

Some Sort of Foreigner

by Roger White

from *Witness of Pebbles*, 1981

Who shall say how much or how little of the Message given by [‘Abdu’l-Bahá] was understood by those persons, well-known and unknown, gentle and simple, who sought His presence in those days [in London]...It is not ours to know how many were conscious of the vital breath of love and wisdom and power, which was always around the Master, more penetrating and significant than even His words...Some were awed and transformed. Their very souls seemed wrapt by an unforgettable experience.

Sara Louisa, Lady Blomfield
The Chosen Highway

London
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I'm ever so glad you popped in, luv. Just sit yourself down and I'll be with you in 'alf a mo. [When I finish basting the 'am, we'll] have a nice cuppa. The kettle'll soon be on the boil. I'm about to do a spot of baking so never mind the mess. Look at those apples, would you, Maude! The best old Mattie the greengrocer 'ad, but they look like they died of a bad fright. And it isn't as if I didn't pay an arm and a leg for 'em. But they'll bake up nice in a tart, and Bill doesn't 'alf like a sweet, especially a good apple tart. I want to give 'im a bit of a treat tonight.

Y'know, 'e's a good man, me old Bill. Even though I grumble about 'im I really do appreciate me old geezer and I was thinking today, well, you silly old cow, you should show 'im, wouldn't 'urt a bit to show 'im. You get to taking one another for granted in a marriage over the years, I was thinking to meself, and you shouldn't always be 'aving a go at 'im.

Eow, I don't 'alf guess the neighbourhood from 'ere to Wapping 'ears us shouting at one another now and again. I am never shy about letting the old man know 'is faults, but it's all an 'abit of speech, like, a part of daily living, and not to be took too

serious.

Not that 'e doesn't put me off; 'e 'as 'is aggravating ways, all right, but 'e's a decent sort—a good father and an 'ard worker. I've always said there's more to Bill than a liking for a pint and a quick turn under the blanket. And 'e's smart, 'e is. I mean to say, like, 'im being in 'is trade, 'e gets to see all kinds, and from the inside out, so to speak. The 'igh and the low alike. So there's no use anybody putting on la-di-da airs with 'im, for 'e's seen 'em all in their knickers and with their 'air down, in a manner of speaking. So it isn't every day 'e's impressed.

[Then yesterday—yesterday] 'e comes in just as I laid the tea, but instead of tucking in as usual, 'e just sits there—'ardly speaking, so I'm thinking to meself, wot's 'e on about, and I says to 'im, “Is everything all right, luv?”

Well, 'e doesn't 'alf give me a start when 'e says in a kind of funny, quiet voice so's I know 'e's been thinking it over, like—”Gladdie, 'e says, do you suppose there's anything in this business of religion?”

So I think for a moment, wot's 'e been up to? and I answer, casual like, “Well, there's some wot makes a right to-do about it; what do you think?”

[Then] 'e tells me 'e was on a job up [to that] posh place where Lady Whatzit-Thing-Me lives and that the 'ouse was all in an uproar on account of 'er ladyship 'ad some very important guest—some sort of foreigner, but a real gentleman and a kind of preacher—and the place was buzzing with callers and everybody making a fuss over 'im, including 'er ladyship. She was a nice motherly sort, says Bill, but she'd let it be known it would be appreciated if 'e would get the work done and clear out smartly.

So 'e does 'is work quick, all right, and in such a tearing 'urry that 'e's nipped out and is 'alf-way down the block before 'e notices 'e's forgot 'is tools. Well, that's me Bill, I thinks to meself; 'is daydreaming doesn't 'alf drive me mad as you well know, Maude. So back 'e goes on the quick and gets 'imself let into the front passage, but before 'e knows wot's 'appening a door bursts open and a crowd of people comes into the

passage, and there's poor old Bill caught in the act and 'im wishing the floor would open up and swallow 'im, 'e was that confused.

“Isn't that the limit!” I says to 'im, wondering why 'e's not laughing fit to bust, because it's the kind of daft thing wot would tickle 'im, after it was over, and 'im not being one [who'd] be afraid to say Bob's-your-Uncle to the Archbishop of Canterbury if 'e 'ad a mind to.

“So wot did you do?” I says. “Well,” says Bill, “I just stood there, [didn't I] because the foreign gentleman was in the middle of the crowd and the minute 'e spots me 'e steps forward and the others step back, like, and 'e comes right over smiling like 'e knew me all me life, and 'e shakes me 'and says *Welcome! Welcome!* I never met anyone like 'im 'e was that polite and friendly”, says Bill.

“So 'e speaks English?” I says. “I thought you said 'e was some sort of foreigner.” “Eow, 'e was dressed foreign-like,” says Bill, “but 'e spoke English and it sounded all right to me.”

Well, I guess there's foreigners and foreigners, Maude. Y'see, 'e was ever so nice to Bill, courteous like, asking 'im questions about where 'e lived and did 'e have a family.

I was thinking, “wot a cheek!” But Bill says it was like being asked by an old friend wot you 'adn't seen in a long time, and there was me Bill—you know 'ow 'e is with strangers, Maude; 'e uses words like they cost a pound apiece—there 'e was telling 'im about our Tom and Ellen and about me needing an operation and all—I'd 'ave died if I'd known, 'im being a perfect stranger—and the old foreign gentleman says something like, “I'll pray for your wife and you must pray, too.” I daresay Bill was 'oping 'e'd leave off. Me Bill praying, can you see it!

So Bill gets embarrassed and tells 'im that 'e doesn't know much about religious things, being as 'ow 'e's 'ad to work so 'ard all is life and no time for that—but 'e says it not cheeky, mind, with respect. Bill says there was something ever so nice about 'im, you could never be rude, like.

And the old man didn't 'alf surprise Bill by saying with a big smile and 'is voice booming all over the passage, "Good! Very Good!" And 'e goes on to say that work is a kind of prayer, too, and that if a man goes to work—well, like, to support 'is family or to help other people, it's like God understands 'e's busy and that's 'ow a working man prays, so to speak. Like, it's the reason wot counts with the Lord.

Well, if that didn't 'alf give me Bill something to think about! I'll tell you! It's funny, Maude, 'ow we never thought about it before, but when you stop to [consider], it makes good sense.

So then the gentleman says goodbye to Bill and wishes 'im good luck and all, and when somebody asks a question of the old man, Bill's able to slip away. And off 'e goes to work this morning, does Bill, whistling the place down like 'e was the Maharajah of Mile End. Eow, 'e's not going to forget that foreign gentleman in an 'urry, mark me words!

So there 'e sat last night, see, letting 'is tea get cold and asking me in a daft voice, like wot I told you, did I think there was anything in religion. Him wot isn't exactly your plaster saint and wouldn't set foot in a church but for weddings and funerals.

"Well," says I, "I guess there's a lot of good people in the world and the Good Lord knows who they are if anybody does; and I don't reckon all of 'em do their praying in church, luv."

Eow, 'e's not a bad sort, me old Bill.