comforter. But you would not be content to describe her as motherly. Motherliness is too confining a term. Mother-love embraces and holds, however lightly; has something of possessiveness, something that asks response to the love showered. There was no hint of this in her affection. She left spirit and body alike utterly free, demanding nothing of those she loved. And she would, it seemed, have them unaware of any debt of love. So light was her touch that she woke in them no sense

of responsibility or conscious gratitude. Even when she comforted, her caress was feather soft; for she knew that those in sore need can be bruised by the least pressure of compassion. She would give the balm itself and add no weight of her own hand; so that healing and comfort came as a magic gift. At the time you neither knew nor asked its source, and your thankfulness overflowed in a happy sharing of the gift.



Khánúm 1919

She would not weigh your worth and reward you according to your deserts; nor would she consider whether your pain were inflicted or self-provoked, as if she knew that suffering has a sanctity of its own. She never sat in judgment and was not concerned with separating the sheep from the goats. Not only did she not single out black from white in the flock, but in the inner fold of your own nature she did not call the fault dark nor see the white lamb in a good action. She would not

use criticism and censure. When you brought her your darkness she lit a taper. If you had done wrong or failed in your effort, or even failed to make the effort, she loved you the more, conscious of your chagrin in failure; pitying you for your weakness and defeat and pitying you, too, if you did not suffer and felt no shame in failure.



Khánum 1931

You were sure that if one tried to hurt her she would wish to console him for his own cruelty. For her love was unconditioned, could penetrate disguise and see hunger behind the mask of fury, and she knew that the most brutal self is secretly hoping to find gentleness in another. She had that rarest

heart -- courage, -- to uncover the very quick of tenderness to any need. And so deep was her understanding that she plumbed all the miseries of the human heart and read their significance, blessing both the victim and the valid pain itself.

So alive was she to the source of all bounty that she had no consciousness of her own bounty. When she made a gift she seemed to be thanking you for it. The prompting included gratitude. When she gave joy she blessed you for it. It was almost as if she did not distinguish giving from receiving; as when, during the last year of her life, she went one summer day to the mountain with the children of her family and sat watching them at their picnic. To have her there with them made the day a festival. This joy that she shed she shared. . . . And when they came down in the evening she thanked them for her delight in their play and for the happiness their happiness had given her.

Though she was unaware of her own loving-kindness she was moved by the least trace of it in others. To serve her was not duty; it was high privilege. But she took nothing for granted in the way of devoted service and even in her last hours she whispered or smiled her thanks for every little ministrations. Her generosity was instinctive, not considered; you felt no pause between impulse and act. You knew that her openhandedness was the evidence of an unbroken stream of impelling kindness that flowed through her, that never failed. She delighted in making presents, -- sweetmeats and goodies and coins for the children, and for others flowers, keepsakes, -- a vial of attar of roses, a rosary, or some delicate thing that she had used and cared for. Anything that was given her she one day gave to someone else, someone in whom she felt a special need of a special favour. She was channel rather than cup; open treasury, not locked casket.

And as she would not lock away her small treasures, neither would she store up her wisdom and her riches of experience. In her, experience left no bitter ash. Her flame transmuted all of life, even its crude and base particles, into gold. And this gold she spent. Her wisdom was of the heart. She never reduced it to formula or precept; we have no wise sayings of hers that we can hang motto-like on our walls. Just by being what she was she gave us all that she knew.

A thousand of the things that cannot be uttered by the human tongue she spoke in smile and glance, and in tender silence.

Often she would sit silent in a hum of voices, but never shut in a shell of silence, never isolated nor aloof. Her stillness was neither empty nor insistent; it did not hush nor summon others to quiet, but made accompaniment to the play of voices around her. How full she was of deep tranquility; how far removed from mere placidity. She loved laughter and often joined in the eager, merry moods of the young people who clustered about her. These responsive humours were happy ripples on the sea of her tranquility.

She was seldom alone. The unity and selflessness that some may win by vigil and withdrawal she reached and maintained in the company of others. Her whole attitude of life was prayer. Her thoughts were kneeling thoughts. She found communion in shared quietude, and privacy in a sunny room where children played. Her room was the heart of the house. Around the glow of her brazier in winter or when she sat on her window divan in full sunlight, old and young would gather near her, filtering in one by one, slipping out again to work or play, or pausing for a moment in a busy day at the doorway for a glimpse. You left your shoes at the threshold of that room and you left, too, any outer

covering of pose or manner you might have made for yourself for protection in a bleak world. Here was no need for pretence and brave showing; here in the light of her shining simplicity you became simple. All fear went out of you, all shyness, all timidity. Insensibly she tempered coldness and warmed indifference. You did not think, "How good she is; how selfish am I." For the moment self was forgotten and, in the forgetting, conscious standards of comparison were lost. The current of intent that fed the ego was cut. You were free.

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Although for so many years she had been the head of that great household, directing every detail of its ordering, she showed no urge to small activity. When there was something to be done she did it straightway, giving it her full attention. When she sat with folded hands she was wholly there; no part of her mind seemed to be busy with the next step, the duty to come. It was in keeping with her harmony with life that she gave herself in her entirety to her hours of companionship and so made them complete. Islands in time.

And she was not only in harmony with life and those who peopled it for her; she was never in conflict nor at variance within herself. In her inclinations you heard no dissident minority of hesitation, no murmur of reluctance that robs the act of its purity, its generosity. Her personality was so attuned to her spirit that integrity and purity were her natural expression, and her habit of recognizing and choosing the pure in all things was involuntary. She was incorruptible rather than innocent, for she knew the shapes of evil and faced them fearlessly. She regarded all life with

something more generous than tolerance and her outlook was uncolored by any slightest tint of prejudice. If you had looked for fault you would have found only human sides of her rare qualities, and these sides linked you with her in understanding and allowed awe to give way to devotion.

She was not learned nor even educated in a worldly sense; she drew her wisdom from hidden springs. Though her intelligence was of the heart, that heart itself was filled from sources deeper than human knowledge. She did not read much or often write but was in a constant state of communication with life. You felt that every object held something of import for her; that every phase of nature and every thing, animate and inanimate, were as letters and syllables formed to a message for her reading. And all that she gathered she translated into ways of living. She did not expound or teach; won you by no argument or triumph of wit; never lent herself to persuasion or appeal. Depth to depth she shared with you a secret that through some alchemy of spirit fed your instant need.

If she found you troubled she would not discuss your difficulties and try to solve your problems. You forgot them. Confusion and complexity were dissolved in her warm clarity. You reached with her a region of consciousness beyond clamour and doubt and beyond questioning. You were reassured. With a word she gave you certainty, and reality of assurance.

When a fig is plucked very early in the morning before the sun has warmed it, it holds a clear honeyed drop at the base. Its sweetness, distilled during the night, is condensed at dawn into a single globule suspended from the cool globe of the fruit, the soul of the fruit. . . . So she gave you the essence together with the solid body of the fact.

And as she showed us love in all the manifold workings of its guiding power and in the countless shades of its reflected glory, yielding herself utterly to its breath and so making it plain to our eyes, as a tree in abandoning itself to the wind becomes the breeze made visible, -- so, too, she made us feel that back of love itself is a mightier force, its Essence, which we are not yet able to bear in all its fullness.

When you went to her unsatisfied and restless you discovered that your unrest and discontent were really homelessness of spirit. Over the next hill and the next you had gone, searching for sanctuary and peace. Here in her white room you found them. You found the way to bring heaven to little things, to compass the infinite with four walls. Here was home.

She seemed not to separate this plane from the next, nor to long, -- for all the rigours of her years, -- to escape to the bright wonder of the future life. In her daily round she carried the commonplace to the edge of dream and showed you wonder in the trivial and the fugitive. Small things were not small to her; they were fragments of the vast. She gave you, not hope of bliss to come, but realization of present happiness. With her you felt marvel in every tiniest aspect of life around you, -- a flower, a shadow on the wall, a fold of her veil, a voice in the garden below; all these were touched with enchantment. You became aware of the mystery of the spirit animating all things, and of the preciousness of every instant. This moment, this now, was tinged with the beauty of the eternal and held an atom of happiness, absolute and eternal.

Though she had nothing of luxury and her possessions were few and of no great intrinsic value, she made none of the denial of life of the ascetic. She loved beauty. You would

say that she lent to her surroundings her sense of order, fragrance and exquisiteness, but you look in vain for words to describe that inner sensibility of which these were the outer gossamer traces. Ever after, to those who had known her, any lovely thing, any perfection of refinement was a reminder of her. She was immortalized in all beauty. In the moth-green and silver of spring you find something of her fragrance and delicacy; in the fountain jet that is the voice of the garden you hear her. You remember her in the sound of the sea, and in the laughter of children. Wherever happiness is or friendship, she is there.

We of the West knew her only in the latter days of her life. But we could not find it in our hearts to wish that we had known her in her youth or earlier womanhood rather than in the time of her fulfillment. She had none of the habits of mind which we have come to associate with age. We see old age musing, looking over its shoulder; sighing over memories flattened between pages turned with the years, -- distinct, perhaps, and sharp in outline, but dried of the fullness and colour of living emotions. She had no need to turn back the leaves, to recapture any shreds of vanished hours. The essential filaments of the past were woven with the threads of the present into today's pattern. Her now embodied all her yesterdays.

And you would not say that she was still beautiful, for that implies a preserving lacquer of time. Her beauty, too, was fulfillment, not vestige of former loveliness. A luminous tenderness played over her face, mobilizing its strength and nobleness of modeling. Though her clear tints had paled, except the colouring of her eyes that were still clearly blue, -- and her soft contours were carved away, she was more than beautiful in extreme slenderness and fragility, in fineness of texture and structure, and in grace that was long union of gracious thought and act. Her

gestures were filled with meaning; her hovering hand blessed you before you felt its pressure.

She had the swift response of youth and the ageless vital power of adding the charm of her own quality to the spoken word. In telling a little story, a simple picturing of some simple thing, she would pause, smile, hold the image; warm it before she gave it to you. When we begged her to

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tell us of the scenes of tumult and outrage that crowded her childhood or of the long hardship in exile and imprisonment, she would not try to recreate in part that drama too great for any telling, or even to bring to the surface an episode out of the troubled past. She would simply allow to emerge from her still depths some living impression, some poignant detail, and so move you with this glimpse that you felt all the seasons of her grief and the full measure of her pain; and you knew, too, that this grief, this pain, were never for herself. She could convey anguish itself in a look. And in this charged look you first saw human suffering, and then beneath that an intimation of woe immeasurable for the darkened understanding of those who had caused the suffering.

Her burdens appeared light because she did not bend under them, and she approached great tasks without apparent effort. She seemed never to search nor to strive because she showed no trace of tension and strain. In all her life she had known none of the hot, dusty moments of human struggle, nor its breathless, small achievements, but had gone forward unflinching, with a tranquil lifting of

the heart in action, to meet a succession of difficult days.

Her life could not be called martyrdom, for she did not recognize it as such. She was not shaken by the transports of rapture of the martyr and had no urge to raise the banner, to rush to encounter, to offer up with heroic valour. Her ardour burned with a steady flame. In the face of test and danger she neither hurried nor held back, but entered the perilous way with quiet breath. Her courage was born of her understanding faith, and it was this faith, this understanding, that carried her serene through years of incessant labour and meticulous service, and through times of waiting empty-handed, -- and through the bearing of irremediable sorrow and loss.

Something greater than forgiveness she had shown in meeting the cruelties and strictures in her own life. To be hurt and to forgive is saintly but far beyond this is the power to comprehend and not be hurt. This power she had. The word *mazlúm*, which signifies acceptance without complaint, has come to be associated with her name. She was never known to complain or lament. It was not that she made the best of things, but that she found in everything, even in calamity itself, the germs of enduring wisdom. She did not resist the shocks and upheavals of life and she did not run counter to obstacles. She was never impatient. She was as incapable of impatience as she was of revolt. But this was not so much long-sufferance as it was quiet awareness of the forces that operate in the hours of waiting and inactivity.

Always she moved with the larger rhythm, the wider sweep, toward the ultimate goal. Surely, confidently, she followed the circle of her orbit round the Sun of her existence, in that complete acquiescence, that perfect accord, which underlies faith itself.

So she was in life. And when she came to die her failing faculties threw into sharper and more intense relief the nature of her heart and spirit. It was as if she first let slip away the mechanical devices of the mind and the transient sense perceptions while holding fast to the end the essential elements of her being, unclouded by extremity of bodily weakness and pain. Still her smile spoke strength, serenity, tenderness and the love that is both recognition and bestowal. And so she left for remembrance a last clear record of the pattern of her life.

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