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Illustration

ABDU'L-BAHÁ, WASHINGTON, D.C., 1912

Frontispiece

Portals To Freedom was first published before many of the current translations of Bahá'í writings were available. Some of the quotations used in this book were taken from earlier renditions of these works, as for example, The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys, The Hidden Words and others. Also several quotations were taken from a compilation, Bahá'í Scriptures, much of which has been retranslated and revised into a newer work called Bahá'í World Faith. For an accurate rendition of the Bahá'í Writings, these current editions should be used as references.

INTRODUCTION

"I ask Thee, O Ruler of Existence and King of Creation, to transmute the brass of existence into gold by the elixir of Thy Revelation and Wisdom: then reveal unto men by a comprehensive Book that which will enrich them by Thy

Riches."

Bahá'u'lláh

What is that mystery underlying human life which gives to events and to persons the power of mutation, of transformation? If one had never before seen a seed, nor heard of its latent life, how difficult to believe that only the cold earth, the warm sun, the descending showers and the gardener's care were needed to cause its miraculous transformation into the growing form, the budding beauty, the intoxicating fragrance of the rose!

Or who can understand the reason why a chance perusal of a book, the presence of a friend or the meeting with a stranger often alters a determined course of action, profoundly affects our attitude toward life, and, not seldom, so nearly reaches the roots of being and the springs of action that never after is life quite the same?

It is as if some super-Luther Burbank had, by that seemingly chance event, grafted into the branch of our crab-apple being the bud of the Tree of Knowledge, or into the bramble of the wilderness of human thought the rose of paradise.

To this mystery of mysteries the philosophy of the schoolmen offers no adequate explanation. We only know that it is a common experience of us all. The effort towards the description of this catalysis is the essence of all poetry; the abortive attempt to explain it is at the root of all philosophy, while the experience of it is the one cause underlying the transformation of human life and character. All history is its witness and every saint its justification.

In offering to the reader this inadequate account of one such experience my only excuse is its totality, its all-inclusiveness, its grandeur. It is unique not because it is rare, since every contact of man with his fellow men demonstrates it, but because of its supremacy over other transforming contacts. One might liken it to the difference in effect between touching a cold clod and the grasping of a galvanic battery, or the meeting with a debased criminal and the meeting with an Abraham Lincoln.

To those who met Abdu'l-Bahá in the summer of 1912, when He spent eight months in this country, such comparisons will seem highly inadequate. While to many that meeting did not convey more than a contact with personified dignity, beauty, wisdom and selflessness, and so led them, at least, to higher altitudes of thought and life, to hundreds of others that meeting was the door to undreamed-of worlds; to a new, a boundless, an eternal life.

We realize the difficulties faced in attempting to bring to the reader a quarter of a century later, the atmosphere created by this meeting for those who had the eyes to see, the ears to hear and minds to comprehend, even slightly, the new and divine world opened before the eager and courageous feet. In fact to do so with any degree of accurate completeness is all but impossible. To those bred in the Christian tradition one might ask what would be the probable effect upon them if they could have been among the audience

when the Sermon on the Mount was spoken, or if one of them, like John, could have reclined upon the breast of the Master. Without daring to suggest that the comparison is parallel, my own experience, when brought into close association with Abdu'l-Bahá, was so overwhelming, so fraught with sensations suggesting an entrance into a new and super-mundane world, that I can think of no other comparison more adequate.

I do not propose in relating these experiences to minimize my own reaction to this great experience by presenting it with even the slightest suggestion of materialistic or pseudo-scientific explanations. It is my work to report as faithfully as possible what I saw and heard and experienced during these meetings and conversations. If at times the recounting flavors of a fancy bordering on the fantastic I may comfort myself with reflection on the possible terms applied to Peter, James and John, the fishermen, when they attempted to describe to their fellow laborers the effect which the Master's Presence had upon them. What epithets must the former lovers and associates of Mary Magdalene have applied to her!

To me, a man of middle age, a Unitarian Clergyman, a student since youth of religions and philosophies, the experience had a disturbing quality somewhat cataclysmic. Why should this man be able so to upset all my preconceived notions and conceptions of values by His mere presence? Was it that He seemed to exude from His very being an atmosphere of love and understanding such as I had never dreamed? Was it the resonant voice, modulated to a music which caught the heart? Was it the aura of happiness touched at times with a sadness implying the bearing of the burden of all the sin and sorrow of the world, which always surrounded Him? Was it the commingled majesty and humility of His every gesture and word, which was perhaps His most obvious characteristic? How can one answer such questions? Those who saw and heard Abdu'l-Bahá during those memorable months will share with me the sense of the inadequacy of words to communicate the incommunicable.

At the time I met Abdu'l-Bahá, in the spring of 1912, He was sixty-eight years of age. Of these, twelve years had been spent in exile with His spiritual as well as physical Father, Bahá'u'lláh, in Baghdád, Constantinople and Adrianople. Then forty years, to a day, in the Turkish prison-fortress of `Akká, ten miles from Mt. Carmel, on the coast of Palestine. Because of their staunch adherence to their faith in Bahá'u'lláh as the Manifestation of God, Abdu'l-Bahá with about seventy others had sacrificed all that they had, preferring imprisonment and inward freedom with Him to outward freedom and spiritual bondage without Him. With the overthrow of the tyrannous reign of Abdu'l-Hamid, by the Young Turk Party in 1908, this long exile and imprisonment ended and that Voice and Presence was free to prove to the world what He had so completely demonstrated, that "The only prison is the prison of self."

To what marvelous inner life of the spirit could be ascribed, I asked myself, the fact that this man, born of a long line of Persian nobility; accustomed to every luxury until his eighth year; followed by a half-century of exile,

torture and prison life, could emerge into the modern world of Paris, London and New York and dominate every experience with a calm control of circumstance; a clarifying exposure of superficialities; a joyous love for all humanity which never condemned but with forgiveness brought shame?

It is with the hope that, to a degree, the following pages may approach an answer to this question that they are offered to the reader.

single page

chapter 1

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