***Memories of***

**‘ABDU’L-BAHÁ**

By

STANWOOD COBB

*Author of Character, Radiant Living, Tomorrow and Tomorrow, etc.*

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***Memories of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá***

***By Stanwood Cobb***

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 great-

ly 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 Cam-

bridge 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 pre-

pared, 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!”[[1]](#footnote-1)\*

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 ut-

terance could sweep me—mind, heart and soul—

into that Faith!

But it was more than these four words that em-

powered 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*.

**II**

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, fa-

mous 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 compel-

ling. 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 bewilde-

ring. 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 evi-

dent to me. It was ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.

Lua Getsinger, with the devotion of a Mary Magda-

lene, 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 buoy-

ancy with which He gave forth solemn pronounce-

ments.

For instance, when He said, “But Bahá’ís must en-

dure 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 joy-*

*ousness 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 diversion-

ary 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 with-

out 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 perma-

nently 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 prel-

ude the rich blossoming of spring.

Needless to say, the ensuing spring at Robert Col-

lege 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 sun-

shine 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.

**III**

Again it was my privilege to visit ‘Abdu’l-Bahá

in the summer of 1910, and this time at His own in-

vitation. 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 boy-

hood, 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 move-

ments 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 un-

believers. Of this fact I shall later give a vivid in-

stance.

\* \* \*

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 per-

fection. 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 spir-

itual 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. Phys-

ical 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.

**IV**

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 coun-

try 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 univer-

sal 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 flow-

ing 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 cheer-

ful attitude is good.”

And so ‘Abdu’l-Bahá won reporters’ hearts and con-

tinued 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 di-

minished by the presence of a translator. For the tech-

niques of translation gave  ’Abdu’l-Bahá a certain spirit-

ual 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 dy-

namic power of His own spiritual personality.

And when He spoke, the Persian words—so beauty-

ful 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 unequaled 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 avail-

able for study. One can perceive in all of these ad-

dresses 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 foun-

dations 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 dis-

cipline. Their minds are more mystical, more im-

mediate 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 aware-

ness or comprehension of the ultimate—of the “Ome-

ga” 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 Bahá’u’lláh

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 day-

light 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 op-

portunity 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 op-

portunity 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. Fa-

ther 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 phi-

losophy 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 Fa-

ther 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 prepar-

ing 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 con-

demned 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 cre-

ative spirit and to the Creative Spirit of the cosmos.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá kindly invited me to bring Porter Sar-

gent and the pupils to see Him. Mr. Sargent gladly ac-

cepted 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 or-

chestra 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 ideal-

ist, a humanitarian, a man of great vision for human-

ity, 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 con-

cept 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 pene-

trate the pride of his intellect.

So when this golden opportunity came of an inter-

view 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 pow-

er 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 Him-

self 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 oc-

casion in the presence of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, such a revela-

tion 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 am-

bassador, 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-Ba-

há’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.

**VI**

In all my interviews with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá I had an ex-

traordinary 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 al-

ways His statements with humility and with total con-

viction; 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 Stein-

metz, this “wizard of electricity” was observed to be

eagerly absorbing ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s elucidation of elec-

tricity. 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?” Ṣafá

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 electric-

ity 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.

**VII**

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, ex-

pressing 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.

**VIII**

To those who would like to pursue further the

marvelous details of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s life we recom-

mend “Portals to Freedom” by Howard Ives,[[2]](#footnote-2)\* 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 Mont-

fort 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 Ive’s recollections is expressed by him in

the following words: “What ‘Abdu’l-Bahá said im-

pressed 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. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. \* First published by Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 112 Linden Ave., Wilmette, Ill. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)