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Letter to Chicago

Josephine C. Cowles

1901, Vail Papers Box 8 Josephine C Cowles

Notes:

Excerpt from Letter from Josephine C. Cowles to
The friends and maid servants of the Merciful of Chicago.

About 1901

From a copy given by Mrs. North Per F. A. K.

“Our beloved sister Mrs. Agnew has requested me to write you something with which I was deeply impressed while in ‘Akká, the “White City” the New Jerusalem by the tideless sea.”

One event which stands out pre-eminently and most impressively was the Anniversary of the Departure of Bahá'u'lláh, the revered father of our beloved Master, on the twenty-eight of May.

After a sojourn with those beloved people of nearly seven weeks and my visit was about completed, it seemed like leaving Paradise, and I thought my heart would break. I knew that it was wrong, for had I not been blessed beyond all that I could ask or think? While I remained there what could I do to serve the Glorious Cause to which I desired to devote the remainder of my life? To leave an atmosphere of love which, like the fragrance of rare exotics, permeated every thought, and where every service rendered was divine, was almost beyond the power of the human will. I knew that it was best, and, while I was willing, I did not wish to go. But when the dear Master, like a pitying father, said; “do not weep, I will be with you”, my heart was comforted. And again, when He told me that I was to remain until after the night of the Departure and receive that blessing, I was almost happy.

On that evening all the believers repaired to the Holy Tomb (which you probably know is about two miles outside the city), there to spend the night. After Tupper we were driven there, where we met all the members of the holy household, and the believers.

The Tomb is connected with the main building (the Bahjí) by A kind of chapel or enclosed garden, at the entrance of which you remove your shoes, and advance to the Holy Threshold, at which you kneel and pray.

The rooms were brilliantly illuminated with lamps and candelabra, and thickly carpeted with rich Oriental rugs, all of which were love offerings from the many pilgrims from all over the world. The Tomb proper was covered with a costly and most beautiful Persian shawl, and thickly strewn with flowers.

The night was wondrously beautiful; the full moon was shining with such magnificence that it was almost as light as day. Through the open window we could see the blue Mediterranean in the distance, and the air was heavy with the fragrance of jasmine and roses. The only audible sound was the wail of a solitary night bird, whose cry seemed like some lone wanderer whose lamp had become extinguished and who was calling out for help.

Within the chapel the aisles were filled with kneeling women, and one of the Holy Leaves chanted the prayers. The sky, the air, the sea, and even the flowers with which the room was profusely decorated, were in perfect accord. The solemn chanting amid those prostrate forms was a scene long to be remembered; and there we remained till midnight. Then we retired to the rooms on the left of the chapel, and the men in like manner filled the places so recently occupied by us. In that gathering there were venerable men who had suffered years of imprisonment, whose shining faces beamed with holy light; young men were there too, whose every look spoke of the deep veneration and love with which they had dedicated their lives to the Holy Cause; even the little grandchildren were there, whose gentle and subdued manner spoke of holy reverence. One of the venerable believers chanted the Holy Utterances and Prayers, and for three hours they remained in solemn devotion.

During that time there was singular phenomenal occurrence. While from the open window we could distinguish the sea and sky in the distance, which was beautifully calm and clear, not a cloud to be seen, where we were there was quite heavy thunder storm. The lightning flashed, and the reverberation of the thunder through the heavens seemed indeed as if God were speaking. The bowed forms of the worshippers and the solemn chanting made one feel as if he stood upon the boundary of an invisible world, “one not made with hands, but eternal in the heavens.”

At three o'clock the men retired, the women went into the chapel and prayers again were chanted. Three of us went into the “Holy of Holies” the Sacred Tomb – and there prostrated ourselves in prayer.

I have often wondered if the believers in other lands could think what was the burden of our supplications that night. While no one spoke to the other, I afterwards learned that the release of our beloved Master was the burden of all hearts poured out at the Holy Threshold of the Exalted and Divine Father, Lord of all the worlds.

On the Threshold of the Tomb were a few sprays of Jasmine which the Greatest Holy Leaf venerated, and gave a part to me.

In the early dawn we passed out and walked in the fields. The full moon was still above the horizon. The blue of the distant sea, the paling of the stars, the pure azure of the sky without a single cloud, the purple line of the low mountains in the east, and the plain of Aces, which has been the scene of some of earth's greatest conflicts, were all before us. As we wandered in the early dawn there was a calm, such as would follow a night of deep excitement, and a feeling of expectancy, as if we were waiting for something. It would take a mightier pen than mine to describe the wonderful emotion which took possession of us, and I could only think of the holy women nineteen hundred years since watching at the Tomb of our crucified Saviour, Jesus Christ. As the dawn advanced the birds began to chant their morning matins, and as the sun burst forth upon our expectant vision in all of its splendor and poured a flood of golden light over the world, I could but exclaim: "The Lord is risen, yes, He has risen indeed:"

O my beloved friends: How powerless are my words to make you see and feel what I experienced on that memorable night. It was like standing in some holy sanctuary, on the borders of a world beyond, where we had entered into the Sacred Place of The Most High, and communed with the angels. A few hours of such a recollection will suffice for a lifetime. It is an experience never to be forgotten. It seemed as if we could never leave such an influence, and when we thought of the Precious Casket entombed in that Sacred Shrine, and what It had Manifested to the world, we could but feel our utter unworthiness. To think of self or to harbor one selfish thought were worse than sacrilege.

But where, this night, is our beloved Master, the Center of the Covenant, the Lover, the Friend of all the world? He is not with us. His holy feet have not pressed the earth outside the city gates for four long years, but every foot of ground inside those walls has been made forever sacred and blessed. In a little room on top of the house where He dwells, whence He could see the Holy Tomb, He kept His lonely vigil. No not alone, for who can tell what heavenly angels were there ministering to Him, and like the Prophets of old, He may have talked with God. When we saw Him the next day His face was resplendent with divine Glory, and the Voice of the Holy Spirit rang clear in His every Utterance."

From a copy given by Mrs. North Per F. A. K.