

The following story is from the book

The Central Figures
The Báb
Volume One



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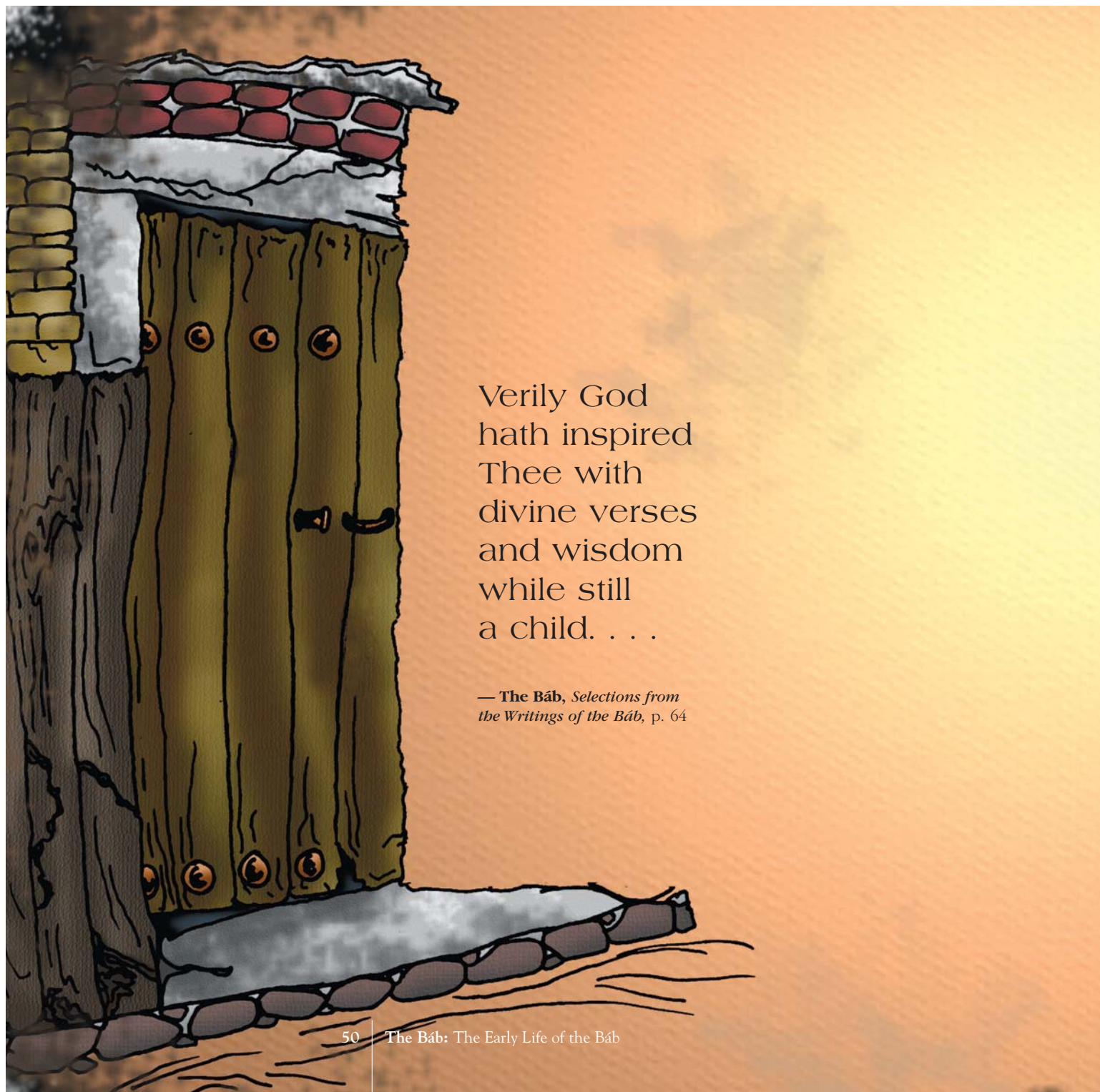
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Verily God
hath inspired
Thee with
divine verses
and wisdom
while still
a child. . . .

— **The Báb**, *Selections from
the Writings of the Báb*, p. 64

The Maktab Days

“I’ll never forget Him or the day I saw Him for the first time,” said the old man to his friend, remembering his childhood so many decades ago.¹

Written by Lily Ayman


Illustrated by Omid and Majid Nolley

“In our sunlit classroom,” he continued, “we were sitting on the floor with our knees bent under us. It was just a few of us boys. In front of each of us, there lay a slate and a book. Facing us, Shaykh ‘Ábid sat on a comfortable cushion, holding a long ruler. He was wearing a long robe and a white turban. He was a well-known teacher in Shíráz in the 1850s.

¹As this story is told as a decades-old memory, it is not intended as an exact retelling of historical events. Details appropriate to the time and place have been added by the author to indicate the sorts of clothing worn by children and adults and the style of classroom likely in Shíráz in the 1850s.

The old man remembers his days in the maktab.





“Shaykh ‘Ábid taught young students of religion from dawn to midmorning. Later in the day, he had classes for us—the children of notable families of Shíráz. There were no schools in Persia in those days. Private tutors gave classes in their homes, but only for the children of privileged families. These classes were called *maktab*.

“On that day,” he continued, “the children were reading their new lesson out loud together, moving back and forth to the rhythm of their voices. The shaykh was listening and looking around the room to catch any mischievous boy red-handed. Suddenly, the door opened with a squeak. The chanting stopped, and all heads turned to look. Shaykh ‘Ábid got up from the cushion and moved quickly forward, gesturing for the guests to enter.

“A distinguished-looking man, wearing a dark brown cloak and a black turban, was standing by the door. He was holding the hand of a frail young Boy in a long green coat with a beautifully embroidered skullcap on his head. The man and the shaykh greeted each other warmly and started talking. We did our best to engage the Boy. He did not look at us.

“‘This is my nephew, Siyyid ‘Alí-Muḥammad, who I told you about,’ we heard the distinguished-looking man say. ‘He is very shy, but He is eager to learn.’

“Well, Siyyid ‘Alí-Muḥammad, can you say: Bismi’lláhi’r-Raḥmání’r-Raḥím?’ To our great surprise, the Boy, without a moment’s hesitation, repeated the first verse of the Holy Qur’án. He also explained the meaning of the words, ‘In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful.’ Then the teacher asked Him to repeat another verse, but the Boy remained silent. The teacher asked Him again and again, but the Boy would not repeat the new verse. After the third time, the Boy asked the meaning of the first word of the verse. The teacher said: ‘It means God. When you are older, you will learn the meaning of the verse.’ He continued his talk with the Boy’s uncle.

“From that day, Siyyid ‘Alí-Muḥammad became a regular pupil of the shaykh. He was not an ordinary pupil. He would never repeat a verse without first understanding its meaning. He would never join others in reading, in unison, the lesson given by the teacher. He seemed to learn as the teacher was explaining and did not need to repeat the words. He was always busy reading and would never play with us or join us in telling jokes. I remember that, one day, the teacher noticed that Siyyid ‘Alí-Muḥammad was not reading with the others and was occupied with something else. He approached the Boy quietly. He saw Him completely engrossed in practicing His writing on the slate. The beauty of His handwriting surprised the teacher. He asked. ‘Who has taught you to write like this?’ The young Boy looked down bashfully without answering the teacher.

Shaykh ‘Ábid contemplates his new student.

A student in the maktab.



“Gradually, we understood that we were in the presence of a very special Child, and the shaykh started treating Him as such. In all the years we were classmates, no one could excel Him in any subject. It was as if He understood all the subjects before they were even taught.

“I remember one day, Shaykh ‘Ábid had a serious discussion with his older students, who were young clergymen, about the interpretation of the first verse of the Qur’án. The heated discussion did not lead to any result, so they all decided to refer to the writings of scholars about this verse and proceed with the discussion later.

“Siyyid ‘Alí-Muḥammad, Who was intently listening to the discussion, told His teacher, ‘Your arguments did not consider the ḥadīth² of His holiness ‘Alí on this matter.’ Then, to the amazement of all present, He recited the whole ḥadīth by heart. Our surprised teacher asked, ‘From whom did You learn all this?’

“In answer ‘Alí-Muḥammad recited a verse from the famous Persian poet, Ḥáfiz, that means: ‘If the blessings of the Holy Spirit will help again, others will also do what Christ could perform.’

²Hadīth are reported sayings or actions of the Prophet Muḥammad or of the Imáms.

“At this moment, the shaykh took Siyyid ‘Alí-Muḥammad’s hand and took Him back to His uncle’s home. We were wondering what would happen to Him, after answering the teacher like that. Later we heard that the shaykh had told the uncle that ‘Alí-Muḥammad did not really need to go to his maktab any more, that His knowledge was beyond His teacher’s. Then before leaving, he had added, ‘Keep Him safe and cherish Him. He is very special.’

“To our surprise, Siyyid ‘Alí-Muḥammad was back the next day, and he remained in the maktab until he was 11 years old.

“It was many years later that we learned that our young, shy Classmate had declared Himself as the Báb,” concluded the old man. ★

Shaykh ‘Ábid teaches his older students.

