



Tirelessly He Gives

Inspiration
from the words and example of
'Abdu'l-Bahá

"He gives — gives — gives! His love
seems never content with giving.
Tirelessly he gives of his
spirit and heart"

Juliet Thompson

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Cover photograph: a scene in the gardens at Bahjí.
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'Abdu'l-Bahá in Dublin, New Hampshire, USA, 26 July 1912

Introduction

Those whose lives had been touched by meeting ‘Abdu’l-Bahá could speak of Him only with wonderment. The stories they told of His transformative effect on them are legion, a small sample of which are gathered in this booklet as a token in commemoration of the centenary of His passing in 1921. These few stories point the way to a large body of literature about Him which deserves to be explored by anyone interested in practical spirituality. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was a man who demonstrated truly extraordinary human qualities on a level that seems scarcely believable in our day when so many heroes’ hidden failings have been exposed. Yet, here are accounts that ring true and have kept their lustre so they continue to speak to us now of the heights that we can aspire to if we follow the example of the one known to Bahá’ís as “the Master”.

The exceptional qualities of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá are explained by His identity as the son and successor of Bahá’u’lláh, the Founder of the Bahá’í Faith. The story of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is part of the story of the emergence of this Faith in the world, in which the Voice of Divine guidance can be witnessed intervening once again in history. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s role as the Centre of His Father’s Covenant was to interpret and implement Bahá’u’lláh’s Teachings and to be a living demonstration of service to humanity for the Glory of God.

Along with the stories in this booklet are a few prayers by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá Himself and passages by various authors reflecting on His significance. The assortment offered here has been chosen as a sampling of the vast range of stories and reflections available. The National Spiritual Assembly hopes this booklet will help stimulate hearts and minds to further explore the transformative power in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s example and wisdom.

A caveat: the stories in this booklet are not presented as absolutely reliable accounts of history or Bahá’í belief, as they tell of the personal responses of the individuals who wrote them. Sources are given in brief form below each item and listed with full details in the “List of Source Materials” at the back.

Reflections

Prayer

O Thou Lord of wondrous grace!

Bestow upon us new blessings. Give to us the freshness of the spring. We are saplings which have been planted by the fingers of Thy bounty and have been formed out of the water and clay of Thy tender affection. We thirst for the living waters of Thy favours and are dependent upon the outpourings of the clouds of Thy generosity. Abandon not to itself this grove wherein our hopes aspire, nor withhold therefrom the showers of Thy loving-kindness. Grant that from the clouds of Thy mercy may fall copious rain so that the trees of our lives may bring forth fruit and we may attain the most cherished desire of our hearts.

— 'Abdu'l-Bahá

Indiscriminate Love for all People

For 'Abdu'l-Bahá, servitude to humanity was the highest station to which any soul could aspire. True service, as he exemplified it, was founded upon indiscriminate love for all people, regardless of race, creed, or class. This in turn was founded upon love for God and recognition of God's love for all creation. The path to individual happiness and fulfilment that he demonstrated was that of adherence to God's commandments and a spirit of sincere, selfless effort for the betterment of the world.

— Kenneth E. Bowers

Paradox Was Part of His Daily Existence

One can imagine few tasks as difficult as that of writing a biography of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. His life was long, active, varied, tense, dangerous, full of pain and joy. No one was closer to Bahá’u’lláh, and no one paid so high a price for His devotion. Paradox was part of His daily existence. He loved all men indiscriminately, yet had to suffer hatred and ingratitude. He travelled four continents, yet spent most of His life as a prisoner and an exile. He was the incarnation of kindness and humility, but also of majesty and power. His disciples called Him the Master, yet He wanted no other title than ‘Abdu’l-Bahá (Servant of Bahá) and prayed for grace to serve man, for selflessness and for martyrdom in God’s path.

— Kazem and Firuz Kazemzadeh

He Lived by Prayer

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in appearance, was a man of medium height though to all who met Him, He gave the impression of such majesty that He seemed much taller. His beard was flowing and white; His head covering, whether a turban or tarboosh, was white also. But, meeting Him, none of these details were even noticed. It was only the spirit one felt and the outpouring love. Love filled Him and flowed out from Him to bathe and encompass everyone in His presence. He was, as we all know, the Mystery of God. His Station is unique. There has been no one like Him in any past religious era, nor will there ever be such in the future. Bahá’u’lláh had bestowed upon Him the assurance of God’s guidance in His explanations of anything in the Teachings that needed clarifying for the believers and, when He was but ten years old, His Father, Bahá’u’lláh, addressed Him and referred to Him as “the Master”. He was the perfect Exemplar of the Bahá’í Teachings: He lived by prayer and wished only to be known as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá the servant of the servants. He made no mistakes. Yet, with all this, He needed, as we all need, the constant attitude of prayer to renew and revivify Him, and, urging us ever upward. His constant adjuration was, “Do as I do. Be as I am”.

— Reginald Grant Barrow and Muriel Ives Barrow Newhall

Loving Father, Companion, Friend, Exemplar

Original title: "What if We All Had a Kind, Loving Father?"

While not a prophet of God himself, 'Abdu'l-Bahá nevertheless occupies a singular station for Bahá'ís, as explained here by the Universal House of Justice in their introduction to Bahá'u'lláh's "Most Holy Book:

This unique figure is at once the Exemplar of the pattern of life taught by His Father, the divinely inspired authoritative Interpreter of His Teachings and the Centre and Pivot of the Covenant which the Author of the Bahá'í Revelation made with all who recognise Him.

The Bahá'í Faith asks its followers to become citizens of the world, recognising and acting on the consciousness of the oneness of humanity and offering love and compassion to all people. 'Abdu'l-Bahá excelled in his role as the exemplar of these lofty spiritual teachings, as the personal accounts of those who met him clearly indicate.

Wellesca ("Aseyeh") Allen-Dyar, who became a Bahá'í in 1901 and made his pilgrimage to 'Akká six years later, described how 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

... was able to be to us a loving father, a companion and friend, and we could enjoy ourselves socially because we did not continually keep Him answering questions, at which time He would at once assume a different attitude and ... one would feel His Kingship, His Greatness, the unlimited depths of His Wisdom. He is indeed as a "well of living water springing up into everlasting life," and knowledge and wisdom come from His lips as does water from a fountain, giving life to every thirsty heart ...

Myron Phelps, a New York attorney and writer, travelled to 'Akká in 1902 and described how 'Abdu'l-Bahá, known by many as "the Master," related to others there:

All the people know him and love him — the rich and the poor, the young and the old — even the Babe leaping in its mother's arms. If he hears of

any one sick in the city — Muslim or Christian, or of any other sect, it matters not — he is each day at their bedside, or sends a trusty messenger. If a physician is needed, and the patient poor, he brings or sends one, and also the necessary medicine. If he finds a leaking roof or a broken window menacing health, he summons a workman, and waits himself to see the breach repaired. If any one is in trouble — if a son or a brother is thrown into prison, or he is threatened at law, or falls into any difficulty too heavy for him — it is to the Master that he straightway makes appeal for counsel or for aid. Indeed, for counsel all come to him, rich as well as poor. He is the kind father of all people

Juliet Thompson, an American painter, became a Bahá'í during a stay in Paris in 1901. She met 'Abdu'l-Bahá in 1909 in the Holy Land and later saw him in Europe and America. She wrote:

He gives — gives — gives! His love seems never content with giving. Tirelessly he gives of his spirit and heart — like a tender father he gives of material things — little keepsakes, or, in lovely symbol, flowers.

She also described how Lee McClung, then Treasurer of the United States, after his meeting with the Master and groping for words to describe it, had said: **"I felt as if I were in the presence of a great Prophet — Isaiah — Elijah — no, that is not it. The presence of Christ — no. I felt as if I were in the presence of my Divine Father."**

Jean LeFranc, a French journalist for *Le Temps*, met 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Paris and then wrote:

The venerable face of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in which his young eyes sparkle, beams with intelligence and kindness. He is fatherly, affectionate, simple; he inspires trust and respect. His divine power comes no doubt from knowing how to love people and to be loved by them.

Lady Blomfield, an early British Bahá'í, hosted 'Abdu'l-Bahá during his visits to London. In this account, she described an event that occurred in Paris:

A very poor quarter in Paris — Sunday morning — groups of men and women inclined to be rowdy. Foremost amongst them a big man brandishing a long loaf of bread in his hand, shouting, gesticulating, dancing. Into this throng walked ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, on his way from a Mission Hall where he had been addressing a very poor congregation at the invitation of their Pastor. The boisterous man with the loaf, suddenly seeing him, stood still. He then proceeded ... crying ‘Make way, make way! He is my Father, make way.’ The Master passed through the midst of the crowd, now become silent and respectfully saluting him. ‘Thank you, my dear friends, thank you’, he said smiling round upon them. The poor were always his especially beloved friends. He was never happier than when surrounded by them, the lowly of heart!

Frederick Dean, a Buddhist and journalist who met ‘Abdu’l-Bahá on several occasions in New York City, was a reporter for “The Independent” and “The Weekly Review” assigned to report on a church event at which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá spoke:

I first met the teacher in an up-town church. I had been sent by my paper to report the sermon. The speaker’s likeness to my own father was so startling, that, immediately after the service, I entered the anteroom and told him of the remarkable resemblance. Very quietly he answered: “I am your father and you are my son. Come and dine with me.” Another engagement prevented, but I asked if I might take breakfast with him the following morning. “Come.” He said. I went, and after that first meeting followed others. We walked in his garden, and, as we walked, we talked. I told him of his peculiar attraction to me on account of my own outlook on life; that I came from Southern Asia and that I was a Buddhist — a Buddhist-Christian. “So am I,” replied the teacher. “I am also a Confucian-Christian and a Brahmin-Christian; a Jewish and a Mohammedan-Christian. I am a brother to all who love truth — truth in whatsoever garb they choose to clothe it.” ...

On the last day that I saw him he gave me his rose — he always had a freshly picked rose on his table As he left me at the door he said, ‘... Think of me as your loving father and not as some divine thing to be adored.’... Those who met him carried away a nameless something that made life’s pleasures brighter.

John E. Esslemont, a Scottish physician, met the Master in Haifa in November 1919 and spent two and half months as his guest. He related how, though nearly seventy-six years of age, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was still “remarkably vigorous:”

His services were always at the disposal of those who needed them most. His unfailing patience, gentleness, kindness and tact made His presence like a benediction. It was His custom to spend a large part of each night in prayer and meditation. From early morning until evening, except for a short siesta after lunch, He was busily engaged in reading and answering letters ... and in attending to the multitudinous affairs of the household

In the afternoon He usually had a little relaxation in the form of a walk or a drive, but even then He was usually accompanied by one or two, or a party ... with whom He would converse ... or He would find opportunity ... of seeing and ministering to some of the poor. After His return He would call the friends to the usual evening meeting He delighted in gathering together people of various races, colours, nations and religions in unity and cordial friendship around His hospitable board. He was indeed a loving father not only to the little community at Haifa, but to the Bahá’í community throughout the world.

During ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s trip to the United States and Canada in 1912, he stopped in Salt Lake City on his journey westward. Feny Paulson, from Montana, came to meet him at the station. The next day, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá went to the State Fair, where he purchased seeds to take back to the Holy Land. Paulson describes him at the State Fair as a “flowing-robed figure ... with majestic bearing” followed by his oriental companions. The next morning, she

left her modest accommodations at the YWCA to have tea with him at his hotel. She wrote:

The Master served tea, saying This is the Lord's Supper you are having with Me. He also said, I am your Father. That was to take the place of the father I had never remembered, and whom I had so often tried to recall. He gave me a locket-sized likeness of Himself as a father gives a treasure to one of His children. ... Although the details of each person in the presence of 'Abdu'l-Bahá are different, they are the means to the same end — spiritual progress. Incidents forgotten and hidden in the recesses of one's being, in His presence, are in a flash perceived and unobtrusively aired. ... problems and burdens ... become non-essentials in the light of His divine love. ... 'Abdu'l-Bahá was the Supreme Psychiatrist.

Thornton Chase, considered the first American Bahá'í, met 'Abdu'l-Bahá during his pilgrimage to 'Akká in 1907. When 'Abdu'l-Bahá went to California in 1912, Chase died before he arrived. But 'Abdu'l-Bahá made a special visit to his grave. Chase had written this about the Master:

I found in Abdul-Baha a man, strong, powerful ... as free and unstilted as a father with his family or a boy with playmates. Yet each movement, his walk, his greeting, his sitting down and rising up were eloquent of power, full of dignity, freedom and ability. ...

'Abdul-Bahá is a grand man, broad, universal in thought, standing above the world and looking down upon it in its weakness and poverty with a boundless love and an intense longing to lift it up from its wretchedness, to make it conscious of the rich bounties of God, which are so freely offered in this wonderful time, to remove the differences to bring all men, all peoples, all religions into true manhood and religion ... He stands there erect, with extended arms, the Master of the Feast, calling with a loud, clear voice to all mankind: "Come! Come! Come! Now is the time! Now is the accepted time! Come and drink of this sweet Water which is pouring in torrents upon all parts of the world!"

And, as each hungry pilgrim comes ... he takes him in his arms and draws him to his breast with such sincerity and enthusiasm of love that the petty cares, thoughts and ambitions of the world vanish away, and one is at peace and in happiness because he has reached home and found love there ... One wishes that the embrace might not end, it is so joyful, so comforting. Truly, I think it never does end. It opens a door of love which shall never be closed. The home of the heart is there.

Sheikh Younis el-Khatib was a renowned Muslim poet and orator who spoke at 'Abdu'l-Bahá's funeral and at the memorial meeting held 40 days after his passing:

Alas! In this tribulation there is no heart but aches with anguish, no eye but is filled with tears. Woe unto the poor, for lo! goodness hath departed from them, woe unto the orphans, for their loving father is no more with them! ... Suffice it to say, that he has left in every heart the most profound impression, on every tongue most wondrous praise. And he that leaveth a memory so lovely, so imperishable, he, indeed, is not dead.

Mysteriously, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's presence in the world still seems quite tangible — he is someone we can all relate to, and he promised that he would always be with us. In fact, he said something rather astonishing: "If the believers ... establish, in a befitting manner, union and harmony with spirit, tongue, heart, and body, suddenly they shall find 'Abdu'l-Bahá in their midst."

In this spirit, we can all claim 'Abdu'l-Bahá as a kind of universal father figure — always there, always willing to lift us up, always calling us to a higher spiritual plane.

[Note: Several of the accounts shared here are from a new compilation by Robert Weinberg, *Ambassador to Humanity: A Selection of Testimonials and Tributes to 'Abdu'l-Bahá.*]

— Anne Gordon Perry

His Challenge to Materialism

Juliet Thompson, in her book, “‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the Centre of the Covenant,” gives a wonderful metaphor for the role of a servant of God. She states that the heart is the servant of the living body. The highest function of the heart is to be the channel of life and divine love. Then she says that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s last words to the believers in his Will and Testament are concerned with the mystery of love as a motivating force for servitude. If we apply this example to the body of the Bahá’í community, we could say that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s servitude acted like a heart to channel divine love to all humanity. His words and example transmitted the lifeblood of the Bahá’í revelation, which is love of God and unity, to the entire Bahá’í community and to Bahá’í institutions around the world.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s visit to the West must have challenged many Westerners due to his simplicity, modesty, and exemplary sense of humility. His journey to America coincided with the emergence of the Industrial Revolution when individualism and a materialistic way of life were on the rise. Today consumerism dominates our perception of the true meaning and purpose of life. Children are taught to be more competitive, to strive and become superior to others, to have more power, to acquire more material goods, and to be less empathic to the plight of the poor.

The Bahá’í teachings aim to reverse this process. In this materialistic and self-worshipping world, there are countless people who are indeed bond-slaves to self-interest, indulgence, and the vanities of the material world. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s life offers an example of how a spirit of humility and utter nothingness can free humanity from such chains.

Taherzadeh wrote in “The Covenant of Bahá’u’lláh” that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had an immense dislike of being photographed saying that “...to have a picture of oneself is to emphasise the personality.”

In his trip to the West during the first few days of his visit to London “He refused to be photographed.” However, the newspaper reporters needed a

photograph of him and put pressure on the Bahá'ís to take his picture. The Bahá'ís persistently beseeched him until he finally allowed his picture to be taken in order to make them happy. His kind heart went out to the reporters who might have lost their jobs if there was no picture with their report!

'Abdu'l-Bahá's loving generosity and magnanimity extended to everyone, whether poor and utterly unknown or famous. One of the stories from "Vignettes from the Life of 'Abdu'l-Bahá" recounts how upon 'Abdu'l-Bahá's passing, E.G. Browne, the renowned Cambridge scholar, and orientalist wrote an article about him in the Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society.

Browne stated that 'Abdu'l-Bahá "probably exercised a greater influence not only in the Orient but in the Occident than any Asiatic thinker and teacher of recent times..." He furthermore remarked that one of the most important practical results of Bahá'í teaching in the United States was "the establishment in Bahá'í circles in New York of a real fraternity between black and white, and an unprecedented lifting of the 'colour bar' ..."

'Abdu'l-Bahá had an immense sense of empathy for the plight of the Black people who suffered discrimination and denigration because of the colour of their skin. During his journey to the West, He made it clear that racial prejudices must be abolished, equality of rights be respected, and social justice established.

Honnold also wrote about how while in Paris, 'Abdu'l-Bahá stayed in a hotel where "among those who often came to see Him was a poor, black man. He was not a Bahá'í, but he loved the Master very much. One day when he came to visit, someone told him that the management did not like to have him — a poor black man — come, because it was not consistent with the standards of the hotel. The poor man went away. When 'Abdu'l-Bahá learned of this, He sent for the man responsible. He told him that he must find His friend. He was not happy that he should have been turned away. 'Abdu'l-Bahá said, 'I did not come to see expensive hotels or furnishings, but to meet My friends. I did not come to Paris to conform to the customs of Paris, but to establish the standard of Bahá'u'lláh.'"

— **Abdu'l-Missagh Ghadirian**

A Man of Many Gifts

Seldom have I seen one whose appearance impressed me more. A tall strongly-built man holding himself straight as an arrow, with white turban and raiment, long black locks reaching almost to the shoulder, broad powerful forehead indicating a strong intellect combined with an unswerving will, eyes keen as a hawk's, and strongly-marked but pleasing features—such was my first impression of 'Abbas Effendi, “the master” as he par excellence is called. ... One more eloquent of speech, more ready of argument, more apt of illustration, more intimately acquainted with the sacred books of the Jews, the Christians, the Muhammadans, could, I should think, scarcely be found even amongst the eloquent, ready, and subtle race to which he belongs. These qualities, combined with a bearing at once majestic and genial, made me cease to wonder at the influence and esteem which he enjoyed even beyond the circle of his father's followers. About the greatness of this man and his power no one who had seen him could entertain a doubt.

— **Professor Edward Granville Browne, Cambridge University Orientalist**

His Childhood and Youth

Prayer

He is God!

O Thou kind Lord! We are poor children, needy and insignificant, yet we are plants which have sprouted by Thy heavenly stream and saplings bursting into bloom in Thy divine springtime. Make us fresh and verdant by the outpourings of the clouds of Thy mercy; help us to grow and develop through the rays of the sun of Thy goodly gifts and cause us to be refreshed by the quickening breeze wafting from the meadows of Truth. Grant that we may become flourishing trees laden with fruit in the orchard of knowledge, brilliant stars shining above the horizon of eternal happiness and radiant lamps shedding light upon the assemblage of mankind.

O Lord! Should Thy tender care be vouchsafed unto us, each one of us would, even as an eagle, soar to the pinnacle of knowledge, but were we left to ourselves we would be consumed away and would fall into loss and frustration. Whatever we are, from Thee do we proceed and before Thy threshold do we seek refuge.

Thou art the Bestower, the Bountiful, the All-Loving.

— 'Abdu'l-Bahá

Childhood Privations

'Abdu'l-Bahá, then only eight years old, was broken-hearted at the ruthless treatment of His adored Father. The child suffered agonies, as a description of the tortures was related in His hearing — the cruel scourging of the feet, the long miles Bahá'u'lláh had to walk afterwards, barefooted, heavy chains cutting into the delicate flesh, the loathsome prison; the excruciating anxiety lest His very life should be taken — made a load of suffering, piteous for so young and sensitive a child to endure.

All the former luxury of the family was at an end, deserted as they were by relations and friends. Homeless, utterly impoverished, engulfed in trouble, and misery, suffering from sheer want and extraordinary privations — such were the conditions under which His childhood's life was spent.

These things counted not at all whilst He was with His Father; so that the exile and the earlier days in Baghdad were happy, in spite of outside miseries. But when Bahá'u'lláh retreated into the wilderness of Sulaymaniyyih the dear child was beside Himself with grief. He occupied Himself with copying those Tablets of the Báb which had remained with them. He tried to help His dear mother, Asiyih Khánum, in her arduous tasks.

During this time He was taken by His uncle, Mirza Musa, to some of the meetings of the friends. There He spoke to them with a marvellous eloquence, even at that early age of eleven or twelve years. The friends wondered at His wisdom and the beauty of His person, which equalled that of His mind.

He prayed without ceasing for the return of Bahá'u'lláh. He would sometimes spend a whole night through praying a certain prayer. One day after a night so spent they found a clue! Very soon the Beloved One returned! Now His joy was as great as His grief had been!

Many were the gatherings of the friends on the banks of the Tigris, to which the young boy was taken by His Father. These meetings, necessarily secret, were not His greatest pleasure. He drank in the teaching of divine things

which were to educate the world, with an understanding of universal conceptions astounding in such a young child. So life went on; He grew into a beautiful youth, beloved by all who knew Him.

— Lady Blomfield

Taking up Responsibilities at an Early Age

‘Abdu’l-Bahá attended no school during the Baghdad years [1853-1863], but, inspired and instructed by Bahá’u’lláh, He read avidly and memorised many of the works of the Báb. He also began to write, composing a commentary on a hadith (tradition)—“I was a Hidden Treasure”—attributed to the Prophet Muhammad that shows, in the words of Bahá’í historian Hasan Balyuzi, “profound knowledge, striking mastery of language, and rare qualities of mind, but above all . . . the most profound understanding.

While still in His teens, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá became His father’s ambassador, His shield, and His amanuensis, transcribing some of Bahá’u’lláh’s writings, including the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* (*Book of Certitude*). On His father’s behalf He began to assume the burden of negotiations with government authorities in Baghdad. When Bahá’u’lláh was summoned to the Ottoman capital, Constantinople (Istanbul), in 1863, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá played a principal role in making arrangements for the difficult journey across Iraq and Anatolia, which took more than three months. “‘Abdu’l-Bahá was then a youth of nineteen, handsome, gracious, agile, zealous to serve, firm with the wilful, generous to all,” Balyuzi writes. “He strove hard to make the toil of a long journey less arduous for others. At night He was among the first to reach the halting-place, to see to the comfort of the travellers. Wherever provisions were scarce, He spent the night in search of food. And at dawn He rose early to set the caravan on another day’s march. Then the whole day long He rode by the side of His Father, in constant attendance upon Him.”

— “Bahá’í Chronicles” website

His Generosity Pleased His Father

It was told of him as a little boy that he once was sent out to inspect the shepherds who had charge of his father's flocks among the Persian hills. When the review was completed he was told by his attendant it was customary to give each of the shepherds a present. He said he had nothing to give; but was told the men would expect something and something should be given them. The boy thereupon presented the shepherds with the flocks. His father hearing of this munificent gift was pleased at his son's generosity but said "We shall have to watch 'Abbás; for next he will give away himself."

Even when some years later, 'Abbás Effendi and his father, as exiles and prisoners, were reduced to destitution, he still managed to help others and contrived (so his companions said) somehow to find something to give away.

— George Townshend

Faithful as the Beating of the Heart

Of that first Declaration of Bahá'u'lláh, made to His Son alone, we have the account of 'Abdu'l-Bahá Himself, given sixty years later.

"I am the Servant of the Blessed Perfection. In Baghdad I was a child. Then and there He announced to me the Word, and I believed in Him. As soon as He proclaimed to me the Word, I threw myself at His Holy Feet and implored and supplicated Him to accept my blood as a sacrifice in His Pathway."

The sacrifice, of life at least, was accepted, and prolonged for fifty-six years in prison and exile, within the limitations of which 'Abdu'l-Bahá was faithful to a servitude, incessant as the beating of the heart, to God and man. With all who came to Him in the Prison of 'Akká seeking alms or wisdom, with the countless pilgrims who in the end found their way to that prison, in a vast correspondence with East and West, day and night He laboured. He took no rest, allowing Himself but two or three hours of sleep. Even beyond these fifty-six years was the sacrifice prolonged. When the commutation of His life-

sentence opened for Him world opportunities, as He travelled throughout Europe and America, His door stood open from dawn to midnight. High and low flocked to that door and none was turned away.

Forty of those years of exile were passed at the side of His Father, at times in a close imprisonment all but insupportable to the flesh. It was in 'Akká, Syria, a Turkish penal colony, that Bahá'u'lláh and His family spent these darkest days, confined in a fortress — He and His Son in chains. To this penal colony more than seventy disciples had chosen to follow their beloved Lord, accompanying Him from Adrianople, preferring captivity with Him to freedom in their own homes. And now, in the terrible "Barracks" of Akká, during a period of two years, these were all herded into one room, men, women and children, with the delicately reared family of Bahá'u'lláh. The room had an adjoining alcove, in which Bahá'u'lláh was placed.

In the stories we have of those days, through all the intolerable physical misery we hear the high ring of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's gaiety cheering His fellow-prisoners. We see Him nursing with His own hands the sick and the dying among them, as many — in that one room — fell victims to dreadful contagious diseases. When the jailers fastened chains upon Him, we can sense the sweetness of His tones answering their astonished question: "How is it you laugh and sing when prisoners ironed in this way usually cry out, weep and lament?" "I rejoice because you are doing me a great kindness; you are making me very happy. For a long time I have wished to know the feelings of a prisoner in irons, to experience what other men have been subjected to. I have heard of this; now you have taught me what it is. You have given me this opportunity. Therefore I sing and am very happy. I am very thankful to you."



From the first we find 'Abdu'l-Bahá decisive and endowed with a strange power. While His Father was still in the dungeon in Tihrán and 'Abdu'l-Bahá but eight years old, the wife of Bahá'u'lláh, returning one day from her sister's house to which she went daily in the hope of receiving news of her husband, found her little son in the street, surrounded by a band of older boys who had

gathered to molest Him. “He was standing straight as an arrow in their midst, quietly commanding them not to lay hands on Him. Which, strange to say,” the story ends, “they seemed unable to do.”

Another picture of this commanding power comes down to us from His early youth. At that time the most terrible crisis which Bahá'u'lláh and His family ever had to meet, developed in Adrianople, where again they were on the eve of banishment. A banishment far more cruel than the three that had preceded it, for now this uniquely united family was to be torn asunder, Bahá'u'lláh sent to a distant city, a secret destination, His wife and children to another secret destination; forever parted, and forever lost, one to the other. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá sought out the officials. Again and again He went to them. What he said has not been recorded — only that “He pleaded”, “He persisted”, and that the officials “seemed unable to put the measure into execution.” While this measure was pending, news of it reached the believers of Adrianople and they rushed in a body to the house of Bahá'u'lláh, frantic at the thought of separation from Him. One old man seized a knife and crying, “If I must be separated from my Lord, I will go now and join my God,” cut his throat. A scene of wild confusion followed, during which a cordon of police surrounded the frenzied crowd and brutally attempted to control it. It was then that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá suddenly appeared in their midst. We sense a lightning flash of power, a superhuman force, as we read of His ‘ ‘impassioned and vehement words”, denouncing the cruelty of the police, demanding the presence of the governor. “We had never before,” said His sister, in telling the story, “seen my brother angry.” So swift was the effect of this anger that the governor was at once sent for. He hurried to the scene and, witnessing it, said: “We cannot separate these people. It is impossible.”

— Juliet Thompson

His Qualities

Prayer

O Lord! What an outpouring of bounty Thou hast vouchsafed, and what a flood of abounding grace Thou hast granted! Thou didst make all the hearts to become even as a single heart, and all the souls to be bound together as one soul. Thou didst endow inert bodies with life and feeling, and didst bestow upon lifeless frames the consciousness of the spirit. Through the effulgent rays shed from the Day-Star of the All-Merciful, Thou didst invest these atoms of dust with visible existence, and through the billows of the ocean of oneness, Thou didst enable these evanescent drops to surge and roar.

O Almighty One Who endowest a blade of straw with the might of a mountain and enablest a speck of dust to mirror forth the glory of the resplendent sun! Grant us Thy tender grace and favour, so that we may arise to serve Thy Cause and not be shamefaced before the peoples of the earth.

— 'Abdu'l-Bahá

Blazing Majesty and Simple Humanity

This story of an exceptional occasion comes from the diary of the painter and devoted follower of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Juliet Thompson.

The Beloved Master's portrait is finished. He sat for me six times, but I really did it in the three half hours He had promised me; for the sixth time, when He posed in His own room on the top floor, I didn't put on a single stroke. I was

looking at the portrait wondering what I could find to do, when He suddenly rose from his chair and said: "It is finished." The fifth time He sat, Miss Souley-Campbell came in with a drawing she had done from a photograph to ask if He would sign it for her and if she might add a few touches from life. This meant that He had to change His pose, so of course I couldn't paint that day. And the fourth time (the nineteenth of June)--who could have painted then?

I had just begun to work, Lua in the room sitting on a couch nearby, when the Master smiled at me; then turning to Lua said in Persian: "This makes me sleepy. What shall I do?"

"Tell the Master, Lua, that if He would like to take a nap, I can work while He sleeps."

But I found that I could not. What I saw then was too sacred, too formidable. He sat still as a statue, His eyes closed, infinite peace on that chiselled face, a God-like calm and grandeur in His erect head.

Suddenly, with a great flash like lightning He opened His eyes and the room seemed to rock like a ship in a storm with the Power released. The Master was blazing. "The veils of glory", "the thousand veils", had shrivelled away in that Flame and we were exposed to the Glory itself.

Lua and I sat shaking and sobbing.

Then He spoke to Lua. I caught the words, "Munádíy-i 'Ahd." (Herald of the Covenant).

Lua started forward, her hand to her breast.

"Man?" (I?) she exclaimed.

"Call one of the Persians. You must understand this."

Never shall I forget that moment, the flashing eyes of 'Abdu'l-Bahá the reverberations of His Voice, the Power that still rocked the room. God of lightning and thunder! I thought.

"I appoint you, Lua, the Herald of the Covenant. And I AM THE COVENANT, appointed by Bahá'u'lláh. And no one can refute His Word. This is the

Testament of Bahá'u'lláh. You will find it in the Holy Book of Aqdas. Go forth and proclaim, "This is THE COVENANT OF GOD in your midst."

A great joy had lifted Lua up. Her eyes were full of light. She looked like a winged angel. "Oh recreate me," she cried, "that I may do this work for Thee!"

By now I was sobbing uncontrollably.

"Julie too," said Lua, not even in such a moment forgetful of me, "wants to be recreated."

But the Master had shrouded Himself with His veils again, the "thousand veils". He sat before us now in His dear humanity: very, very human, very simple.

"Don't cry, Juliet," He said. "This is no time for tears. Through tears you cannot see to paint."

I tried hard to hold back my tears and to work, but painting that day was at an end for me.

The Master smiled lovingly.

"Juliet is one of My favourites because she speaks the truth to me. See how I love the truth, Juliet. You spoke one word of truth to Me and see how I have praised it!"

I looked up to smile in answer, and in gratitude, then was overwhelmed again by that awful convulsive sobbing.

At this the Master began to laugh and, as He laughed and laughed, the strangest thing happened. It was as if at each outburst He wrapped Himself in more veils, so that now He looked completely human, without a trace left of His superhuman majesty. Never had I seen Him like this before and I never did afterward.

— Juliet Thompson

Sacrifice and Love

Story of 'Abdul-Bahá during the fast: The following beautiful story illustrates how taxing that fast was on the Master, 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

The resident believers used to say that the phrase “effulgences of the Prison” was a term which had been revealed by the Tongue of Glory [Bahá'u'lláh] to characterise the hardships and tribulations associated with life in 'Akká; it had endured among the friends through word of mouth.

At the beginning these hardships were numerous, but many of them disappeared little by little, mainly because of the changes to the environment. Others still persisted. The various deadly epidemics, which during the time of Bahá'u'lláh's imprisonment in the barracks had annihilated a large number of the inhabitants, had disappeared leaving no trace, as had the foul-smelling fumes which had caused and spread infectious diseases.

Still, one of those “effulgences of the Prison” which the passing of time and change in the climate had failed to overcome was the assault of the fleas, mosquitoes, flies and ants, which confirmed the expression, “Blessed the one who is bitten by the insects of 'Akká”. Another was the thirty-day fast, which according to the command of Bahá'u'lláh was to be observed until the end of the period of incarceration to commemorate the Islamic holy month. Every sincere and devoted believer was expected to observe it gladly and of his own free will.

This thirty-day fast, which according to the Islamic calendar is observed in the month of Ramadan, continued to be kept until the end of the period of imprisonment in 1909 A.D. For the pilgrims and resident believers, who led relatively comfortable and peaceful lives, observing the thirty-day fast was not a difficult undertaking. But for the blessed person of the Centre of the Covenant, whose life was filled with numerous occupations and hardships (as described in Chapter 3 of this chronicle), it can be imagined how arduous and exhausting such an observance was. This was especially true when in the month of Ramadan the Muslims of Akká, including all the government

officials, switched their nights and days and conveniently slept during the daytime, while at night, after breaking the fast and observing the obligatory prayers, they crowded ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s biruni [living room] to while away the night and disturb the Master until dawn.

But that spiritual and heavenly Being had to begin His many tasks before the rising of the sun, as has been described in previous chapters. And so in the month of Ramadan no comfort was possible for ‘Abdu’l-Bahá; at times even the opportunity to partake of the meals did not present itself, and therefore His fast began without any breakfast and ended without any dinner. Thus the “effulgences of the Most Great Prison” sapped His strength and weakened His body. Many times during these days of fasting I saw the Master in such a state of exhaustion that I was deeply shaken.

On one such day He summoned me to His presence in the biruni area. As He spoke, signs of melancholy and weariness were apparent in His voice. He slowly paced the floor and then began to climb the stairs with difficulty. The symptoms of fatigue gave way to expressions of displeasure and weariness: “I don’t feel well. Yesterday I did not eat any breakfast and when the time came to break the fast I had no appetite. Now I need a bit of rest.” As He spoke, His face was so ashen that I became alarmed for His Well-being. So I boldly exclaimed, “It is better for the Master to break the fast.”

“No, it is not proper,” was ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s reply.

I persisted. “With the way the Master feels, fasting itself is not proper either.”

“It is not important, I will rest awhile” responded ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.

“The believers cannot endure to see the Master in such a state of physical weakness and exhaustion,” I remained unyielding.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá gave an effective and moving explanation in the hope of convincing me to relent. It did not work. In fact, it increased my ardour, and I continued to try to persuade Him to break the fast. As He would not yield, my words became mixed with tears and lamentations. But He would not let up.

Suddenly I realised that I had found a new quality in myself which did not allow me to give in, despite all the reasons that 'Abdu'l-Bahá had offered. And so, stubbornly holding my ground, I told myself, "Regardless of what may come of this, I will continue to beg, plead and implore until I achieve my purpose, for I can no longer behold the Beloved of the world in such a condition."

While begging and supplicating, strange thoughts crowded my mind. It was as if I wished to discover in what light my servitude and devotion to that Threshold was regarded in the sight of God. As such, I would consider success in this to be a good omen. And so from the very depths of my heart I entreated the Most Holy Shrine for assistance.

Spontaneously these words flowed from my lips, "So may I make a suggestion?"

"What do you want me to do?" 'Abdu'l-Bahá replied.

Tears streaming from my eyes, I begged Him, "Come and for this once break your fast, to bring happiness to the heart of a sinful servant of Bahá'u'lláh."

God be praised, I know not where those words came from, but they brought such joy to the heart of that quintessence of kindness and love that quite loudly He exclaimed, "Of course, of course, of course."

Immediately He called for Nasir and told him, "Put some water in the pot and boil it and make a cup of tea for me." And then He put His blessed hand on my shoulder and said, "Are you pleased with me now? If you wish, you can go back to your tasks now and I will drink the tea and pray for you."

Such feelings of joy and ecstasy flooded my being at that moment that I was rendered incapable of a reasonable response. Looking at me, 'Abdu'l-Bahá remarked, "Do you want to be present to see with your own eyes when I break my fast? Very well, come and sit down." He then withdrew to His small office, took up the pen and began to write, as I watched. Aqa Rida now came into the presence of the Master for some particular purpose. 'Abdu'l-Bahá remarked,

“Today I do not feel well and in response to the request of one of the loved ones of God I want to break my fast.”

As Aqa Rida left the room, the teapot with a single glass and a bowl of sugar were brought in. Addressing me, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá said, Jinab-i-Khan, you have performed a praiseworthy service. May God bless you. If I had not broken the fast now; I would surely have fallen ill and would have been forced to break the fast.” And with every sip of the tea, He bestowed on me other kind and loving words. After that He arose and said, “Now that I feel better, I will go after my work and will continue to pray for you.”

And then He started down the stairs. In the biruni reception room there was no one except the late Aqa Siyyid Ahmad-i-Afnan (the same Afnan upon whom the rank of martyr was bestowed posthumously). Addressing him, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá said, “Jinab-i-Afnan, today I was not feeling well and intended to rest, but at the request of a beloved friend I have broken my fast. I am happy to have done so, for otherwise I would have fallen ill. But now I feel well and can continue the work of the Cause.” Having said this, He walked out of the room.

Jinab-i-Afnan, his eyes shining with the light of pure joy and delight, said, “God Almighty, who was that ‘beloved friend’, so that I can sacrifice my life for him?” And I, drunk with manifest victory, exclaimed, “It was I, it was I”

In brief, rather than any attempt at sacrifice of life, and filled with heavenly joy, we embraced each other as our spirits soared. As we did so, I placed in the storehouse of my memory the fact that the thirty-day fast truly was an “effulgence of the Most Great Prison”.

— Dr Youness Afroukhteh

The Covenant of Selfless Servitude

It is not simply the interest that attaches to the fact that this man, in his sixty-ninth year, was able to accomplish this rather remarkable feat of physical and intellectual endurance which prompts this catalogue of his summer's work.

There is a deeper significance to be discerned by those who attended him during his journeyings, or even by those who have read this chronicle carefully and sympathetically. During this very summer, the poet and sage, Rabindranath Tagore, had been under contract to deliver a series of lectures in America. After covering a pan of his proposed itinerary, which was not nearly as extensive as that of Abdu'l-Bahá's, his strength and nerves were exhausted and he cancelled his contract and returned to India. He said he could not bear the materialistic vibrations of America. It needs also to be disclosed that while Tagore's contract called for a sizable financial remuneration, 'Abdu'l-Bahá had no contract, other than the Covenant of selfless Servitude made with Bahá'u'lláh in the sanctuary of His heart, and, furthermore, so far from demanding or expecting any financial reward, He consistently refused the slightest remuneration, and even when entertained by solicitous and generous hosts He was punctilious in seeing to it that gifts to both host and servants of the household far outweighed what He received. Also He emphasised the spiritual capacity of the American people which Tagore decried. When He stayed at hotels his "tips" to servants who waited on Him were often so generous as to excite astonishment. But even this does not at all cover what He gave. In several instances that have come to my personal knowledge His spiritual influence upon chambermaids and porters was such that one of them said to one of those accompanying the Master: "This is sacred money. I shall never spend it upon myself."

Is comment necessary? Whence came the Power of body, mind and Spirit which enabled this Man, unused to Western bustle, competition and nervous strain; all His long life subject to persecution, imprisonment and hatred; cast suddenly into an environment for which he could have had no preparation, so to master every situation with which He was confronted? I have shown

how this mastery extended to the details of the society of culture and luxury, but it was no less noticeable, no less victorious, when in contact with the humble and sorrowing.

How is it possible to ignore such conquering majesty! How can one refrain from searching with passionate intensity for the secret of His power! To me, after all these years of study and prayer in my search for this key, there can be only one answer, the answer given by Abdu'l-Bahá himself, and even more convincingly by the Blessed Perfection, (Bahá'u'lláh).



Even His physical condition was reinforced constantly by this Divine Power. On one occasion after a particularly exhausting day He was returning late at night from a gathering at which He had spoken with much energy and effectiveness. In the automobile he showed great weariness. He relaxed and gradually sank into almost a comatose condition. The friends who were with Him were greatly alarmed. On arriving at their destination He had to be almost carried into the house and to His room. Within fifteen minutes, while the friends were gathered in great anxiety in the lower rooms, His voice was heard resounding with even more than its usual energy and power calling for His secretary, and He appeared at the top of the stairs His usual dominant, smiling, forceful self.

— Howard Colby Ives

His Great Simplicity, His Marvellous Humility

George Townshend, one-time Canon of St Patrick's Cathedral, in Dublin, Ireland and Archdeacon of Clonfort Cathedral, who became an ardent Bahá'í, wrote: "...In 'Abbas Effendi's character the dominant element was spirituality. Whatever was good in His life He attributed not to any separate source of virtue in Himself but to the power and beneficence of God. His single aim was servitude to God. He rejoiced in being denuded of all earthy possessions and in being rich only in His love for God. He surrendered His freedom that He

might become the bondservant of God; and was able at the close of His days to declare that He had spent all His strength upon the Cause of God. To Him God was the centre of all existence here on earth as heretofore and hereafter.”

One of the last pilgrims to visit ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in the Holy Land in 1921 was Anna Kunz, the daughter of a Swiss theologian who lived in Zurich in Switzerland. She later recalled, “As I think of him now. I always love to think, first, of his great simplicity, his marvellous humility which knows of no self existence, and last, or better, first, of his boundless love.”

Today humanity is increasingly concerned — and rightly so — with “the quality of life”. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was absorbed with both its spiritual and its physical dimensions: He knew that as the quality of man’s spiritual life improves, his physical life would improve also — the other world reflects the inner man. He was fully aware that we are indeed on a “spiritual journey from self to God”. He wanted all people to be aware of this vital fact also — then they could truly arise to their real potential, both in this world and in the next.

— **Annamarie Honnold**

His Love for Children

Prayer

O Lord! I am a child; enable me to grow beneath the shadow of Thy loving-kindness. I am a tender plant; cause me to be nurtured through the outpourings of the clouds of Thy bounty. I am a sapling of the garden of love; make me into a fruitful tree.

Thou art the Mighty and the Powerful, and Thou art the All-Loving, the All-Knowing, the All-Seeing.

—'Abdu'l-Bahá

Encourager of Children's Education

The Master loved children. It was observed that “many of His talks were given as He sat with His arm encircling one of them.” To parents He would speak in the following vein: “Give this child a good education; make every effort that it may have the best you can afford, so that it may be able to enjoy the advantage of this glorious age. Do all you can to encourage spirituality in them.”

— Annamarie Honnold

The Black Rose

During his stay in America 1912, 'Abdu'l-Bahá addressed governance, peace, gender equality, and the role of religion. Yet one underreported subject that he spoke about often was children, and this in a country still struggling with child labour.

'Abdu'l-Bahá was an advocate for the youngest members of society. When speaking to the International Peace Forum in New York on May 12, 'Abdu'l-Bahá shed light on an often-neglected consequence of war. "Consider what is happening in Tripoli," he said, "children, made fatherless; fathers, lamenting the death of their sons; mothers, bewailing the loss of dear ones."

'Abdu'l-Bahá had four daughters of his own, and attended many children's gatherings in America. Whether listening to them sing, commenting on their work in classrooms, or writing age-appropriate prayers for them, he treated them with respect.

On April 19, 'Abdu'l-Bahá was heading to the Bowery Mission in New York when a group of boys saw him and his Persian entourage and began to throw sticks at them. One of his hosts, Mrs. Kinney, explained to the boys that he was a "holy man" going to see the poor. The boys decided that they wanted to join him, but instead, Mrs. Kinney gave them her home address and told them to visit.

When they arrived, 'Abdu'l-Bahá stood at the door and greeted each boy personally. The Reverend Howard Colby Ives explains: "Among the last to enter the room was a coloured lad of about thirteen years. He was quite dark and, being the only boy of his race among them, he evidently feared that he might not be welcome."

When 'Abdu'l-Bahá saw him, Ives wrote, "His face lighted up with a heavenly smile. He raised His hand with a gesture of princely welcome and exclaimed in a loud voice so that none could fail to hear; that here was a black rose." Ives continued: "The other boys looked at him with new eyes. I venture to say that he had been called a black — many things, but never before a black rose."

"Every child is potentially the light of the world," 'Abdu'l-Bahá would argue, "and at the same time its darkness."

"Training in morals and good conduct is far more important than book learning," he said. "The child who conducts himself well, even though he be

ignorant, is of benefit to others, while an ill-natured, ill-behaved child is corrupted and harmful to others, even though he be learned.” Of course, he commented, instilling both moral education and book learning in children would be preferable.

“Give them the advantage of every useful kind of knowledge,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá wrote on the subject of child rearing. “Let them share in every new and rare and wondrous craft and art.” Yet he wasn’t suggesting a life of indulgence. “Bring them up to work and strive,” he added, “accustom them to hardship. Teach them to dedicate their lives to matters of great import, and inspire them to undertake studies that will benefit mankind.”

— Caitlin Shayda Jones

‘I Would Look into His Eyes’

Ali M. Yazdi, at age 11, was living in Alexandria, Egypt when ‘Abdu’l-Bahá visited.

I had many opportunities to see the Master — as we always called Him — at meetings and on festive occasions. I especially remember the first time He came to our house to address a large gathering of believers. The friends were all gathered, talking happily, waiting. Suddenly all grew quiet. From outside, before He entered the room, I could hear the voice of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, very resonant, very beautiful. Then He swept in, with His robe flowing! He was straight as an arrow. His head was thrown back. His silver-grey hair fell in waves to His shoulders. His beard was white; His eyes were keen; His forehead, broad. He wore a white turban around an ivory-coloured felt cap.

He looked at everyone, smiled and welcomed all with Khushámadíd! Khushámadíd! (Welcome! Welcome!) I had been taught that in the presence of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, I should sit or stand with my hands crossed in front of me, and look down. I was so anxious to see Him that I found myself looking up furtively now and then. He often spoke — I was privileged to hear Him speak on many subjects. For nine months it seemed like paradise. Then He left us and sailed for Europe. How dismal everything became. But there was school

and there were duties. Exciting news came from Europe, and there were memories! 'Abdu'l-Bahá came back four months later. Paradise returned. He spoke to me on several occasions, calling me Shaykh 'Alí, the name He Himself had given me, after my uncle who was the first member of the family to join the Faith. When 'Abdu'l-Bahá spoke to me, I would look into His eyes — blue, smiling and full of love.

— Ali M. Yazdi

Boisterous Boys are Won Over by His Charm

Juliet Thompson and other Bahá'ís decided to give the Master a birthday party, and a few of them baked a cake. She reported, "We took several taxis to the Bronx, with the Master riding in the first one. As soon as His taxi had arrived there, the Master got out and walked into the park ahead of the rest of us.

"A group of young boys gathered around Him and started to laugh. Two or three of them threw stones at Him. With natural concern many of the friends hurried towards the Master, but He told them to stay away. The boys came closer to the Master, jeered at Him and pulled at His clothes. The Master did not become cross. He merely smiled at them radiantly, but the boys continued to behave as before. Then the Master turned towards the friends. 'Bring me the cake,' He said. No one had mentioned to Him that we had brought a cake.

"Some of us said, 'But 'Abdu'l-Baha, the cake is for your birthday.' He repeated, 'Bring me the cake.' A friend uncovered a large sponge cake, with white icing, and gave it to the Master. As soon as the boys had seen the cake they began to calm down, and stared at the cake hungrily.

"The Master took it in His hands and looked at the cake with pleasure. The boys were now standing quietly around Him. 'Bring me a knife,' said the Master. A friend brought Him a knife. The Master counted the number of boys who were standing around Him and then cut the cake into the same number of pieces. Each boy eagerly took a piece, ate it with relish, and then ran away happily."

— Annamarie Honnold

Hands Bursting with Sixpences

When ‘Abdu’l-Bahá first arrived in England, he was the guest of a friend in a village not far from London. The evident poverty around him in this wealthy country distressed him greatly. He would walk out in the town, garbed in his white turban and long Persian coat, and all eyes were centred upon this strange visitor, who, the people had been told, was “a holy man from the East”. Naturally the children were attracted to him, followed him, pulled at his coat, or his hand, and were immediately taken into his arms and caressed. This delighted them, of course, and children are never afraid of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, but what pleased and amazed them still more was that when they were put down, they found in their little hands a shilling or sixpence from the capacious pockets of “the holy Man’s” long coat. Such bits of silver were a rarity in their experience, and they ran home with joy to tell the tale of the generous stranger from the Orient, possessed apparently of an endless store of shining sixpences.

The children crowded after him and so many sixpences were dispensed that the friend who entertained ‘Abdu’l-Baha became alarmed, and talked the matter over with Miss Robarts, who was also a guest in the house. “It is a shame!” they said indignantly. “He comes to us accepting nothing, and is giving to our people all the time! It must not go on!”

That day ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had bestowed many sixpences, and people had come from the neighbouring villages, bringing their children to receive the blessing from “the holy Man” — and of course the sixpences! About nine o’clock in the evening the ladies decided that no one else must see ‘Abdu’l-Bahá that night. But as they waited outside the cottage, a man came up the path, carrying one baby, and with others clinging to him. When he asked for “the holy Man”, however, he was told severely that he could not be seen, he was very tired and had gone to bed. The man sighed, as he said, “Oh, I have walked six miles from far away to see Him. I am so sorry!”

The hostess responded severely, feeling that the desire for sixpences had prompted the journey perhaps more than religious enthusiasm, and the man

sighed more deeply than ever, and was turning away, when suddenly ‘Abdu’l-Bahá came around the corner of the house. The way in which he embraced the man and all the babies was so wonderful, that the hearts of the too careful friends melted within them, and when he at last sent away the unbidden guests, comforted, their hearts full of joy, their hands bursting with sixpences, the two friends looked at one another and said: “How wrong we were! We will never again try to manage ‘Abdu’l-Bahá!”

— “**Star of the West**”, quoted by Annamarie Honnold

Little Ones Were Attracted to Him

Throughout His visit to the West ‘Abdu’l-Bahá regularly met children. On the streets of cities and towns, little ones were attracted to Him and followed Him — like the children in New York who followed Him and were invited to the home of the Kinneys. There the Master gave them chocolates and most tenderly taught them about beauty in the diversity of the human race. On 24 April 1912 (Washington) and on 5 May (Chicago), He explicitly addressed children.

In these talks ‘Abdu’l-Bahá emphasised the true identity of these young souls:

... your hearts are exceedingly pure and your spirits most sensitive. You are near the source; you have not yet become contaminated. You are the lambs of the heavenly Shepherd. You are as polished mirrors reflecting pure light.

He also explained the importance of education so that this purity – this simplicity and sincerity greatly praised by Jesus Christ – would be maintained and bear fruit through adult reason and intelligence.

— “**The Journey West**” website

His Generosity

Prayer

O Thou Lord of wondrous grace!

Bestow upon us new blessings. Give to us the freshness of the spring. We are saplings which have been planted by the fingers of Thy bounty and have been formed out of the water and clay of Thy tender affection. We thirst for the living waters of Thy favours and are dependent upon the outpourings of the clouds of Thy generosity. Abandon not to itself this grove wherein our hopes aspire, nor withhold therefrom the showers of Thy loving-kindness. Grant that from the clouds of Thy mercy may fall copious rain so that the trees of our lives may bring forth fruit and we may attain the most cherished desire of our hearts.

—‘Abdu’l-Bahá

Generosity to the Poor

‘Abdu’l-Bahá gave freely of what He had — love, time, care and concern, food and money, clothing and flowers, a bed, a rug! His motto appeared to be: frugality for Himself, generosity for others.

Stories of the Master’s self-denial in favour of others’ well-being are legion. He was “bountiful as the rain in His generosity to the poor...” Because He and His family were rich in the love of God, they accepted material deprivation for themselves gladly. On the other hand, if the Master knew of a broken window or a leaky roof, which were health hazards, He would make sure the necessary repairs were completed. He did not need, or want, luxury. This became

obvious on His trip to America. Once, after a few days in beautiful rooms reserved for Him by the friends in one city, He moved to a simple apartment. However, in hotels He tipped so generously as to cause astonishment. In homes where He was entertained, He left thoughtful gifts for both hosts and servants. It should be emphasised that He went from coast to coast to speak without pay or benefit of contract.



On the occasion of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s first dinner in the home of Lady Bloomfield in London His hostess had prepared course after course in her eagerness to please Him. Afterwards He gently commented: “The food was delicious and the fruit and flowers were lovely, but would that we could share some of the courses with those poor and hungry people who have not even one.” Thereafter the dinners were greatly simplified. Flowers and fruit remained in abundance, for those were often brought to the Master as small love tokens.



One day ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was going from ‘Akká to Haifa and asked for a seat in the stage coach. The driver, surprised, said “Your Excellency surely wishes a private carriage.” “No.” replied the Master. While He was still in the coach in Haifa, a distressed fisherwoman came to Him; all day she had caught nothing and now must return to her hungry family. The Master gave her five francs, then turned to the driver and said: “You now see the reason why I would not take a private carriage. Why should I ride in luxury when so many are starving?”

— Annamarie Honnold

Seeding Prosperity

In a final touching tribute to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s generosity this true story emerged in the 1990s, some 70 years after ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s passing. The Universal House of Justice, the supreme governing Council of the Bahá’í world community, announced a major construction project on Mount Carmel, Haifa, of buildings that would, at last, meet the commands of Bahá’u’lláh, the

Founder. Accordingly, a tender was put out for Israeli construction companies to bid for, and a public call for engineers was made by the House of Justice. To everyone's astonishment, a large number of Arab engineers emerged from the greater Haifa area offering their services. When the bemused Bahá'ís asked them why they had come forward they all said: "The Master, Abbas Effendi ('Abdu'l-Bahá) gave our grandparents and great-grandparents money to start small businesses. Our family businesses prospered and our families were able to pay for our school and university education. We are here to give something back to Abbas Effendi."

— Trevor R. J. Finch

Attitude of Loving Service to All

'Abdu'l-Bahá's life was filled with great events, but at this juncture it is worth looking at the smaller events of his daily routine, which also demonstrate his profound attitude of loving service to all. Myron Phelps, a prominent New York attorney who was not a member of the Bahá'í Faith, visited Haifa for a month and recorded a typical scene in his book, *The Master in 'Akká*:

"Imagine that we are in the ancient house of the still more ancient city of 'Akká, which was for a month my home. The room in which we are faces the opposite wall of a narrow paved street, which an active man might clear at a single bound. Above is the bright sun of Palestine; to the right a glimpse of the old sea-wall and the blue Mediterranean. As we sit we hear a singular sound rising from the pavement, thirty feet below—faint at first, and increasing. It is like the murmur of human voices. We open the window and look down. We see a crowd of human beings with patched and tattered garments. Let us descend to the street and see who these are.

"It is a noteworthy gathering. Many of these men are blind; many more are pale, emaciated, or aged Most of the women are closely veiled, but enough are uncovered to cause us well to believe that, if the veils were lifted, more pain and misery would be seen. Some of them carry babes with pinched and

sallow faces. There are perhaps a hundred in this gathering, and besides, many children. They are of all the races one meets in these streets—Syrians, Arabs, Ethiopians, and many others.

“These people are ranged against the walls or seated on the ground, apparently in an attitude of expectation;—for what do they wait? Let us wait with them.

“We have not to wait long. A door opens and a man comes out. He is of middle stature, strongly built. He wears flowing light-coloured robes. On his head is a light buff fez with a white cloth wound about it. He is perhaps sixty years of age. His long grey hair rests on his shoulders. His forehead is broad, full, and high, his nose slightly aquiline, his moustaches and beard, the latter full though not heavy, nearly white. His eyes are grey and blue, large, and both soft and penetrating. His bearing is simple, but there is grace, dignity, and even majesty about his movements. He passes through the crowd, and as he goes utters words of salutation. We do not understand them, but we see the benignity and kindness of his countenance. He stations himself at a narrow angle of the street and motions to the people to come towards him. They crowd up a little too insistently. He pushes them gently back and lets them pass him one by one. As they come they hold their hands extended. In each open palm he places some small coins. He knows them all. He caresses them with his hands on the face, on the shoulders, on the head. Some he stops and questions. An aged negro who hobbles up, he greets with some kindly inquiry; the old man’s broad face breaks into a sunny smile, his white teeth glistening against his ebony skin as he replies. He stops a woman with a babe and fondly strokes the child. As they pass, some kiss his hand. To all he says, ‘Marhaba, marhaba’—‘Well done, well done!’

“So they all pass him. The children have been crowding around him with extended hands, but to them he has not given. However, at the end, as he turns to go, he throws a handful of coppers over his shoulder, for which they scramble. . . .

“This scene you may see almost any day of the year in the streets of Akka. There are other scenes like it, which come only at the beginning of the winter season. In the cold weather which is approaching, the poor will suffer, for, as in all cities, they are thinly clad. Some day at this season, if you are advised of the place and time, you may see the poor of ‘Akká gathered at one of the shops where clothes are sold, receiving cloaks from the Master. Upon many, especially the most infirm or crippled, he himself places the garment, adjusts it with his own hands, and strokes it approvingly, as if to say, “There! Now you will do well.” There are five or six hundred poor in ‘Akká, to all of whom he gives a warm garment each year.”

— **Kenneth E. Bowers (quoting Myron H. Phelps)**

Compassion for the Down-trodden

His compassion for the aged, for children and the down-trodden knew no bounds. I remember once after he had visited a Salvation Army refuge near the Embankment, in London, tears came to his eyes. He could not understand how a wealthy nation like Britain could allow such poverty and loneliness in its midst. He spoke about this to Archdeacon Wilberforce of Westminster Abbey and to Dr. R. J. Campbell of the City Temple and he provided a sum of money through London’s Lord Mayor for the succour of the poor and derelict, then so prominent a feature of the London scene.

In speaking to me, he often referred to the need for providing food and sustenance for those in want, as a primary requisite to supplying moral and spiritual food for the heart and for the mind.

— **Wellesley Tudor Pole**

His Call for Racial Equality

Prayer

O Thou kind Lord! O Thou Who art generous and merciful! We are the servants of Thy threshold and are gathered beneath the sheltering shadow of Thy divine unity. The sun of Thy mercy is shining upon all, and the clouds of Thy bounty shower upon all. Thy gifts encompass all, Thy loving providence sustains all, Thy protection overshadows all, and the glances of Thy favor are cast upon all. O Lord! Grant Thine infinite bestowals, and let the light of Thy guidance shine. Illumine the eyes, gladden the hearts with abiding joy. Confer a new spirit upon all people and bestow upon them eternal life. Unlock the gates of true understanding and let the light of faith shine resplendent. Gather all people beneath the shadow of Thy bounty and cause them to unite in harmony, so that they may become as the rays of one sun, as the waves of one ocean, and as the fruit of one tree. May they drink from the same fountain. May they be refreshed by the same breeze. May they receive illumination from the same source of light. Thou art the Giver, the Merciful, the Omnipotent.

—‘Abdu’l-Bahá

The Marriage of Louis and Louisa Gregory

‘Abdu’l-Bahá stirred up a revolution on race relations when visiting America in 1912 at a time of many restrictions for African-Americans. He rarely criticised others or over-emphasised any tenets of the Bahá’í Faith except His insistence on race amity and equality of all races.

Along those lines, He personally encouraged the marriage of Hand of the Cause Louis Gregory, an African-American man and Louisa Mathews, a white British woman which resulted in the first inter-racial Bahá'í marriage of its kind while He was still in America.

In *God Passes By*, the Guardian cites this marriage as one of the acts 'Abdu'l-Bahá undertook while on this hemisphere that defined the significance of His trip:

'Abdu'l-Bahá frequently urged inter-racial marriage. Bringing the Gregorys together in marriage is considered in Baha'i history as an "exemplary act" of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and one of the most significant of the acts He carried out during His time in the United States.

This most important union of Louis Gregory and Louisa (Louise) Mathew took place on September 27, 1912 in New York as conditions in Washington D.C. were rather unfavourable to inter-racial marriages and it allowed them to be a little more discreet. 'Abdu'l-Bahá was in Colorado at the time of the wedding on His way to California but He praised this marriage greatly and addressed them when He stated: "I saw a seed in your heart."

Gregory was born in Charleston, South Carolina, on June 6, 1874. His father died when he was five years of age. Later, through help from his stepfather and working hard as a tailor and waiter in the summers, Gregory was able to gain admittance into Fisk University and later studied law at Howard University, receiving his degree in 1902.

He met 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Ramleh, Egypt in 1911 on his way to the Holy Land for pilgrimage and met Louisa Mathews for the first time there.

Gregory worked tirelessly on race unity in the face of opposition with some of the Bahá'ís as well as the general public. He was elected to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and served on that body for many years. At the urging of the Guardian, he travelled extensively to teach the Faith and worked on issues of race unity around the country particularly in the south.

Louisa Mathews was born in 1866 and accepted the Faith in Paris. She travelled with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá on the S.S. Cedric to the U.S. From the 1920s onward Louisa spent most of the year teaching the Faith in Eastern Europe, returning to the U.S. in the summers to be with her husband.

Their interracial marriage survived the many obstacles of the time and thrived for nearly 40 years until Louis Gregory’s passing on July 30, 1951. He is buried in the cemetery at Eliot, Maine. Louisa passed away in 1956 and is buried next to her beloved husband in Eliot.

— “The Journey West” website

What Brought Happiness to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá

At noon on Tuesday, April 23 [1912], ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s fourth day in Washington, he stood next to Louis Gregory before 1,600 students, faculty, and guests of Howard University, crammed into Howard’s Rankin Chapel. Stained timber arches stretched across the space, resting on hammer beams at the walls and supporting a dark wooden roof. The band played as he entered, and the audience rose in applause.

By 1912 Howard was the nation’s leading black university, having been founded in 1866 to educate newly-emancipated slaves. The overflowing crowd in Rankin Chapel that afternoon was the first predominantly black audience ‘Abdu’l-Bahá would address in America, and the first of two such meetings that Louis Gregory had arranged for that day.

Reverend Wilbur Patterson Thirkield, Howard’s eighth President, introduced ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. “This was a most notable occasion,” wrote Joseph Hannen, who was also in the audience, “and here, as everywhere when both white and coloured people were present, Abdul-Baha seemed happiest. The address

was received with breathless attention by the vast audience, and was followed by a positive ovation and a recall.”

‘Abdu’l-Bahá began by drawing attention to the diversity in the room. “Today I am happy,” he said, “for I see . . . white and black sitting together.” He then proceeded to reject prevailing black and white views about the essentialism of race — the popular belief that a person’s race was central to his or her humanity:

“There are no whites and blacks before God. All colours are one, and that is the colour of servitude to God. Scent and colour are not important. The heart is important. If the heart is pure, white or black or any colour makes no difference.”

— Jonathan Menon

Desegregating Black and White

At that time, Washington was the most racially and socially mixed Bahá’í community in America, but it had deep racial unity problems. The upper classes, including people like Mr and Mrs Parsons, still upheld the long-standing social conventions of racial segregation that were not easily overcome. Many whites were afraid to host multiracial gatherings in their homes for fear of what others would say. Many blacks were also reluctant to attend meetings because of their fear of insults and discriminatory treatment. An example: once ‘Abdu’l-Bahá said He wanted to host a unity Feast. The committee organised for the event selected one of the city’s most exclusive hotels — one was known for its refusal to admit black people. The black Bahá’ís thought it might be better if they did not attend and so avoid the problem of the colour bar. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, however, insisted they attend and in the end all the Bahá’ís, both black and white, sat side-by-side in the previously segregated hotel.

— Earl Redman

His Love for God

A poem by 'Abdu'l-Bahá

O Lord so rich in bounty, so replete with grace,
Whose knowledge doth mine inmost heart and soul embrace!
At morn, the solace of my soul is none but Thee;
The knower of mine ardent goal is none but Thee.
The heart that for a moment hath Thy mention known
Will seek no balm save longing pain for Thee alone.
Withered be the heart that sigheth not for Thee,
And better blind the eye that crieth not for Thee!
In all mine hours of deepest gloom, O Lord of might,
My heart hath Thy remembrance for a shining light.
Do, through Thy favour, breathe Thy spirit into me,
That what hath never been may thus forever be.
Consider not our merit and our worth,
O Lord of bounty, but the grace Thou pourest forth.
Upon these broken-winged birds whose flight is slow
Out of Thy tender mercy newfound wings bestow.

Further Reading

Recommended Websites and Books

These sources offer convenient access to more stories and information about ‘Abdu’l-Bahá:

Prayers by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá: <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/prayers/>

“The Life of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá” (brief introduction to His life) on bahai.org — <https://www.bahai.org/abdul-baha/life-abdul-baha>

“Articles and Resources” (A selection of readings, essays, and resource materials offering further exploration of the life, mission and legacy of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá) on bahai.org — <https://www.bahai.org/abdul-baha/articles-resources/>

“The Extraordinary Life of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá” on the Utterance Project website — <https://theutteranceproject.com/the-extraordinary-life-of-abdul-baha/>

239 Days — <https://239days.com/>

For books by and about ‘Abdu’l-Bahá: New Zealand Bahá’í Distribution Service — <https://bds.bahai.org.nz/collections/abdul-baha>

Sources of Reflections, Stories and Prayers

These are all the sources drawn upon for the content of this booklet. The sources are listed alphabetically according to the names given at the foot of each story, reflection or prayer.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá. The prayers of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in this booklet come from “Additional Prayers Revealed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá” (under “Reflections”, “His Childhood and Youth”, “His Qualities”, “His Generosity”); and “Bahá’í Prayers: A Selection of Prayers Revealed by Bahá’u’lláh, the Báb, and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá” (all other prayers). The poem at the end of the booklet is from “Twenty-six Prayers Revealed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá”. All these source documents may be found at: <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/prayers/>

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<http://www.spanglefish.com/epsomandewellbahais/index.asp?pageid=344379>
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<https://239days.com/2012/07/13/every-child-is-potentially-the-light-of-the-world/>
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<https://www.bahai.org/documents/essays/kazemzadeh-kazem-and-firuz/six-books-about-abdul-baha>
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<https://239days.com/2012/04/23/this-shining-colored-man/>
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