

# *A Cup of Tea*

by Roger White

published in *Another Song, Another Season: Poems and Portrayals*

George Ronald, 1979

*The monologue is from the point of view of a fictitious character who meets 'Abdu'l-Bahá through Juliet Thompson. Upper class and prejudiced, she does not believe she can change her life sufficiently to embrace the Faith. Still, she has a life-changing experience meeting the Master. (Note: Text is altered slightly, for performance as a monologue. – Anne Perry)*

No more tea, Emma dear, you have been more than kind and the cake was most delicious. The strawberries are extraordinary this year, are they not...sweet and plump, like small red hearts. But returning to your question, yes, I have been seeing dear Miss Thompson and her friends; Juliet is a charming and talented girl, and her friends are kindly. Many of them are well placed – somehow one doesn't dare hope for that among the religious, if I may say so. I try to warn Miss Thompson to hold little hope for me – as you know, I'm essentially pragmatic – but she does insist so sweetly that sometimes I attend. She is always gracious at the meetings though I understand little of what she says – since her visit to Palestine she has seemed – how shall I say – not quite of this world; she lives in a state of ecstasy. She talks of nothing but the one she calls the Master – an occult-sounding term; I quite dislike it – but I confess he does intrigue me; I mean, a prisoner for forty years and now at an advanced age coming to America teaching a message of brotherly love and peace – it's like a fable. The newspapers are full of it, of course.

Miss Thompson has been beside herself since learning he would come and I naughtily allowed her to persuade me to meet him, not giving her false hope by permitting her to see how avidly curious I was. You can picture it – my pretending indifference yet half fearing she would cease insisting, and then my casting about for some means to accomplish this without upsetting my husband. Wingate is an avowed agnostic, as he eagerly informs anyone who will listen, and no doubt would disown me. His conception of my social role outside the home extends no further than my service on the Opera

League and my charities; and he has always been embarrassed by what he calls my brother's Episcopalian delusions.

But where was I? Oh yes, the Master – how queer that that name should come so readily to my lips; 'Abdu'l-Bahá or 'Abbás Effendi would be proper forms of address, I suppose. I was a guest at a gathering at someone's home – a rather good address – though what Juliet told the hostess I cannot think, and indeed I never met her, so great the crush. A strange assortment – some orientals – Persians, I suppose – a coloured gentleman – Wingate would use another term but, you see, one can in the South without offence – two Chinese, and some of what one might describe as the labouring class; a struggling artist or two, and one who might have been a poet, from Miss Thompson's seemingly endless circle of co-enthusiasts. Others, too, of course, who appeared both charming and distinguished, but on the whole was struck both by the ordinariness of the people in the group and fascinated by the idea of their being linked together through curiosity or devotion. And the Master was present – 'Abdu'l-Bahá – and he appeared – how shall I say – oh, noble, majestic, serene – it was rather as though a great light had entered the room – do you find me sentimental? One felt an overpowering need to win his approval – like a child with an adored teacher. And he spoke. Not at length, but with extreme simplicity and power. His voice is gentle, hypnotic, one might say irresistible, I scarcely remember the words – it was rather his presence which compelled – but something of his father's sufferings and his message, and a few words about his own imprisonment – the words seemed the least part of it. One could not resist feeling a sympathy, of course, but for me what he said was not the central point. How can I say this and be sure I am understood – as he spoke, I asked myself: why is he here; what does he want of us; he is not young – what can possibly come of this journey in the West?

And it came to me that his being here represents an unvoiced invitation – perhaps I should say command, for it is his presence which expresses it rather than what he says – a command, then, that we make an adjustment in our lives – am I making sense? I almost exclaimed aloud: "He wants us to be like him!" Not in an imitative way – not that – but to step into his world, and to somehow transform this one. And I wondered if the others knew this too – perhaps this is what Miss Thompson has been telling me all along and I simply have not understood. But it bore in on me there in his presence – profoundly bore

in – that he asked us to make an adjustment of the soul, if I may use that term – to become spiritually renewed.

This all happened in a flash, as these things do, Emma, and there was more. In that moment I knew I might – if I were free – what shall I say – follow him, in the sense Miss Thompson uses that term. Oh, not on my knees in the dust as she doubtless would – thought perhaps that too – but, in my own way, follow him; that I might become one of those women who weep at his mention; that he might represent a standard to which one could devote one’s life. There I was – in my mind – throwing myself at his feet, sobbing, and covering them with kisses. It was most unsettling.

But in the same moment of realizing this truth about myself I felt a sense of deep loss – heart-piercing loss. I heard myself saying – not aloud, of course, though I scarcely knew at that time what I might have done – heard myself saying “It’s too late for me!” And tears stung my eyes at that instant. Pictures of Wingate and the children flashed into mind, and a picture of our house and myself presiding at one of Wingate’s functions.

And I looked about the room and thought, how can I open my home to all these people? How can I present them to Wingate’s mother? In following the Master, you see, you open your door upon the world. My choices have been made, I realized. And in my feeling of loss I saw the faces around me suddenly as alien, hateful – in that moment I felt a loathing even for Miss Thompson who has been the essence of kindness. The people appeared – how shall I put it – smug and conspiratorial, a closed circle. I felt excluded and I detested them. I saw them as Wingate might see them, as pitiable objects of derision – as calf-eyed and fawning, mooning about like biblical figures at the feet of Christ in a shabby tableau. They seemed naïve, even incredibly stupid. Of what use are any of these to him, I thought? He is of a different world! What can possibly come of this journey he is making, these talks, this pathetic handful? How can any of this matter?

All of this in a split second, as I said. And then I closed my eyes against my tears. It is perhaps as well I had not met the hostess because then, unforgivably – I blush to say it – I fainted. The room was stifling and I had unwisely worn a velvet frock. I have never in my life engaged in that deplorable feminine diversion – Wingate’s mother faints at every conceivable opportunity – I despise the practice, always having supposed it to be an

artifice. But there it was – picture it, if you can, Emma, I must have blacked out for only a moment – someone was fussing about and making well-meaning but clumsy efforts to loosen my collar, and my eyes opened to see the Master rising and coming towards me bearing the cup of tea someone had just placed in his hand. He came to me urgently – and yes tenderly – and handed me his cup. ‘Drink! Drink!’ he said, and his voice and eyes were almost stern. Wherever he is the Master is the centre of attention so of course all eyes were upon me as I took a timid sip. No offence to you, dear, but never have I tasted such tea as from his hand. And then he smiled dazzlingly and leaning down to me whispered in English – his tone was so pitched that no one heard – ‘It is acceptable.’ His eyes appeared to lend a significance beyond what the words conveyed. And then he turned, and the others engaged him. I was happy no longer to be the focal point of the room. Soon it was over, and we all left. I have not seen Miss Thompson since, nor answered her calls. And I will not discuss this with her – isn’t it strange, but I feel this is private, in some acutely intense way it is mine. Obviously, I must extricate myself from her group, gently, of course, for I have no wish to hurt her. However laudable or desirable the objectives of her circle, it is too late for me; perhaps it is even too late for all of us. How my husband and my parents would scorn all my gushing – all the emotional tumult that meeting has unleashed – though perhaps I do not really know them at all, and Wingate least of all. Do you ever feel that those you love are strangers? I cannot imagine how I appear to my own husband and children or explain the sense of remoteness from them I sometimes experience. It is odd to feel divorced from one’s own life’s centre.

But, anyway, too late, you see, too late. As Wingate says, this is the age of reason and enlightenment, the century of prosperity and progress and peace, and the world struggles along well enough without its seers and sages. He may well be right – he makes a study of these things. But, Emma, the Master! If only you could see him! Extraordinary, wasn’t it, his saying what he did? I wonder whether I shall ever understand it.