



STANWOOD COBB

*Memories of  
'Abdu'l-Bahá*



# MEMORIES OF ‘ABDU’L-BAHÁ

By

STANWOOD COBB

Originally published by

Avalon Press



eBook version 1.0

I first met ‘Abdu’l-Bahá vicariously, so to speak, and it was this meeting that brought me into the Bahá’í Faith in the summer of 1906. It happened that being in the vicinity of Green Acre that summer I made a pilgrimage there to see what it was all about. My curiosity had been aroused by weekly articles in the Boston Transcript. At this time I was studying for the Unitarian ministry at the Harvard Divinity School.

It was a warm Sunday afternoon in August. The big tent on Green Acre's lower level, where the lecture hall now is located, was filled to capacity to hear some famous sculptor from New York. I was not greatly interested in his lecture. It was not for the sake of art that I had come, but for the sake of religion. At the end of the lecture I went up to speak to Sarah Farmer—who had been presiding in her own ineffable way, shedding a warm spiritual glow upon the whole affair. As I had previously met her in Cambridge at the home of Mrs. Ole Bull, I ventured to recall myself to her.

Miss Farmer took my hand in hers and cordially held it while she looked into my eyes and asked, "Have you heard of the Persian Revelation?"

"No," I answered.

"Well, go to that lady in a white headdress and ask her to tell you about it. I know by your eyes that you are ready for it."

What had she seen in my eyes? I do not know. But what she had read there proved true. For within half an hour from that moment I became a confirmed Bahá’í and have remained so ever since.

But it is of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá that I am writing, and not of myself. How did it happen that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, seven thousand miles away and a prisoner in ‘Akká, could at such a distance confirm me with such immediacy into the Bahá’í Faith?

It happened in this way. The path had been prepared, so to speak. For in reviewing books for the Boston Transcript which dealt with the prevailing and rapidly increasing flaws in our present civilization, and the need of a better world order, I had begun to debate deeply with myself on this matter of such great universal concern.

It is true, I thought, that a new and better pattern of civilization needs to be devised. But even if such a pattern — an ideal pattern — were conceived, who could put it over? Could I, as a clergyman, hope to convert all my congregation to it? Much less could I hope to convert the whole country. And no human being could by any conceivable power of vision and of personality bring all humanity into such a kingdom of perfection.

I still vividly remember how I was taking a long walk in the beautiful suburb of Chestnut Hill, around the reservoir, when the solution of this problem flashed into my mind. Someone must appear with more than human authority, in order to win the allegiance of the whole world to an ideal pattern for humanity.

This was my general frame of mind when Mary Lucas, the "woman in white" — a singer just back from visiting ‘Abdu’l-Bahá — took me under an apple tree on the sloping lawn and proceeded to unfold to me the Persian Revelation. Her exposition was very simple. It consisted of only these four words: "Our Lord has come!"<sup>[1]</sup>

The moment Mary Lucas uttered those words I felt, This is it! How did it happen that I felt that way? The "woman in white" had not discoursed to me upon the spiritual character and greatness of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, nor upon the principles of the Bahá’í Faith. How great is the power of speech, when one simple utterance could sweep me — mind, heart and soul — into that Faith!

But it was more than these four words that empowered Mary Lucas so to usher me into the Cause. It was more than speech itself. It was a unique spiritual vibration which Mary Lucas had brought from ‘Akká that convinced me. And it was the strange cosmic dynamism with which her words were charged that moved my soul.

If ‘Abdu’l-Bahá Himself had stood under that apple tree and addressed me, I could not have been more convinced. For what is distance on the plane of spirit? Mary Lucas had brought the spirit of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá with her. I felt it, and I was convinced. Especially as my own soul had already sought out and found the answer to the world's dire needs: Someone must appear with more than human authority.

So that was my first meeting with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá — strangely vicarious, perhaps predestined. The second meeting — with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in person while He was still a prisoner in ‘Akká — took place in the following way. In

February of 1908 I had the great privilege of visiting Him in company with Lua Getsinger, famous in the annals of Bahá'í history.

I accidentally (or was it by destiny?) ran into Lua on the steps of Shepard Hotel in Cairo, where I had gone for a few days of travel during the midyear holidays of Robert College (Constantinople), in which at that time I was teacher of English and Latin.

"What are you doing here?" asked Lua in great surprise.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, in equal surprise.

It seems that Lua was on a pilgrimage to 'Akká, and she urged me to leave off my travels in Egypt and join her. I explained that I had written 'Abdu'l-Bahá for permission to visit, but had been answered that at that time it was not advisable.

"But I have standing permission to take anyone with me," urged Lua.

"But I have arranged a trip up the Nile with my friend Hussein."

"What is a trip up the Nile compared with the privilege of visiting the Master?"

Lua's logic was convincing and her ardor compelling. Twenty-four hours later saw me ensconced in a room adjoining 'Abdu'l-Bahá's in the historic "prison of 'Akká", in reality a large compound enclosed within walls.

My first meeting with 'Abdu'l-Bahá was bewildering. We were ushered into a long study, lighted by large French windows at the farther end. I saw a large desk there, but no person sitting at it. Only a radiance of light. As we approached the end of the room, a majestic figure in Oriental garb became evident to me. It was 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

Lua Getsinger, with the devotion of a Mary Magdalene, fell to her knees and fervently kissed His robe. But what was I to do? I am not one who can act insincerely. Should I merely shake hands with Him? As I stood in hesitation 'Abdu'l-Bahá, fully realizing my predicament, saved me from it by taking me in His arms and embracing me.

"You are welcome!" He said.

Every evening at dinner 'Abdu'l-Bahá, who did not eat at that time, helped to serve us. He went around from guest to guest, putting more food upon the plates. This is the height of Oriental hospitality, to serve an honored guest with one's own hands. When the meal was over, 'Abdu'l-Bahá would give us a brief talk on spiritual themes. I regret I have not a memory sufficient to recall all that He said. But I do recall two of these messages of spiritual wisdom.

"It is not enough to wish to do good. The wish should be followed by action. What would you think of a mother who said, 'How I love you, my babe!' — yet did not give it milk? Or of a penniless man, who said, 'I am going to found a great university!'"

On another occasion He spoke of the need for loving patience in the face of aggravating behavior on the part of others. "One might say, 'Well, I will endure such-and-such a person so long as he is endurable.' But Bahá'ís must endure people even when they are unendurable?"

Three extraordinary qualities which characterized all of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's utterances were to be found in these two brief conversations: His supreme logic; His delightful sense of humor; and the inspiring buoyancy with which He gave forth solemn pronouncements. For instance, when He said, "But Bahá'ís must endure people even when they are unendurable", He did not look at us solemnly as if appointing us to an arduous and difficult task. Rather, He beamed upon us delightfully, as if to suggest what a joy to us it would be to act in this way!

I want to emphasize this important point — the joyousness with which 'Abdu'l-Bahá always depicted the spiritual life as He enjoined it upon us. And why not? Is man's spiritual life not in reality more joyous than any other kind of life that he can lead?

This philosophy of joy was the keynote of all of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's teaching. "Are you happy?" was His frequent greeting to his visitors. "Be happy!" Those who were unhappy (and who of us are not at times!) would weep at this. And 'Abdu'l-Bahá would smile as if to say, "Yes, weep on. Beyond the tears is sunshine."



And sometimes He would wipe away with His own hands the tears from their wet cheeks, and they would leave His presence transfigured.

\* \* \*

On the occasion of this visit I had been under a severe strain at Robert College, due to disciplinary troubles. That was one of the reasons for my diversionary trip to Egypt. Also I had been slowly recovering in previous years from a nervous depression due to overwork at Dartmouth. I had been earning my way through Dartmouth, and also at the Harvard Divinity School. At times I would feel so depressed that I should have been glad to have found a hole in the ground, crawled into it, and pulled the hole in after me. I understood at such times the Hindu craving for extinction.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá came into my room one morning without His translator. He sat beside me and took one of my hands in both of His and held it for a minute or two. He had not at any time inquired as to my health. He knew. From that moment on I found myself permanently relieved of these depressive moods. No matter how hard the going, I have always since then been glad to be alive.

At last, all too soon, the time came to go. The three days assigned for our visit had come to an end. I shall never forget how Lua Getsinger sobbed as if her heart would break as she slowly descended the long flight of steps, looking back frequently at ‘Abdu’l-Bahá Who stood benignly at the top.

And I shall never forget how joyously ‘Abdu’l-Bahá smiled at Lua's tears, knowing that they were more precious than pure gold. For they were the complete offering, at that moment, of Lua's heart and soul to the Master — the instinctive expression of her great love. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá knew that these were not tragic tears. They were like the vernal showers that prelude the rich blossoming of spring.

Needless to say, the ensuing spring at Robert College was one of the most glorious periods of my life. Never had the birds sung so sweetly, the flowers and shrubs bloomed so exquisitely, the golden sunshine seemed so intoxicating. As for my disciplinary troubles at the college, they vanished like mist which the sunshine dispels. My pupils, some of whom had been carrying knives and revolvers, loved me again and more than ever. Such was the magic power that I brought from ‘Akká.

\* \* \*

Again it was my privilege to visit ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in the summer of 1910, and this time at His own invitation. I was given the privilege of spending a week there, in the Persian guest house on the slopes of Mt. Carmel. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá at this time was living in Haifa in the home built for Him by Mrs. Jackson, having been freed from His imprisonment by the Young Turks in the summer of 1908. The oppressive and cruel governor who had in vain sought graft from Him and had threatened to send Him to the malign dungeons of Tunis, had himself met the fate he had designed for ‘Abdu’l-Bahá — the fate of death, and at the hands of the Young Turks. And ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was enjoying, for the first time since His boyhood, the luxury of freedom.

He seemed to me more noble in countenance, more regal in bearing, more potent in the power of His presence than ever before. Every evening at sunset He met with the pilgrims, assembled in a large room, and gave a spiritual discourse.

One afternoon I found the pilgrims waiting outside at the gate for ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. He had been making a call upon the Turkish consul and was expected soon. After a few moments we saw His carriage stop at the foot of the short hill, where He got out in order to walk the rest of the way for the sake of exercise. All of the Persian pilgrims stood in their customary reverential attitude, awaiting His approach with bowed heads and arms crossed upon their breasts. I alone, as an American, took the privilege of watching Him as He approached, enjoying the majesty of His movements and the nobility of His whole appearance. But as He neared me I involuntarily also bowed my head. Some power emanating from Him seemed to obligate this attitude. So had Professor E. G. Browne, the only Occidental ever to visit Bahá’u’lláh, felt obligated to bow his head in the presence of the Prophet. This power emanating from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was not expressed for the purpose of producing submission. It was a power which He never expressed to non-Bahá’ís. Let us say, rather, that it was a privilege He gave us, of seeing a little behind the veil; of experiencing the direct effect of that Cosmic Power which in this early period of our development seems supernormal, however normal it may become to us at some distant future stage of our soul's development. No, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá never put forth any of His spiritual power to dazzle, persuade or overawe sceptics or unbelievers. Of this fact I shall later give a vivid instance.

\* \* \*

On the day I arrived at Haifa I was ill with a dysentery which I had picked up in the course of my travels. 'Abdu'l-Bahá sent His own physician to me, and visited me Himself. He said, "I would that I could take your illness upon Myself." I have never forgotten this. I felt, I knew, that in making this remark 'Abdu'l-Bahá was not speaking in mere terms of sympathy. He meant just what He said. Such is the great love of the Kingdom, of which 'Abdu'l-Bahá spoke so often and so much. This is a love which is difficult, almost impossible, for us to acquire — though we may seek to approximate its perfection. It is more than sympathy, more than empathy. It is sacrificial love.

Looking back, it seems strange that 'Abdu'l-Bahá did not employ His healing power directly upon me, as He had done on the occasion of my previous visit. He left me to the care of His physician and to the prescribed medications. It took three days for me to get on my feet again.

Why did He not restore me directly to health by means of spiritual healing? There is some deep spiritual lesson here. It was not 'Abdu'l-Bahá's province to go about healing physical diseases. It was His mission to expound the Teachings and express the spiritual potency of the world's Divine Physician. Physical events and conditions are of less importance in our lives than the development of our spiritual nature. In regard to health in general, I will quote here a statement which 'Abdu'l-Bahá had made to me on my previous visit: that health is the expression of equilibrium; that the body is composed of certain elements, and that when these elements are in the right proportion, health results; and that if there is any lack or preponderance in these elements, sickness results.

Thus fifty years ago 'Abdu'l-Bahá gave in a simple statement to me all the truths which the new science of biochemistry is now discovering. But there is still another cause of illness, 'Abdu'l-Bahá went on to say. Illness may be caused by nervous factors. Anything that shocks us or affects our nerves may also affect our health.

\* \* \*

All that has been written up to this point is a sort of introduction to the recording of my memories of 'Abdu'l-Bahá on the occasion of His visit to this country in 1912. The purpose of this introduction is to show what sort of a personage it was that on April 11, 1912, landed at the port of New York for an extended visit and lecture tour in this country.

Here was an Oriental in Oriental garb, a man Who had been prisoner most of His life, a character Whose life was for the most part lived on a spiritual plane so lofty as to be almost beyond our comprehension. How did this Servant of God meet, fit into and adjust to the objective, dynamic and materialistic life of America?

'Abdu'l-Bahá, upon landing in New York and being surrounded by alert and inquisitive reporters, was perfectly at home. And why not? Is there any limit to the power of spirit? Was not 'Abdu'l-Bahá's universal spirit as capable of dealing with the fast-vibrating technological Occident as it had been in dealing with the mystic and more spiritual Orient? We shall see, as this narrative continues, how He was "all things to all men"; protean in His universality; thoroughly at home in every environment.

This majestic figure — in tarboosh, turban and flowing robes — drew the newspaper men into His aura and immediately won their favor.

"What do you think of America?" He was asked. "I like it. Americans are optimistic. If you ask them how they are they say 'All right!' If you ask them how things are going, they say, 'All right!' This cheerful attitude is good."

And so 'Abdu'l-Bahá won reporters' hearts and continued to do so throughout His stay in America. He never seemed to them, or was described by them, as a strange or exotic personality. He always received favorable and constructive notices from the press. For eight months 'Abdu'l-Bahá traveled over the United States from coast to coast, giving addresses in churches, universities and lecture halls. Several of these addresses I was privileged to attend. As I look back on these occasions, I recall more vividly His platform presence than the contents of His addresses, which of course have all been published. 'Abdu'l-Bahá did not, as a lecturer, stand still. His movements were very dynamic. He paced back and forth on the platform as He gave forth His spiritual utterances. I felt that the general atmosphere and the effect of His words were enhanced rather than diminished by the presence of a translator. For the techniques of translation gave 'Abdu'l-Bahá a certain spiritual dignity, such as could not have been attained by a straight address in the language of His hearers. The situation was as follows: 'Abdu'l-Bahá would make a statement of a length within the power of the translator to render; then He would stand and smile as the translation was given, or He would nod His head to affirm important points. In other words, 'Abdu'l-Bahá did not stand passive during the period of translation. He constantly illumined this translation with the dynamic power of His own spiritual personality.

And when He spoke, the Persian words — so beautiful and strong — boomed forth almost as musically as in operatic recitatives. While He spoke He was in constant and majestic motion. To hear Him was an experience unequalled in any other kind of platform delivery. It was a work of art, as well as a spiritual service. First would come this spiritual flow of thought musically expressed in a foreign tongue. Then, as the translator set forth its meaning to us, we had the added pleasure of watching 'Abdu'l-Bahá response to the art of the translator. It was, all in all, a highly colorful and dramatic procedure.

The substance of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's talks, here and in London and Paris, have been published and are available for study. One can perceive in all of these addresses and discussions a peculiar adaptation to the Occidental mentality and way of thinking. They are, to sum it up in one word, supremely logical. It was the Greeks who taught the world how to think in logical terms, and they thereby laid the foundations for all Western thought and science. From the Greeks we have learned how to begin at "A" in order to get to "Z" — or as in Greek, from "Alpha" to "Omega."

The Orientals do not think in just this way. Their mentality has never submitted to the Greek discipline. Their minds are more mystical, more immediate in perception. They do not have to begin at "A" in order to comprehend the station of "Z." Through spiritual sensitivity, through rapid intuitional processes, they can often gain an immediate awareness or comprehension of the ultimate — of the "Omega" itself.

All Oriental seers and prophets speak oracularly. One sentence, one paragraph will contain a wealth which a lifetime of thought cannot exhaust. Christ spoke this way. Baha'u'llah spoke this way. But 'Abdu'l-Bahá, for the sake of the Western world, adopted the Greek mode of presentation, carefully elaborating His theses and developing them from known and admissible premises. In no place is 'Abdu'l-Bahá ever obscure or recondite. If He wishes to present a great spiritual truth, He takes it up at an initial point where its truth will be acknowledged by all, and then develops it into a larger presentation such as can expand our very minds and souls.

And so, whatever else 'Abdu'l-Bahá was and in the future will be realized to be, it is recognizable even today that He was God's special gift to the Occident. He translated the oracular teachings of Baha'u'llah into a language and form easily comprehensible to the West. So that no one, having available these lucid pronouncements of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, can say that the Bahá'í Faith is hard to understand. 'Abdu'l-Bahá has set forth its Teachings with all the lucidity of daylight and the warmth of sunlight.

Regarding the countless personal interviews which the Master gave to Bahá'ís and non-Bahá'ís alike, volumes could be written. I will tell here only of the interviews which I personally was privileged to have. When 'Abdu'l-Bahá was in Boston, I seized this opportunity to take my father in to see Him, from our home in the suburb of Newton. Father at that time was a venerable Boston artist seventy-five years of age — an earnestly religious man, devout, spiritual and prayerful. He was sympathetic to my adherence to the Bahá'í Cause, but he had said, "Son, I am too old to change." While I was in Constantinople, Father had at my request attended some of the Bahá'í meetings in Boston; and now he was glad to have this opportunity to visit with 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

But what was my consternation to perceive that Father was taking the conversation into his own hands. It was an occurrence which I never shall forget. Father for some half-hour proceeded to lay down the law to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, or let us say, to enlighten Him on spiritual themes. Or to be more exact, let us say that Father took this opportunity to express to the loving, listening ear of 'Abdu'l-Bahá the spiritual philosophy which had guided him in life.

I sat there quite shocked. But I didn't need to be. 'Abdu'l-Bahá plainly was not shocked at this reversal of the customary role — He now to be the listener and His visitor the discourser. He sat there smiling, saying little, enveloping us with His love. And at the end Father came away feeling that he had had a wonderful interview. What a lesson in humility this was, that 'Abdu'l-Bahá thus exemplified! There are so many times when we can help others best just by being good listeners.

The last interview I had in this country with 'Abdu'l-Bahá was in Washington. Strange, that I do not recall what He said. My heart was too full to take any notes! I only can recall how He embraced me at the end, kissed me, and said three times: "Be on fire with the love of the Kingdom!"

What is this "love of the Kingdom"? That is what humanity must henceforward spend a few thousand years to discover and apply to life. Did 'Abdu'l-Bahá mean the love for the Kingdom or the kind of love that prevails in the Higher Kingdom? Or did He mean both these loves?



Here in these nine words 'Abdu'l-Bahá summed up the gist of all His teaching; which was that love applied by means of the Holy Spirit is the one thing that will solve all problems of man, both as an individual and as a collective society.

The most important interview I had with 'Abdu'l-Bahá was in Paris in the spring of 1913. I was one of the staff of Porter Sargent's Travel School for Boys. On my first visit He inquired about the school and asked me what I taught. I told Him that I taught English, Latin, algebra and geometry. He gazed intently at me with His luminous eyes and said, "Do you teach the spiritual things?"

This question embarrassed me. I did not know how to explain to 'Abdu'l-Bahá that the necessity of preparing the boys for college-entrance exams dominated the nature of the curriculum. So I simply answered: "No, there is not time for that."

'Abdu'l-Bahá made no comment on this answer. But He did not need to. Out of my own mouth I had condemned myself and modern education. No time for spiritual things! That, of course, is just what is wrong with our modern materialistic "civilization." It has no time to give for spiritual things.

But 'Abdu'l-Bahá's question and His silent response indicated that from His viewpoint spiritual things should come first. And why not? The material world, as the expression of man's spirit, is subordinate to the spiritual world. Therefore education should begin with that which is primary and causal; and not with that which, as the creation of man, is secondary to his creative spirit and to the Creative Spirit of the cosmos. 'Abdu'l-Bahá kindly invited me to bring Porter Sargent and the pupils to see Him. Mr. Sargent gladly accepted the invitation, and four of the boys did. The others had excuses, like those people in the Bible who were invited to the wedding feast but did not go. One boy had to buy a pair of shoes; another had planned to take afternoon tea at a restaurant where a gypsy orchestra furnished music, et cetera. How many of life's important opportunities thus pass us by, through our own unperceptiveness or neglect!

I was deeply interested and concerned to see what impression 'Abdu'l-Bahá would make on the owner of the school. Porter Sargent, ten years my senior, was a confirmed and positive atheist. He had been a biologist, and was suffering from that spiritual myopia which so often afflicts this type of scientist. But he was an idealist, a humanitarian, a man of great vision for humanity, and somewhat of a genius.

In one intimate discussion with me on the nature of existence, during a long hike we took together on the sunny island of Capri, he had outlined to me his concept of life and the universe.

"What do you think of it?" he asked me, with some eagerness. Perhaps this was the first occasion on which he had so fully expounded his philosophy of life. "It is splendid!" I said. "But it only covers half of existence."

"What is the other half?" "Spirit."

But this other half did not exist for Porter Sargent. Idealist that he was, creative-minded, somewhat of a poet — I felt sad that not one ray of spirit could penetrate the pride of his intellect.

So when this golden opportunity came of an interview with 'Abdu'l-Bahá, I had great hopes. Now, in this intimate meeting with the Master, I thought, Sargent will be forced to realize the existence of spirit. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's spiritual potency will at last penetrate his shell of skepticism.

And so, when we came out from the hotel after a half-hour conference with 'Abdu'l-Bahá, I eagerly asked, "Well, what do you think of Him?" I have never forgotten my shattering disappointment at the answer: "He's a dear, kind, tired old man." I was chagrined. But this experience taught me two spiritual lessons. The first was that skepticism must solve its own problems, in its own way. The second truth, even more important, was that Spirit never forces itself upon the individual. It must be invited. Theologians have frequently made the observation that God could easily force us to reverence and stand in awe of Him, if He wished. But He does not wish to win man's reverence and awe and love by any forceful way. The initiative must come from man himself. And so in the case of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, I noticed upon many occasions that He never expressed spiritual power for the purpose of dazzling people, or of winning them to a spiritual allegiance for which they were not inwardly prepared. The greater the receptivity of the individual, the greater was the revelation of spiritual potency which 'Abdu'l-Bahá displayed.

Thus Juliet Thompson, who painted 'Abdu'l-Bahá's portrait, has testified to the glorious revelations of Himself which her Subject at times made to her. In similar vein have testified the Kinneys, with whom 'Abdu'l-Bahá spent several weeks. And May Maxwell once told me that she had received, upon one sacred occasion in the

presence of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, such a revelation of Him that she would never attempt to describe it. But materially-minded people ‘Abdu’l-Bahá met upon their own plane, as He did Porter Sargent. And as I also saw Him do in Washington with the Turkish ambassador, on the occasion of Mrs. Parson's reception. This being a social affair, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá did not play the part of the Master but the part of a guest amenable to the situation. And anyone who had looked into the large reception room, as I did, and had seen ‘Abdu’l-Bahá sitting in a corner and exchanging funny stories with the ambassador, would have seen in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá's facial expressions no trace of spiritual power. For He was not here primarily for spiritual purposes, but to play a social part.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá was indeed "all things to all men." He was protean. If some were prepared only to see Him as the Old Man of the Sea, such He was to them. But if they were prepared to see Him as more than this, the degree of their receptivity was proportionately blessed.

\* \* \*

In all my interviews with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá I had an extraordinary feeling of receiving truth from a higher plane than that of the mere intellect. Man's intellect is an organ of discrimination, an instrument for analysis and attack. As we listen to other people more learned than ourselves we are pleased to get information, but we consciously reserve the right of judgment. Some of the things said to us we accept immediately; some with reservations; and some we inwardly oppose. No matter how wise or how learned the teacher, we reserve the right of our own judgment.

But with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá it was different. I accepted always His statements with humility and with total conviction; not because of any assumption of authority, but because I always felt in the depths of my soul that what He said was truth. It always rang true, so to speak. Let us say, as it was said of another great leader of men, that He spoke "with authority."

In the course of His lectures here and abroad ‘Abdu’l-Bahá discoursed on many subjects. Where did He get His wide knowledge of things and of affairs? He had had but one year of schooling at the age of seven. He had been a prisoner all His life. He had few books, no scholarly library, no encyclopedias. Yet at Schenectady, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was being shown around the General Electric Works by Steinmetz, this "wizard of electricity" was observed to be eagerly absorbing ‘Abdu’l-Bahá's elucidation of electricity. The Rev. Moore, Unitarian clergyman who was present at the time, testified to me: "Steinmetz's jaw seemed to drop open as he drank in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá's talk."

\* \* \*

"‘Abdu’l-Bahá, do You know everything?" Saffa Kinney is said to have asked. "No, I do not know everything. But when I need to know something, it is pictured before Me." And so ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, on the occasion of His tour of the General Electric Works, knew more about electricity than did Steinmetz.

Shoghi Effendi has said that intuition is a power of the soul. It was this power that was always available to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, and available in its totality. He has spoken many times of this "immediate knowledge"—this knowledge attained without the means of books or other humans, this strange intuitive power which to some degree is available to us all.

And often, in closing an interview after answering some abstruse question, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá would say: "Time does not permit of further answer. But meditate on this, and truth will come to you."

And so — although ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is no longer with us to answer our questions — the power of the Holy Spirit so strong in Him is still available to us to guide, to fortify, to heal.

\* \* \*

I have tried to describe ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as I saw and knew Him. But how can anyone give an adequate description of this personality that, like St. Paul, was all things to all men?

The Persian doctor who attended Him from 1914 till His death, when recently asked at a meeting in Milwaukee to describe ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, replied that this was very difficult to do; because ‘Abdu’l-Bahá expressed Himself differently at different times, meeting every occasion as the occasion demanded.

If one were asked to describe ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in a single word, that word would be: "Protean." This unusual adjective is derived from the name of a minor deity in Greek mythology who had the magic power to assume any form he wished. And so ‘Abdu’l-Bahá could be on one occasion all love; on another occasion supreme wisdom; and on other rare occasions, expressing a power that seemed cosmic.

And since love, wisdom, and power are the three principles upon which the Cosmos is run; and since ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was designated as our exemplar, it follows that these qualities should be developed in us all, as we grow spiritually toward the attainment of our full stature as citizens of that Kingdom of God destined to be the consummation of our planetary existence.

What was the secret of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s power? He suggests the answer in His own words.

"The human body is in need of material force, but the spirit has need of the Holy Spirit. — If it is aided by the bounty of the Holy Spirit it will attain great power; it will discover realities; it will be informed of the mysteries. The power of the Holy Spirit is here for all. The captive of the Holy Spirit is exempt from every captivity.

"The teachings of His Holiness Bahá’u’lláh are the breaths of the Holy Spirit which create man anew." Whatever was and still is the reality of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, it is evident from the events of His life that He was endowed with a cosmic power for the fulfillment of His mission. Every unexpected circumstance, every event in the midst of the Occidental civilization so foreign to His own background, He met not only successfully but also with a power that won all hearts.

His directives to Bahá’ís always focused on the need of Divine aid—the aid of Spirit—in order to exemplify and propagate the Bahá’í Faith and lay the foundations for that New World Order laid down by Bahá’u’lláh for the establishment of a spiritually motivated world civilization.

\* \* \*

To those who would like to pursue further the marvelous details of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s life we recommend "Portals to Freedom" by Howard Ives,<sup>[2]</sup> a Unitarian clergyman prior to his conversion to the Bahá’í Faith. We had the pleasure of meeting Ives in New York in 1910 when he was at the beginning of his search for spiritual reality.

"Cobb, I'd like you to meet a young clergyman who is becoming interested in Bahá’í," said my friend Montfort Mills to me one day. "Can you have lunch with us tomorrow?"

I was glad to accept this invitation and to meet an earnest seeker. I do not recall our conversation at the lunch table. But it was evident that Ives was seriously searching.

This meeting with Ives resulted on my part in a memorable friendship with a man who was destined ultimately to celebrate the personality and teachings of one who in 1912 became his Teacher and Master. In his vivid narrative Howard Ives reports many loving meetings and interviews with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. The impression of this spiritual leader which remained a constant in Ives's recollections is expressed by him in the following words: "What ‘Abdu’l-Bahá said impressed me with the force of the impact of Divine Truth. There was not a question in my mind of the authority with which He spoke."

---

[1] Bahá’u’lláh, Founder of the Bahá’í Faith

[2] First published by Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 112 Linden Ave., Wilmette, Ill.

# Table of Contents

[\[1\]](#)  
[\[2\]](#)