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## Letter To Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl

Elsa (Laura) Clifford Barney

1900

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To Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl,

My revered teacher and dearly loved friend.

It is at your request, that I am going to put this halting speech in to writing it has no value outside of the fact that these words have arisen from a sincere heart. Friends, it is indeed a great joy for me to be with you all today and I thank you for your warm welcome. I am going to have the privilege of telling you the impressions I received while at Haifa and 'Akká. I wish to begin this talk by a short and beautiful prayer written by the Master for a Believer whose only wish is to love God as she should and to be near Him in the Great Hereafter. "Oh My Lord, my beloved, befriend me in my loneliness, accompany me in my exile – remove my sorrow, cause me to adore Thy Beauty; withdraw me from all else save Thee, attract me through the fragrance of Thy Holiness. Cause me to be associated in Thy Kingdom with those who are severed from all else, save Thee who yearn to serve Thy Sacred Threshold and stand to work in Thy Cause; enable me to be one of Thy Maid servants who have attained unto Thy good pleasure for Thou art the Merciful, The Generous!"

When I first went to Haifa and 'Akká in the month of October 1900, I had heard very little about this great Revelation, beyond the facts that a wonderful herald and fore runner had appeared on the earth. He was called the Báb – His appearance was followed by an extraordinary Being named Bahá'u'lláh, who declared Himself to be "He whom God would manifest." He was unjustly exiled from His country and afterwards imprisoned in 'Akká. Though in close confinement, His writings and teachings went out through the power of the Spirit, and are now encircling the world. Bahá'u'lláh passed away in 1892 – leaving all things and His great work to be continued and established by His Wonderful Son 'Abbás Effendi the "Center of the Covenant." It was to see that 'Abbás Effendi that I left America a little over a year ago. We were three making this pilgrimage. My cousin Ellen Grin, Madame Emma Trouve, a Frenchwoman, and a servant catholic, who as yet had heard nothing of this great revelation, and myself.

When we had landed, I sent this message to the master, "that I believed, He

must be the Christ Spirit of the awaited day. I believed that this great hour was at hand for the whole world and sin itself was calling for a Redeemer. If He was truly the Saviour He had the power of awakening my sleeping souls." I sent this message because I believe the first basis of everything is, or should be sincerity, and I did not want to appear to have deeper feelings than I truly possessed. My cousin and myself were bidden to come to Him next morning at the house of six in the full beauty of the awakening day, we walked to the Master's humble home, there we were greeted by a number of Believers who showed us into a simple room to await 'Abbás Effendi.

When the Master appeared on the Threshold. I was overwhelmed for such an atmosphere of perfect Majesty and humility surrounded His whole being. He swept into the room, and after having given us a most beautiful welcome, bade us be seated, then the flood of His words became to us as living water – I could not understand the language, but the spirit was so strong that we felt as though we knew the words even before they were given us though the clear translation of Aly Kuli Khán. At first we remained as though stunned, but soon to my great surprise for it is something that I seldom do. I began to weep. They were not tears of sadness, oh no they were tears of hope and of deep gratitude, tears that one might shed after having been released from a dark prison for years, I had tried to remove the darkness which enveloped my soul, but in vain, all had seemed useless, my despair increasing tenfold after each successful struggle! I listened to the Master's words, I saw my way and saw my way clearly, my tears flowed from the source of gratitude, my chilled heart fill the warm life pulse of the love throb for the first time. The cage of darkness was shattered and my freed soul felt the wings of the spirit upon which to soar upward to God.

When I returned from this first and ever to be remembered meeting. I told my friend Madame Trouve that I had a wonderful message to give her, and that I would do so as I was sufficiently collected in thought. That afternoon, we drove up Mt. Carmel where we visited a picturesque monastery – my friend knelt down and prayed with great fervour when we had entered the chapel. Next morning she came to me and said, "Elsa I had such a strange dream last night, now I feel quite prepared to hear what you have to tell me." She then related how in her dreams she was kneeling in the chapel upon Mt. Carmel and her prayers were directed to the figure of Christ on the Crucifix. She prayed for guidance and light, gradually the figure on the Cross descended and approached her laying His hand upon her head, and said, "Be at peace – your prayer is answered." When my friend had finished telling me the dream, I replied, "Your prayer is answered, the Spirit of the Great Saviour has again returned to earth." She accepted the whole Message with joy and fragrance.

The next day, she saw the Master once the first, the wave of emotion has passed away, she told me that it was the same face, the same form that in her dream had come down from the crucifix to answer her prayers. After having spent a few blessed days with the Holy Household, we left Haifa and 'Akká. When saying farewell to the Master, I felt so sad, oh so sad, even unto annihilation

for I had not yet understood that wherever I should be there I should find the everlasting strength and guidance of the spirit. I had so yearned to remain as a humble servant in the Master's home so as to pass my life by His side – but He called me to Him and He said, “To be near me hereafter, you must now go far away to do the Master's work. I have hope and confidence and you will return unto this Holy spot, Fear not I am ever with you.” As the ship sailed out of the harbour – we expected our hearts to be rung with anguish, but instead, we all felt a great peace and a great happiness – and I then realized His first promise had been fulfilled – since then I had never felt the pang of separation. Sometimes my eyes have been blinded by the dust of the world, and then I see Him not but if I look upward He is ever visible!

On our return to Paris I had to change the whole course of my life, so as to be free to follow His commands. After a few weeks an unexpected joy came to me; for circumstances formed themselves in such a way that I had to return to the Orient. After spending some few weeks in Egypt, I arrived in ‘Akká the 1st of March – Madame Trouve and my cousin were no longer with me. My second trip was made in the Company of Madame Jackson, and a youth Sigurd Russel by name. At the outset of our journey he did not even believe in God, but now he is one of the finest and most devoted followers of the Master! My friend, Madame Jackson arrived in Haifa full of doubts, but when she left she was full of faith. She said that she had again found the joy of her childhood in regaining her strong faith in God. We arrived in Haifa-‘Akká early in the morning. I was told that I was not to see the Master until evening. My impatience was great. In the afternoon as I was dreaming of the heavenly joy in store for me, or heavenly is the only word which can express the feeling that comes to one in the Master's presence. Yet the joy of anticipation was mingled with apprehension for I feared that since my former meeting, my imagination and love had idealized him and that perhaps a great disillusion might be awaiting me.

The Master entered suddenly, I instantly realized that this ideal was an absolute reality and far beyond my anticipations. I then comprehended that we can only see in Him that which we are capable of seeing – for what we seek we find. I beheld the absolute mirror of the Divine Spirit! – When we ascend a mountain the horizon ever stretches further and so it is with the soul the higher the spiritual state, the greater the power of comprehension, there is no limit to Perfection. After having lived in the midst of the Holy Family, one understands the emptiness of all outside the higher life there are two paths, one material, one spiritual – the more material things we have the more we want and the harder it is to get them. The more one acquires in the spiritual the easier it is to advance onward. In the material obstacles become insurmountable, while in the spiritual every effort makes the path easier and more beautiful.

After a while efforts become the greatest joy – sacrifices made to the Beloved are painless – for this is no greater happiness than proving one's love! After my second visit, the real depth of this religion opened before me. Formerly I had looked at it as an extraordinary Truth but I had not realized its stupendous

proportions. At first I had thought that one could go into it full of past habits and many ambitions, but now I know that all worldliness must be cast aside at the very Threshold – the moment we accepted the name Bahá'íst we must live the life of one. Religions have taught what is right and wrong to all nations, but this great Revelation has brought one special truth and command to all men, it has come to teach – all absorbing union and harmony, and if we do not follow – this command, this great command we are casting side the foundation and how can we seek to build on nothingness, let the lives of every believer be built on the Rock of Truth and Union and not on the shifting sands, of fancy and imagination! A great lesson can be learnt from the Persians for they have seen the seriousness of this belief they know that it is no child's play and that it is not to be distorted by the whims of men – The Persians have seen it spring forth and grow through the blood of their near and dear ones. They have seen martyrdom grow like a flame in the hearts of thousands.

One day when I was with the Master two of our Eastern people (brothers) came to Him. And for the first time I understood and beheld the meaning of the word reverence. Their reverence for Him was perfect for they realized and know who He was! One night in the humble dining hall – we were seated at the Master's table during the meal I studied the expressions on the faces of three Persians who were there and I received a wonderful lesson for their looks expressed love, courage, tenderness and devotion. I understood what this Truth meant to them and what it will mean to us in after years; we were just on the Threshold we have not yet followed in the footsteps of our grownup brothers. Through this religion we find the Key of Hope by which to open the prison doors of the Eastern women's life for in this teachings, women are counted equal to men! I wish to speak a few moments about the soul refreshing Kurrut'ul Ayar – Prof. Brown of Cambridge writes that in such a country as Persia the appearance of such a woman is one the Greatest Miracles of history, and so it is for miracle means a power beyond men and in Kurrut'ul Ayar was seen the power given by the Spirit of God regardless of the praise or blame of men. She stepped out of the habits and traditions of her people – firm pure and courageous, she walked over the road of hardships. Her dauntless spirit glows like a beaming torch to guide her awakening sisters out of ignorance and darkness towards liberty and God. In all she was a perfect example of what a woman's life be. At the age of 33 or 34 she was martyred for the Glorious Cause of Truth! Eastern people (believers) seem to realize more fully than we do, that imperfections and mistakes are experiences by which human beings develop. I feel so with John Knox, who whenever he saw the executioners cart fearing some criminal to death used to say, "If it were not for the Grace of God – there goes John Knox." Here is a beautiful lesson given by the Master!

"A man once saw a wonderful sight. In a certain place there were three men. The first of these was blind but he could see things that were very distant – the second was deaf to all near sounds but he could hear things that were very far off! The third was naked, but he held in his hands a long hem of a garment, the man who beheld this

strange sight asked a teacher the interpretation thereof the answer was this, “These three men represent humanity! The first who could only see things that were very distant, but was near him means that people can generally see very clearly the faults and shortcomings of others, but their defects are too near them to be perceived. The second man could hear of the deaths of others but his own death was too near him to be heard. The third who was quite bare, shows that in this state man comes into the world and it is certain that in this state he must leave it; though he knows this very well – yet he spends his whole time in carefully preserving the hem of a garment from being soiled! Never does the Master speak an idle word, every sentence contains some uplifting. I will now have the pleasure of reading to you some fragments of His Conversations but before I begin I want to say a few more words about the Master, though all the beautiful words are too few to describe the beauty of His form and Spirit.

There is but a single word that can convey to you the endless wealth of His virtue and powers, and that single word is perfection! Now here are the Master’s words I have just promised to read. “Welcome and enter into the Kingdom of Light and Life! If every minute you thanked God a thousand times for the grace of having been born in this marvellous century even that would not be sufficient, thanks. Every day and hour, every minute let your heart overflow with gratitude for the great privilege of living in the latter days. In past ages people have called themselves blessed, if they lived at the time as one of the saints how much greater is your privilege! So the people then a candle was given while your eyes are opening to behold the Glory of the radiant Sun – least aside the worthless honors and praise of the world and enter into a living Kingdom of Gods. Many Irvens have lived but their memories have died with them, while Saint Barbara lives forever with the sceptre of martyrdom in her hand. The names of the children of God – shone throughout eternity regardless of the world’s recording! During a terrible storm, Christ wandered on the mountain, seeking a shelter! A den full of wild beasts, was the only shelter He found and He was the Beloved son of God – He came to those on earth, but they knew Him not. The manifestation in the Book of Igham – explains the meaning of Christ coming in the clouds He says that one meaning of the expression ‘cloud’ is the body of a Prophet.

Why is it that sometimes we cannot see the sun in the sky? Because it is veiled by clouds. The body of a Prophet is the thick clouds often preventing the people from seeing His Glorious Light for they argue that the Prophet is a man such as they are requiring food, rest, sleep, etc. How then can this man represent the Divine Light! Or be a Manifestation of God? Out when the Prophet has departed,

then the veils or clouds is withdrawn, and the people see plainly the Light of His teachings and the Sun of the Holy Spirit that was within Him. The nearer we are to God the more severe do our tests become and when we have received great blessings we are sometimes apt to become self-confident and think we are secure from falling and there is our danger greatest Tests should not become stumbling blocks for when trials are surrounded they are steps leading upward to God! Christ mounted on an Ass, Christ crowned with thorns shows that suffering and humiliation cannot stay the Light of the Spirit! If a man nine faults and but one good quality – I beseech you to overlook these nine defects for this one virtue. Sinners are the sick of humanity and the enlightened are bidden to heal the ill and feeble and not to turn aside to leave them alone to die – Mercy mercy is of God! So be mindful to use it. The great bond created by God to join altogether is union, so be caught to abide by this, for he that casts aside the living commandments of God is of the dead and cannot enter the Kingdom of Life.

I wish you rest from the tormenting spirit, be aware of false seditions rumours for they will come. I pray that your faith may stand all verily the mercy and justice of God protects the flame of faith from a too violent mind! If a bird's wings be covered with mud it cannot fly and so it is with the soul, wash off the earth and the freed soul will soar to heaven. Your faith has come like rain – the first drops were for between, but soon it will pour in torrents. In a tree weal-ways judge its life and strengthen by the way it grows upward, and so it is with man. The knowledge of God arises in the heart like the Sun, showering luminous radiance over all! Open your hearts that ye may be filled! Open your soul, open your souls, that the divine light may shine therein. Strive, strive to receive the spirit of Truth – Truth awaits you all! Pray in the Greatest Name from the depths of true sincerity – then the breath, of the Spirit with its rush of Life will enter your craving souls. Remember will, there is nothing in the whole Universe which is mouth seeking but the Almighty God.”

In the Life of Christ there is one hour of the deepest paths, when on the eve of crucifixion, even the Great Disciple Peter – denied Him thrice! Oh friends let us not fall away from the Master in those His hours of trial! He has willingly stood all hardships ever since the hour of childhood He has borne all to guide us into the Paradise of firm belief now we must all stand as rock columns upon which God can erect His church throughout eternity! Friends, I thank you for the patience with which you have listened to me and if I have been able to give you even one crumb which has fallen from the Master's table, my happiness is complete. Now before we part I want to say these words of Christ and verily they are as spoken by Master today, “Continue ye in my words then you are my disciples indeed and ye

shall know the Truth and the Truth shall make you free.”

(Signed) Elsa Clifford Barney

Kindly taken in short hand by Miss Lilian Rething in Chicago on the 27th of October 1901.