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My Impressions of 'Abdu'l-Bahá

Hooper Harris

December 1906

Dear Mr. Hoar: You write re that many of the friends in America are anxious to know my impressions of 'Akká and of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. How shall I write so as not to feed the fires of superstition on the one hand, or fail to do justice to the greatness of the subject on the other? There are times when we find the symbols we call words entirely inadequate and when we know that, in spite of all effort to avoid it we shall be misinterpreted and misunderstood. There are some unkind ones who, if we allow the heart to express itself freely, will accuse us of emotionalism and over-credulity; and there are others Who, if we restrain the heart, and write of facts as facts, setting them forth in their physical aspect only, will accuse us of lack of spiritual comprehension and almost of infidelity. However, God knows the heart, and acknowledging responsibility to Him alone, I shall endeavor to convey to all interested something of the impressions received on my visit to the Beloved One at Most in December, 1906, now nearly four months ago.

To begin with, I would to God that all the people of the world could see and know 'Abdu'l-Bahá as I saw and know Him! Then indeed would war, strife and conflict cease, the fires of hell and hatred cease to burn, and peace and good will reign on earth. But if we write of 'Abdu'l-Bahá as a personality, as a man, we must describe him as the simplest and most humble and most natural man in all the world. He indulges in no poses, makes no pretensions, asserts no superiority, claims no special privileges and in no way whatever, seeks to impress you with his dignity and importance. He will eat with you, walk with you, talk with you, ask about your health, discuss the simplest matters with you, and answer your most trivial questions. In every sense of the word he is natural, and in every sense of the word simple. The physical eye will observe no halo, see no sign of supernatural power, detect nothing, in fact, that might not be noticed in any really good, simple minded and naturally dignified man. We shall see one who, like all those in this world who wholly sacrifice themselves to God, the evil minded can lie about, accuse of evil and of ambition, mock at old revile. In a word, 'Abdu'l-Bahá will appear to us so simple and so natural that we will wonder what it is that some have been able to see in him, Who have set in circulation certain stories Which have appealed powerfully to the imagination of many, and which may easily, in time, pass into

records of signs, wonders and miracles. We will find it difficult at first to realize that this simple, dignified, kindly and lovable man is the Centre of a spiritual power, of a knowledge and inspiration which is re-creating the world; and is the object of a love and devotion Which no man in the history of the world, except Bahá'u'lláh, his father, ever received in his lifetime. And this love and devotion is not confined to his followers, but is seen in those who know nothing of the Religion of Which he is the Centre. We will see high Turkish officials (his jailors), Turkish women of high rank, and people of all classes and conditions come to consult him on their most important matters, to seek consolation and advice from him in their domestic troubles and to ask for his prayers. Twice a week we will see the poor gather around him to receive gifts at his hands, their only benefactor, their only real protector, in this prison city of squalor and wretchedness. We will plainly see, even with the physical eye, that there is something in this simple, unpretentious man which causes all around him to lean upon him in all things, and to regard him with a love and devotion which prevents his bitter enemies (a mere handful of envious and jealous ones) from speaking ill of him except in the most round-about and stealthy manner. What is it in this man that conquers all who come in contact with him? This man to whom all about him go in their troubles, but who himself, if he has any troubles, never mentions them except to rejoice over them as victories! This man who is so universal that from him we never hear the word "I"

As I write these words tears fill my eyes and run down my cheeks. I, whose heart has often seemed to him like a stone, a man hard-headed and combative by nature, accustomed to indulging in plain speech, and in argument to giving and receiving blows, one who has never been regarded as sentimental or emotional - I, as recall my Impressions of this man, am obliged to confess that my heart melts like wax that the tears blind my eyes, and that all desire for controversy and argument, except as God may will, is taken out of me. What, I repeat, is the strange power of this man, so simple, so natural, so unassuming, who asks for himself no special consideration or reverence whatever, but who continually points us to the things of the spirit and to God? To tell, so as to make myself understood, is beyond any power which God has given to me, or to any man. There are some things which the heart can apprehend, but the tongue cannot utter. In a Tablet to me the Master once wrote, "Turn with thy heart to the heart of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the hidden mystery will be revealed to thee." I have obeyed this command and the mystery has been revealed to me; but I cannot express it in words; not even he can do that. The mystery, however, is no mystery at all to those who can meet 'Abdu'l-Bahá heart to heart, and this meeting can be had, and by many has been had, without paying a physical visit to 'Akká. Only through the spirit can the reality and power of this man be apprehended. One is reminded of the words of Jesus, "No man cometh unto me except the Father draw him."

In spite of all I have said, however, I will try and give you an outer description of the Master. First, it must be remembered that he is 63 years of age and that he has lived a life of imprisonment, of constant anxieties, and of hardship. He

looks his age. But no sign of physical weakness is apparent; on the contrary, he impresses you as being full of strength and energy, an example of splendid manhood at that age. His hair and beard are grey, and the thoughtful lines on his face and forehead are in keeping with his years. His beard is not very long nor full, but of silvery, fine quality. His hair, which is the same color as the beard, he wears about level with the shoulders. Mule the hair, like the beard, is inclined to thinness, there is, as I remember, no sign of baldness. His nose is large, slightly aquiline and finely moulded. His mouth is large and firm, but without, in the slightest degree, being hard, indicating a combination of firmness and kindness. His forehead is high, broad and full, giving the impression of great intellectual power. The wonderful thing about the Master's physical personality is his eyes. When I return to 'Akká the first of June, I shall endeavor to more closely examine and describe those wonderful eyes; at this writing I must confess my inability, and to tell what it is about them that makes them so remarkable. Whether they are black or blue or grey, or a combination of colors, I cannot say. In fact, they seemed to change even as I looked at them and into them, as I did more than once. Of this however, I am quite certain, that I cannot think of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, nor say my prayers, without seeing those indescribable eyes, and more than once since left 'Akká they have looked their love at me in my dreams.

But one tires of physicalities. The important matter is to try to realize the fragrances of the Spirit that are being wafted from that White spot and from that pure heart. Truly, there is that at 'Akká Which cannot be seen with the physical eye, heard with the physical ear, nor understood with the intellect; a something which the heart can feel and the soul alone apprehend and which cannot be reduced to the physical symbols we call words.

When the Master speaks a something is set in vibration over and above the physical words, a something Which is Spirit and Life, and Which bestows Spirit and Life; and it would seem that the outer words are merely a means of contact, or a physical medium of connection between the soul and this Spirit of Life which is imparted to the soul. That which the soul receptive receives from the words is far more than the mere outer form of the words would seem to warrant. For instance, I asked the Master for the answer to a question which had troubled me for a year or more. He answered me in a few words, without apparently any particular effort at explanation, yet his simple statement conveyed to me immediately an understanding of the whole matter that perfectly satisfied. Perhaps the same words spoken by another would have made no impression, for his answer was a simple statement without proof. Uttered by him, however, they seemed to change the whole current of my thought, create a new consciousness in me, and supply me with the power of comprehension, so that a matter which had puzzled me for more than a year was cleared up in an instant. I trust this will convey to you my meaning, that the real dower at 'Akká is the power of love and knowledge, purely spiritual in its manifestation, a matter of the heart and of the soul, and has no connection Whatever with physical miracles and phenomena.

To realize who ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is, to understand his relation to Bahá’u’lláh and to Christ, to comprehend that he needs no other glorification, commendation or exaltation than that he is ‘Abdu’l-Baba, to know Why it is that he commands that no other name or title should be given him, and that by no explanation or interpretation can the Station of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá be made any more glorious than it is, one must be able, with the spiritual eye, to see the things of the Spirit. If we are to be content, as he is content, with his simple designation as the Servant of Bahá, and have no desire to refer to him by any other title, like him we must realize that we are nothing, and that God is all; must eliminate the ego, surrender the self and allow God to do His work in us, instead of imagining that we have any power to accomplish it within ourselves. To be able to apprehend the Station of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is to apprehend, at least in part, the great truth of renunciation, of absolute surrender to God. Surrender to God! How easy to say, but how difficult to really understand and do! It means to be conscious of our nothingness, and to open our souls and let the fragrances of the Spirit blow through them; to feel that God in us is doing our seeing, our willing, our thinking, and relieving us of the responsibility. It is to understand that He is the Great Burden Bearer on whose shoulders is the government of all things. Here is a vicarious atonement worth having, a vicarious atonement which brings rest and peace and real salvation. Who are we and What can we accomplish? It is true that the station of man is very high, but it is high because of his capacity to receive from God. The breeze of the Spirit blows by the rocks and by the trees and by the animals, but they are unconscious of it. Man, however, has the power not only to become conscious of it, but to be the instrument of it in the enlightenment of mankind and the vivification of the world. And this is a matter of simple faith. When we realize that we are nothing and know nothing and stand humbly before God, we will be clothed upon by the Spirit. Adam and Eve tried to make for themselves garments of fig leaves. Useless. God gave them coats of skin. Jesus said, “Consider the lilies how they grow: they toil not, they spin not, and yet I say unto you that Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.” “If then, God so clothe the grass, which is today in the field and tomorrow, is cast into the oven; how much more will He clothe ye, O ye of little faith?” With all our toiling and spinning and fretting, the best that we can do is to clothe ourselves with mere garments of fig leaves, with mere symbols to hide our ignorance. But those Who have found the secret of turning to God in perfect self-surrender and sure faith, receive a spiritual garment so beautiful that the toiling and spinning of the metaphysical schools, with their product of so called knowledge, becomes a useless trouble and a weariness of the flesh. The secret of real spiritual power is the renunciation of the self and dependence upon God. This spirit of renunciation and of absolute submission and surrender to God, is the spirit in Which one is bathed at ‘Akká. The lesson of complete reliance upon God, for all guidance and for all knowledge is the great lesson we receive there, and this is the secret of the love that radiates from there for when we submit to God we realize His love in us and radiate it from us. The Master has said that. When we “receive the confirmation of the Holy Spirit we need no other teacher” but we cannot get that confirmation until

we learn to rely on the Spirit wholly.

I trust that all, may learn this great lesson, and, cutting themselves from all outer personalities, lean entirely upon the Inner Reality of which the Prophets are the authoritative and confirmed outer Manifestation. To be free from personality we must be free from our own personality. Once we have attained this freedom, other personalities will cease to trouble us. Escaping our own personality, we must find refuge in the Personality of God, for God has His Personality as we have ours, and to try to escape it is to go to the other extreme of the exaltation of the ego and to commit spiritual suicide.

We are all well. With Bahá'í love and greetings, Your brother in El-Bahá, { .sig .noid }

(Signed) Hooper Harris. { .sig .noid }

Rangoon, April 1st, 1907. { .date .noid }