

“Remembering the Master”

Stories about Abdu’l-Baha

by Rhonda Palmer

2012

Originally conceived and written by Rhonda Palmer, with additions by Anne Perry.

A flexible script, it can be performed by one or two actors representing the fictional character(s). The stories are based on actual people and events and can be edited or expanded; PowerPoint slides can enhance the piece. See other versions of this script at bahai-library.com/palmer_perry_remembering_master.

Introduction by Emcee: In 2012 Bahá’ís will celebrate the 100th anniversary of the visit of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to America. The Son of Prophet-Founder Bahá’u’lláh, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was given many names and titles—the Perfect Exemplar, the Center of the Covenant, the Mystery of God. The Bahá’ís themselves often lovingly refer to Him as “The Master.” His impact on people—rich and poor, old and young, famous and ordinary, Bahá’í and non-Bahá’í, was extraordinary. Here to tell us some stories of His time in America and how he changed the lives of various individuals is a fictitious character in a monologue created by Rhonda Palmer and revised and performed by Anne Gordon Perry. It is the year 1932. Let us welcome Miss Emmeline White, who is looking back twenty years to the year 1912 and the visit of the Master.

Dear friends, I have so much to tell you about the visit of the Beloved Master to America and how He impacted our lives, I am not sure where to begin. Let me show you my photo album. I guess you are wondering who I am, since you’ve probably never heard of me. That’s me. My name is Miss Emmeline White. I was 28 in 1912, and I taught English to ninth grade girls in Brooklyn.

There were so many of us who were touched by the Master's presence when he came to the United States. I went to one of the meetings in New York with a friend, who said, "My dear, you must see this wonderful Man!" We went to the Church of the Ascension at Fifth and Tenth in New York City and heard him speak about Jesus and then we followed Him up to West 57th street to hear him speak again at the Carnegie Lyceum. Can you imagine such a small old man with such strength and power that he could speak so often and in so many places? Well, I just simply fell in love with Him. We all did, really.

We talked about Him incessantly. We loved to hear stories about Him and to tell others the stories we had heard. We dreamed of Him, and longed to see Him just for a moment. Dear Juliet Thompson told me that when the Master arrived in New York, He asked Mr. Kinney to escort Him to their home where He would meet the Bahá'ís in the afternoon. Juliet couldn't wait to just look at Him, so she talked Rhoda Nichols and Marjorie Morton into hiding on the pier with her. They tried to make themselves as small as possible so as not to be noticed, but just before the Master got in Mr. Kinney's automobile, He turned, looked at them and smiled. It was a smile from heaven itself, Juliet said.

Here is how one newspaper described Him: (*The Independent* July 18, Ward 239 *Days* p. 112)

"He is an aged man now, with a long white beard and a saintly face, worn but peaceful. His bearing is simple and dignified, . . . giving his message from a Christian pulpit to a strange audience in a foreign land with the same earnestness and naturalness as though he were addressing his disciples in Acre. To say "from a pulpit" is hardly correct, since he dislikes to occupy such an exalted position, preferring to put himself upon a level with his audience. Standing upon the floor or walking to and fro, he speaks quietly in Persian, which, sentence by sentence, is translated, tho at times his expressive features and gestures make the services of an interpreter superfluous. He wears a small white turban and a black robe over a white girdled garment. He greets the audience by touching his forehead repeatedly

with the palm of the right hand and closes his sermon with a half-chanted prayer, standing and holding his hands upward and open, as though ready to receive the blessing he beseeches.”

He was so kind to each of us, and though there was often a crowd of followers and well-wishers around Him, He would still make each of us feel as though He had come to America for the sole purpose of enlightening us. My good friend Bertha Clark wrote to me about her meeting with the Master, and said “At the Kinney home there were between three and four hundred souls waiting to receive His blessing. He came to each one of us and took our hands in His with a loving greeting and a few words I did not understand. However I felt an electric shock that went from my head to my feet. This was a day I am sure that no one that was present will ever forget. Whenever the Master spoke, in homes or churches, hall or societies, I went almost at the cost of my position which I had held for many years.” (Ward, *239 Days: Abdu'l-Baha's Journey in America*, p. 206) but I didn't care if I lost my job, as long as I could see His face again.

How can I begin to explain the kind of light that He brought into our darkness? So many things we had no way of understanding until He arrived, and then He didn't merely tell us, Oh NO, He patiently showed us how God truly worked in our lives, how much He loved us, and how little we knew of the little we knew. He really turned our world upside down. Things we thought of as having the greatest importance He showed us were as insignificant as dust. Little things we never noticed were given great glory and honor. How could we ever take it all in?

Can you imagine how the Friends wanted to please the Master? They would do anything for him, and tried to give Him money and cars and clothing. He always

refused and said that these things should be used to help the poor. But I heard of one gift that He accepted and this story just thrilled me to my soul. You see, He had been invited to a very lavish dinner, and the table was full of delicious food and everyone sat down to enjoy a great feast. ‘Abdu’l-Baha was there, passing around the plates piled high with good things to eat. Then one of the friends gave ‘Abdu’l-Baha a present. It had been sent by a very poor man who lived far away, who gave the only thing he could give—his dinner. It was wrapped up in a clean cotton handkerchief. Inside was a shriveled apple and a piece of dry, black bread. ‘Abdu’l-Baha looked at the present and was very happy. He pushed His plate of food away and ate the old apple and the hard bread. He even broke bits off to share with the friends. Think of it friends! He accepted the only gift this poor man had to offer. Surely He would then accept the poor gifts of my own foolish heart!

The Master loved laughter. He loved to hear it among the friends, and he would often laugh loudly and beautifully. If I listen carefully enough there are still bits of His laughter lingering in my heart like church bells. . . Be happy, He would tell us. Be happy, be full of joy. He often told funny stories. You see, even His humor taught us valuable lessons about ourselves. Everything He did was a lesson, and He wanted OUR lives to be like His. Could we ever change enough?

Now, friends, I need to tell you that we were not always comfortable with what the Master told us. Each of us had our own hard burdens to bear and it seemed that He knew each of us better than we knew ourselves. What was my burden? Well, I had never really seen a coloured person before He came, you know, to really see him as a person. There were coloreds around all the time, you know, but they were just cleaning or cooking or something. I never really thought much about them. The Master said that “Color is Nothing.” and I wanted to believe Him, but really, Color is often something, isn’t it? And you know, every time I went to see Him speak, I would end up standing next to a coloured person. The first few times it happened

my skin just crawled, but by and by the beauty of the Master's face would take over my soul and I would forget about everything else.

I still can't believe how I reacted when I first got news of the upcoming wedding of Louisa Mathews and Louis Gregory. It was like telling me that I could walk on the moon, or that the president was a woman, it was that impossible. I kept asking my friend Bertha if she was absolutely sure. Yes, she was sure. But where will they live? I asked. Who will talk with them? Where will they sleep? What if they get arrested? Did they know that in 25 of these United States it was ILLEGAL for them to be married? She was a little calmer than I was, and more sure of the Master's command. She told me that He had actually instructed them to marry, and that he said, "I wish the white and the colored people to marry."

Now, Mr. Gregory was very intelligent for a colored, I mean he was a lawyer and all and a real credit to his race, and Miss Mathews was English and you know how they are, but still.....Well it just shook me through and through. And most of the Bahá'ís were stunned. I mean it is one thing to SAY that color doesn't matter, but to expect me to see some people as my equal well, I just didn't know what to do.

One evening I was sitting at the Kinney home, hoping for just a glimpse of His face, or perhaps a word or two. A Unitarian minister, Mr. Howard Colby Ives, was there also, as were many others. Suddenly a large group of street urchins came in the door and do you know? They had been invited by Mrs. Kinney, to see the Master! They all smelled pretty bad, I can tell you, and probably hadn't seen the inside of a bath in their lives, but Mrs. Kinney invited them in as though they were little princes from the Orient. And the Master! Well, He hugged them for all they were worth, and held their hands, and smiled and laughed so you could almost think he was a boy himself! The last of these urchins to come in the door was a colored lad, and he hung back a little. When the Master saw him you would have thought the King of England had

come in! He raised His hand and said that “Here was a black rose.” The smile and the tears on that boy’s face almost broke my heart. Suddenly I saw how much suffering that child had endured just because of the color of his skin, and I saw the joy in his little heart at being seen, really seen. That joy was enough to light up a whole city. The Master then began giving the boys some expensive chocolates that had been placed in His room. They were pretty happy to have sweets, you can be sure. But suddenly He took a very black chocolate and laid it on the cheek of the little black boy. Then he looked around the room at all of us with such a look of good will and love . . .and humor! All of us, the boys and His followers, we all saw what He meant, without a word being spoken. Here was the sweet in the room, He was telling us, and if we tasted this sweetness we would find it good. That boy’s eyes never left the Master. That’s when I decided that I would just ignore all of my bad thoughts and feelings about the colored race and just DO what the Master said to do. It wasn’t easy, as even the Bahá’ís had a hard time with it and had separate meetings for a long time after His visit to the United States. But I found a colored friend, and she and I became like sisters after a while, and she even came to my apartment for tea sometimes, although my landlady threatened to send me packing. I was so thrilled to be able to suffer just a little and know that it was for my Beloved.

Everyone who saw the Master was transformed in one way or another by his very presence. Some of the transformations were small, like my own, others were earth shattering. There was one young man named Fred Mortenson and he had had one of the roughest of lives. He was, to put it bluntly, a rascal and a thief. He ended up.....IN JAIL.....although I would not mention it if he himself did not tell the story himself. While there, he had a lawyer named Mr. Hall, who tried very hard to help poor Fred. Mr. Hall visited with him and told him stories of The Master. Fred listened, and thought he would like to meet ‘Abdu’l-Baha, so Mr. Hall told him where to go and when he got out of jail Fred set off from Minneapolis for Green Acre—a resort hotel, a long ways away, in Eliot, Maine. Fred did not have any money, so he climbed on top of trains, and sometimes underneath, and traveled like that for many miles. He was a hobo! When he arrived he was dirty and tired.

There were a lot of people there to meet ‘Abdu’l-Baha, many of them fashionable society people, and Fred was told to sit down and wait. Fred sat down and thought that it would be a long time before The Master would want to see him. But soon someone came to announce that ‘Abdu’l-Baha was waiting for *him*. Fred had a funny feeling inside him as he went up the stairs—he had made mistakes and had been very bad, and he wondered if ‘Abdu’l-Baha would be harsh with him. The door opened and The Master smiled at Fred. He took his hands and said, “Welcome! Welcome! You are very welcome!” He asked Fred about his journey, and though Fred wished to avoid answering the question, he told Him with his eyes on the floor that he had been traveling on the top and underneath of trains. Then he looked up. ‘Abdu’l-Baha’s eyes shone, and He kissed Fred on both cheeks and gave him some fruit. Then he picked up Fred’s dirty hat and kissed that too! Fred stayed with the Master for a whole week, and you can be sure that he never did anything unworthy again! (Mehrabani, *Stories of ‘Abdul-Bahá*, p 40)

It’s amazing how some people were drawn to meet the Master. I heard the story of how Miss Sarah Farmer, the founder of Green Acre met him. In 1900 she was on a boat going to Egypt and ran into two old friends who were going to Akka to meet ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. When they got to Egypt she cabled Him to see if she could join them, and of course He said yes. When she got to there, she had a whole list of questions to ask Him, but she left them in her room. Would you believe that He answered all of them without even being asked? And then she wrote in her diary that night: “Heart too full for speech. Received by my Lord.” She suffered terribly when she came back. Everyone thought she was betraying Green Acre when she embraced the Bahá’í Revelation—by choosing one religion instead of anything and everything—but she understood that this one religion encompassed all. Well, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá knew her sufferings and wrote 28 tablets to her. Can you imagine? He confirmed her vision for Green Acre and even said: “The Lord has blessed it and blessed its founder and . . . Far-reaching consequences shall result . . . from that spot.” And then He CAME to Green Acre and drove around with her and told

her many things. Why the only photograph we have of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá kissing anyone is Sarah Farmer! Margaret Klebs wrote: “Never to be forgotten is the picture when the Beloved One held her in His arms driving slowly around the Greenacre fields. Blessed are we who could witness it.” And the last day they went up to Monsalvat, where Sarah visualized a university. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá pointed out to her where the buildings would be and the House of Worship—the second in America—in its midst. He said these things were ordained matters, but a little patience is needed. And he told her the ground was consecrated because of her vision and sacrifice. Then He turned to Miss Farmer and said, “You will be revered above all American women one fine day, you will see.” So I suppose many things will come true the Master predicted and I hope we will live to see them.

When it was time for the Master to depart from these shores we were heart-broken. The light was leaving our eyes, and never more would most of us see that beautiful face alive in this world. As Mr. Ives has so movingly written, “I saw in Him the perfect man, and I would gladly have sacrificed all that I had, or ever could have, to approach that perfectness.” Because Mr. Ives had such a way with words, let me read you his recollection of his first meeting with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá:

...As I approached the door where still he stood, he motioned others away and stretched His hand to me as if he had always known me. And, as our right hands met, with His left he indicated that all should leave the room, and He drew me in and closed the door. Still holding my hand, Abdu’l Baha walked across the room towards where in the window, two chairs were waiting. Even then the majesty of His tread impressed me and I felt like a child led by his father, a more than earthly father, to a comforting conference. His hand still held mine and frequently His grasp tightened and held more closely. And then, for the first time, he spoke, and in my own tongue: Softly came the assurance that I was His very dear son. Then we sat in the two chairs by the window: knee to knee, eye to eye. At last He looked right into me. It was first time since our eyes had met with His first beckoning gesture that this had happened. And now nothing intervened between us and He

looked at me. He looked at me! It seemed as though never before had anyone really seen me. I felt a sense of gladness that I at last was at home, and that one who knew me utterly, my Father, in truth, was alone with me. He put His two thumbs to my eyes while He wiped the tears from my face: admonishing me not to cry, that one must always be happy. And He laughed. I could not speak. We both sat perfectly silent for what seemed a long while, and gradually a great peace came to me. Then Abdu'l Baha placed His hand upon my breast saying that it was the heart that speaks. Suddenly He leaped from His char with another laugh as though consumed with a heavenly joy. Turning, he took my under the elbows and lifted me to my feet and swept me in His arms. Such a hug! No mere embrace. My very ribs cracked. He kissed me on both cheeks, laid His arm across my shoulders and led me to the door. That is all. But life has never been quite the same since. (Howard Colby Ives)

And that, dear friends was true for all of us who had the privilege of meeting Him.