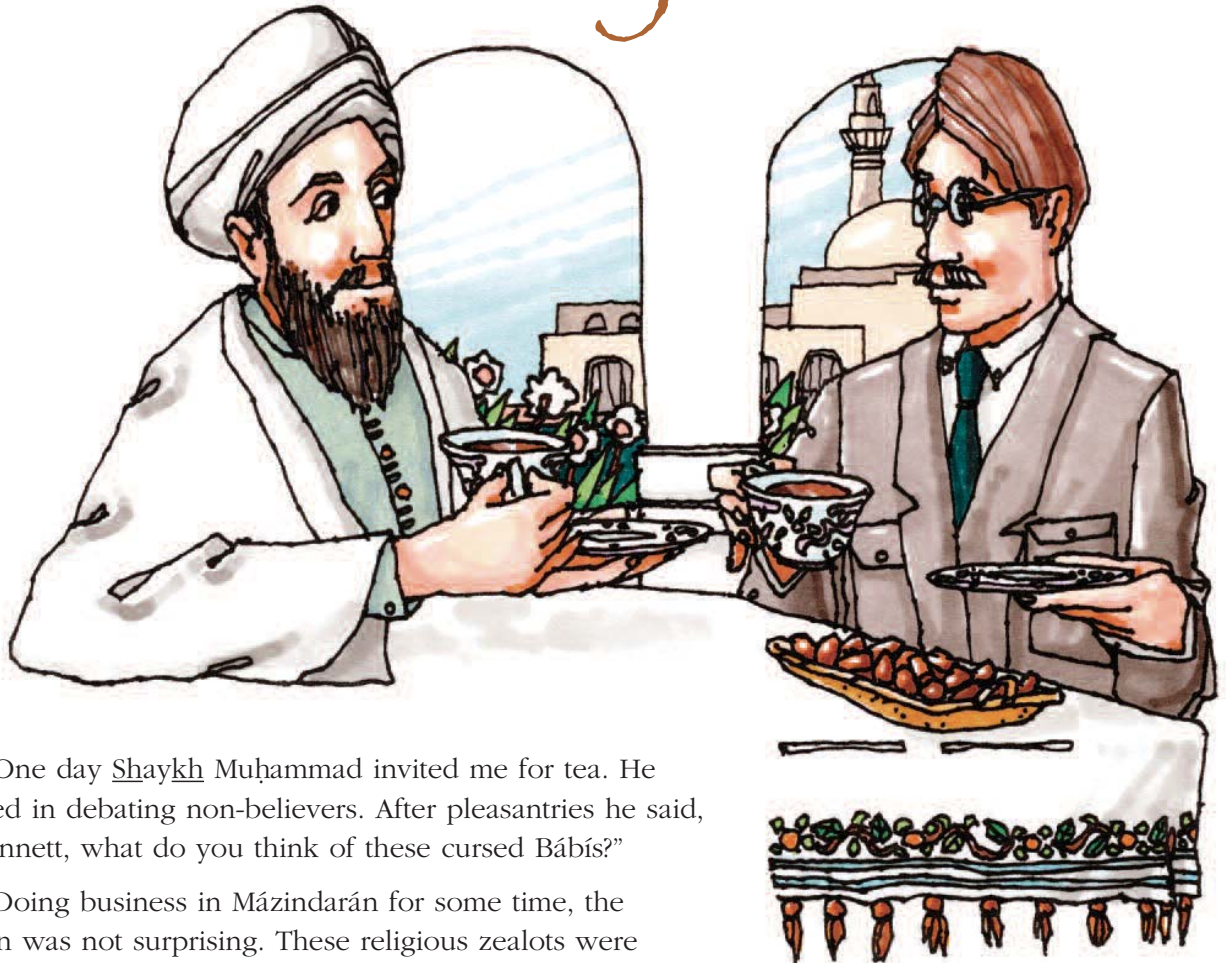


These are the appointed days
which ye have been
yearningly awaiting in the past —
the days of the advent
of divine justice.
Render ye thanks unto God,
O ye concourse of believers.

— **The Báb**, *Selections from the Writings of the Báb*, p. 161

Lesson at Niyálá

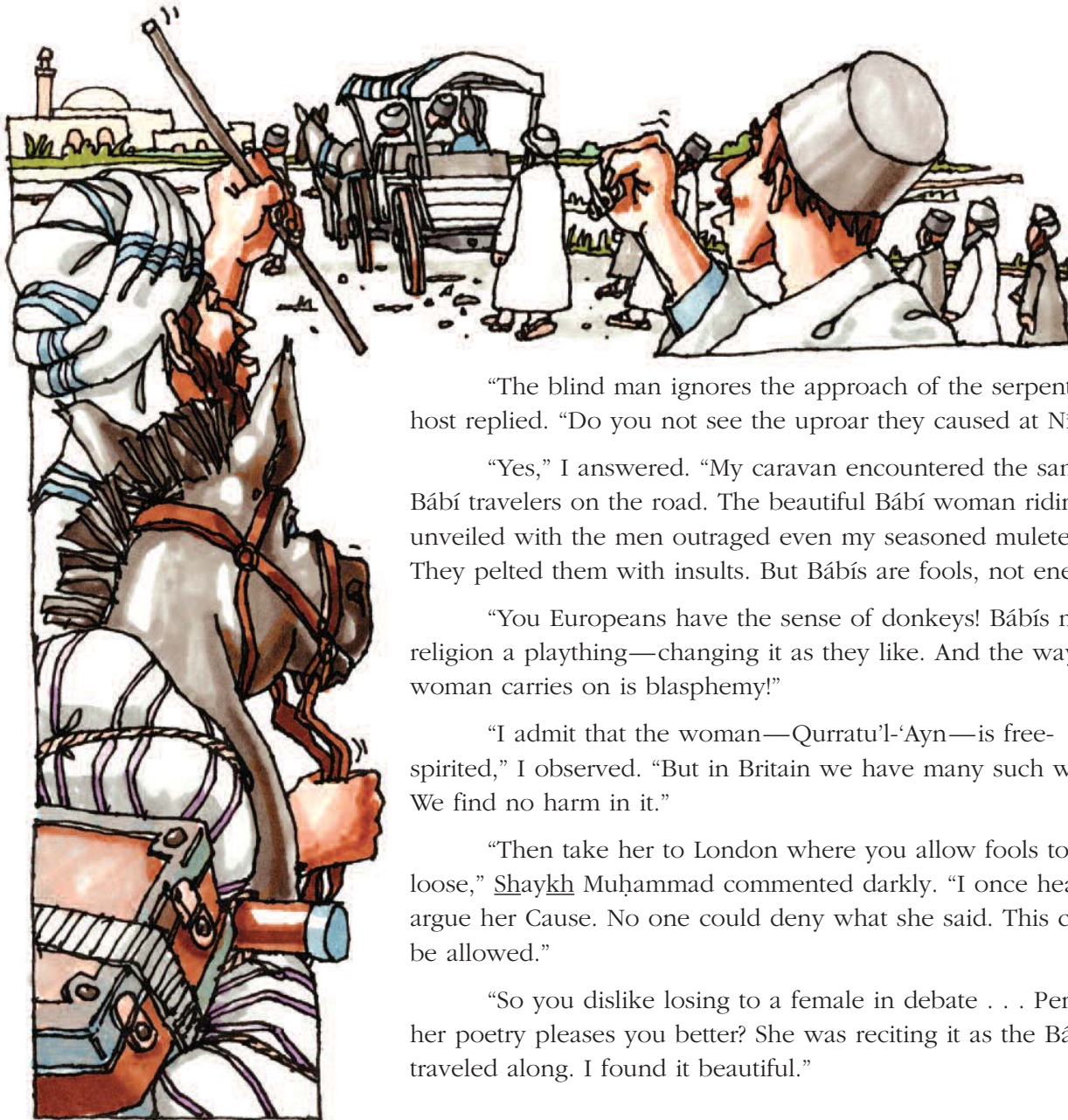
*Written by Rick Johnson
Illustrated by Keith Kresge*



One day Shaykh Muḥammad invited me for tea. He delighted in debating non-believers. After pleasantries he said, “Mr. Bennett, what do you think of these cursed Bábís?”

Doing business in Mázindarán for some time, the question was not surprising. These religious zealots were causing much excitement.

“The Bábí claims are absurd,” I replied. “Muslims have awaited the Mihdí for centuries. I doubt that He has honored us with His coming. The Bábís are fools, but harmless.”



“The blind man ignores the approach of the serpent,” my host replied. “Do you not see the uproar they caused at Níyálá?”

“Yes,” I answered. “My caravan encountered the same Bábí travelers on the road. The beautiful Bábí woman riding unveiled with the men outraged even my seasoned muleteers. They pelted them with insults. But Bábís are fools, not enemies.”

“You Europeans have the sense of donkeys! Bábís make religion a plaything—changing it as they like. And the way that woman carries on is blasphemy!”

“I admit that the woman—Qurratu'l-'Ayn—is free-spirited,” I observed. “But in Britain we have many such women. We find no harm in it.”

“Then take her to London where you allow fools to run loose,” Shaykh Muḥammad commented darkly. “I once heard her argue her Cause. No one could deny what she said. This cannot be allowed.”

“So you dislike losing to a female in debate . . . Perhaps her poetry pleases you better? She was reciting it as the Bábís traveled along. I found it beautiful.”

“In the sacred name of Islám, many eminent scholars have condemned her writings. I have read enough to know that she means to destroy Islám. Listen!”

**Look up! Our dawning day draws its first breath!
The world grows light! Our souls begin to glow!**

**No ranting shaykh rules from his pulpit throne
No mosque hawks holiness it does not know**

**No sham, no pious fraud, no priest commands!
The turban’s knot cut to its root below!**

**No more conjurations! No spells! No ghosts!
Good riddance! We are done with folly’s show!**

**The search for Truth shall drive out ignorance
Equality shall strike the despots low**

**Let warring ways be banished from the world
Let Justice everywhere its carpet throw**

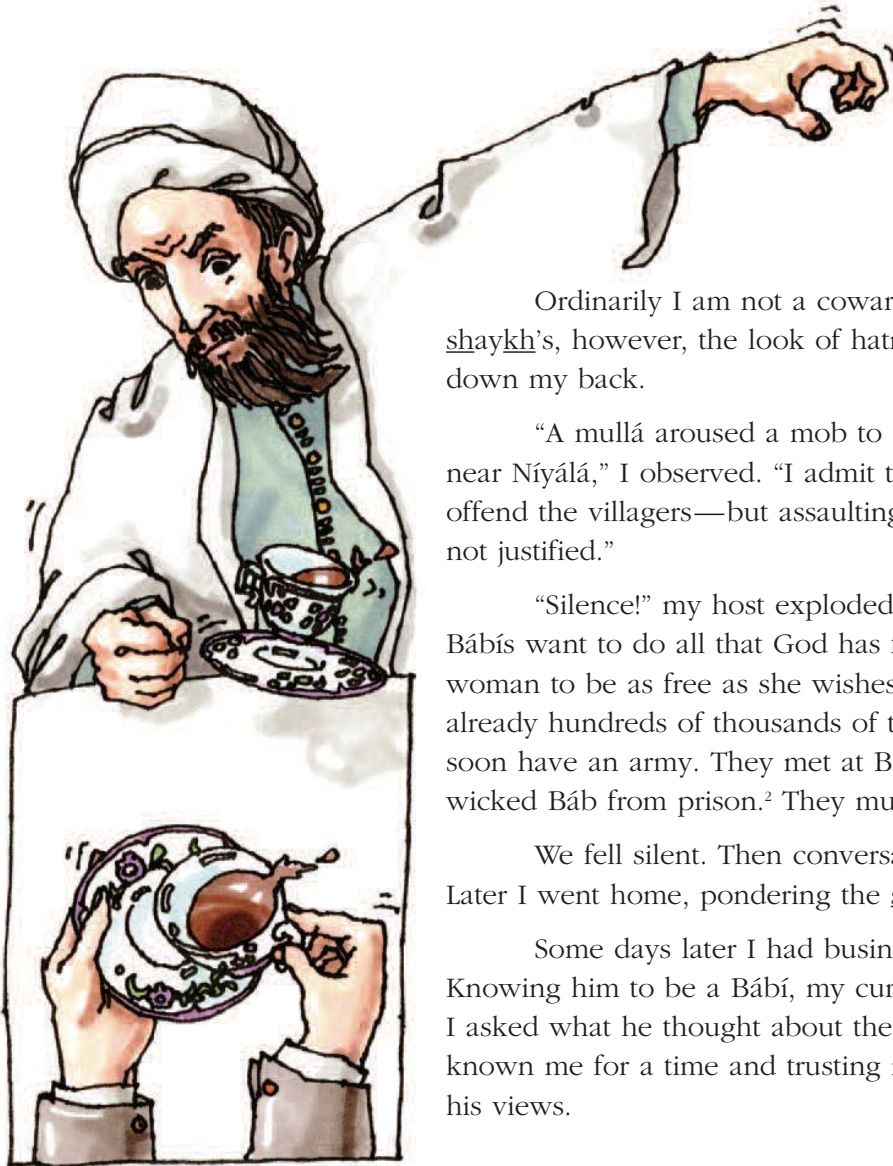
**May Friendship ancient hatreds reconcile
May love grow from the seed of love we sow!¹**

“She writes against Islám. She throws away the veil. Now the men compete with her by tossing their prayer rugs by the side of the road!”

He paused, then asked coldly, “Why do you defend these infidels?”

¹ This poem clearly illustrates why Tāhirih was so hated by the mullás. Her rejection of the old order and longing for a new world are clear.





Ordinarily I am not a coward. When my eyes met the shaykh's, however, the look of hatred in them sent a shiver down my back.

"A mullá aroused a mob to attack Bábís camped near Níyálá," I observed. "I admit the Bábís were foolish to offend the villagers—but assaulting harmless travelers was not justified."

"Silence!" my host exploded. "You know nothing! The Bábís want to do all that God has forbidden. They want a woman to be as free as she wishes. They are evil. There are already hundreds of thousands of them! The devil-woman will soon have an army. They met at Badasht to plot to free the wicked Báb from prison.² They must be stopped."

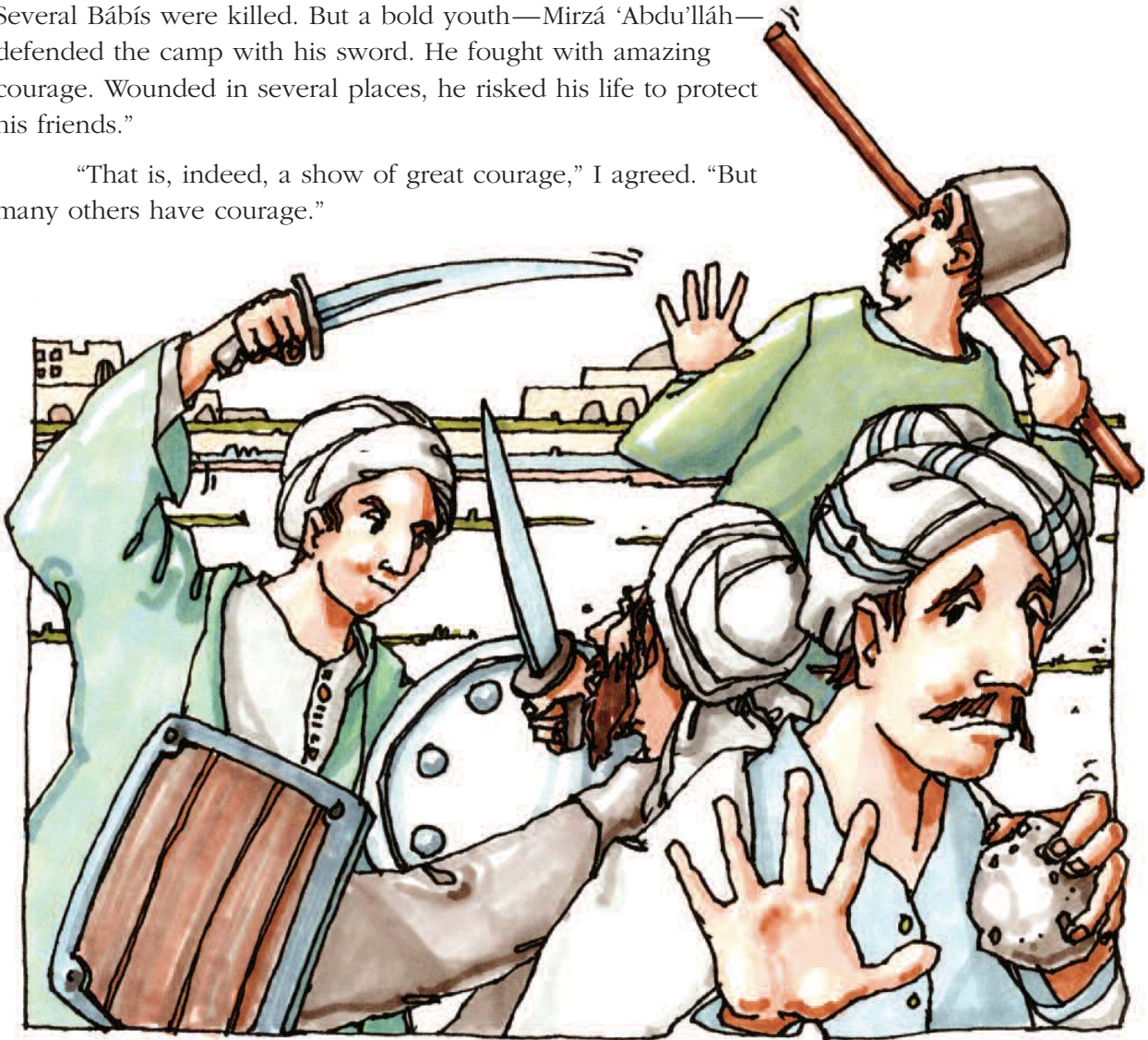
We fell silent. Then conversation turned to other things. Later I went home, pondering the shaykh's words.

Some days later I had business with a merchant. Knowing him to be a Bábí, my curiosity got the better of me. I asked what he thought about the Níyálá incident. Having known me for a time and trusting me, he readily shared his views.

²These and many other charges were made against the Bábís to feed the fury of the violence against them.

“After they left Badasht, some Bábí travelers—including Ṭáhirih, Quddús, and Bahá’u’lláh—were camped near Niyála. The enraged villagers surprised them at dawn,” he began. “They hurtled stones down from a mountain, then stormed the camp. Several Bábís were killed. But a bold youth—Mirzá ‘Abdu’lláh—defended the camp with his sword. He fought with amazing courage. Wounded in several places, he risked his life to protect his friends.”

“That is, indeed, a show of great courage,” I agreed. “But many others have courage.”





“Yes,” my friend replied, “but there is something even more astonishing. Do you know that one Bábí Leader—Bahá’u’lláh—called on him to hold back his sword? Unarmed amidst the attackers, Bahá’u’lláh called out for peace. He persuaded the villagers they were wrong and got them to return the Bábís’ property they had looted.”

“Did that truly happen?” I exclaimed.

“Yes,” my friend said. “That is what the mullás fear the most.”

“Why?”

“Quddús and Ṭáhirih rode in the same howdah, freely enjoying each other’s company. They had once been deeply opposed. It is a symbol of the change that is coming. The mullás deem it a religious duty to compel belief or kill those who do not believe as they want. The Bábí Cause takes a different path. They fear this.”

“I am neither a Bábí nor a Muslim,” I said, “yet I have seen enough religious fanaticism to wonder if anything else is possible.”

“It is possible,” he replied. “Bahá’u’lláh calmed the villagers’ anger. He reconciled the contrary views of Quddús and Ṭáhirih. The mullá is one who wants every soul—and mind—to follow a rigid pattern of belief. The time of mullás is past. Change is coming . . . ” ★