

At Byfleet.

'Abdu'l-Bahá

Original English



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September 9th

ON the afternoon of September 9th, a number of working women of the Passmore Edwards' Settlement, who were spending their holidays with Miss Schepel and Miss Buckton at Vanners, in Byfleet, a village some twenty miles out of London, had the great privilege of meeting 'Abdu'l-Bahá. They wrote a short record of his sayings to keep for themselves. The following is an extract:

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We gathered round him in a circle, and he made us sit beside him in the window seat. One of the members, who was ill, had a specially beautiful greeting from him. 'Abdu'l-Bahá began by saying, as he seated himself: "Are you happy?" and our faces must have shown him that we were. He then said: "I love you all, you are the children of the Kingdom, and you are accepted of God. Though you may be poor here, you are rich in the treasures of the Kingdom. I am the Servant of the poor. Remember how His Holiness Jesus said: 'Blessed are the poor!' If all the queens of the earth were gathered here, I could not be more glad!"

'Abdu'l-Bahá knew that we had a treasury box from which we try to help people less fortunate than ourselves. Presently he rose, and said: "You are dear to me. I want to do something for you! I cannot cook for you (he had previously seen us busy in the kitchen) but here is something for your fund." He went round the circle to each, with a beautiful smile, shaking hands with all, and giving the Bahá'í greeting: "Alláh-u-Abhá!"

Later on he walked in the village, and many poor children came to him, and mothers with sick babies and men out of work. He spoke to them all, through an interpreter. At tea-time other friends joined us. 'Abdu'l-Bahá liked the cottage garden at Vanners, the little orchard and the roses. He said: "This is like a Persian garden. The air is very pure."

On leaving for London he presented every one with a purple heartsease from the garden, and said again and again: "Good-bye" in English.

On the 28th September, 'Abdu'l-Bahá again visited Vanners, the little farm house on the old royal manor that dates back to the time of Edward II. He motored down from London and stayed over night, returning on the evening of the second day.



ORIGINAL



AUDIO

'Abdu'l-Bahá was much struck during the drive by two detachments of Boy Scouts tramping the road. When told of the Scouts' motto, "Be Prepared," and that an act of kindness each day is one of their laws and that some of these boys had put out a fire and assisted at a recent railway accident, he said. "This makes me very happy."

Arriving at Vanners, he found a large, strangely mixed crowd, assembled about the gate to welcome him, from the quite poor to the wealthy who had motored over from their country places. A great number followed him and as many as could do so pressed into the garden and sat down around him. The silence was most impressive. The same attention and eagerness to hear was noticed among the people each time 'Abdu'l-Bahá appeared in the village.

After expressing his joy at being with them, he began to speak to the little group in answer to a question about the elaborate civilization of the West.

The Captivity of Man

'Abdu'l-Bahá said: — "Luxuries cut off the freedom of communication. One who is imprisoned by desires is always unhappy; the children of the Kingdom have unchained themselves from their desires. Break all fetters and seek for spiritual joy and enlightenment; then, though you walk on this earth, you will perceive yourselves to be within the divine horizon. To man alone is this possible. When we look about us we see every other creature captive to his environment."

"The bird is a captive in the air and the fish a captive in the sea. Man alone stands apart and says to the elements, I will make you my servants! I can govern you! He takes electricity, and through his ingenuity imprisons it and makes of it a wonderful power for lighting, and a means of communication to a distance of thousands of miles. But man himself may become a captive to the things he has invented. His true second birth occurs when he is freed from all material things: for he only is free who is not a captive to his desires. He has then as Jesus has said, become captive to the Holy Spirit."

The Power of God

A friend asked 'Abdu'l-Bahá how far the individual could attain to that Christ consciousness in himself of which St. Paul speaks as our hope of Glory.

'Abdu'l-Bahá turned with a look of great joy and said with an impressive gesture: "The bounty and power of God is limitless for each human soul. Consider what was the quickening power of the Christ when He was on earth. Look at His disciples! They were poor and uncultured men. Out of the rough fisherman He made the great Peter, and out of the poor village girl of Magdala He made one who is a power in all the world today. Many queens have reigned who are remembered by their dates in history, and nothing more is known of them. But Mary the Magdalene is greater than them all. It was she whose love strengthened the disciples when their faith was failing. What she did for the world cannot be measured. See what a divine power was enkindled in her by the power of God!"

Inspired Messengers

When asked if it would be always necessary for prophets to come from time to time — “would not the world in the course of events through progress reach to a full realization of God?” — ‘Abdu’l-Bahá replied: “Mankind needs a universal motive power to quicken it. The inspired messenger who is directly assisted by the power of God brings about universal results. Bahá’u’lláh rose as a light in Persia and now that light is going out to the whole world.”

“Is this what is meant by the Second Coming of Christ?” “Christ is an Expression of the Divine Reality, the Single Essence and Heavenly Entity, which hath no beginning or ending. It has appearance, arising, and manifestation and setting in each one of the Cycles.”

Those who have been with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá notice how, often, after speaking earnestly with people, he will suddenly turn and walk away to be alone. At such times no one follows him. On this occasion, when he finished speaking and went out through the orchard gate into the village, all were struck with his free and wonderful walk which has been described by one of our American friends as that of a shepherd or a king.

As he passed along the ragged children clustered about him by dozens, the boys saluting him as they had been taught in school, showing how instinctively they felt the greatness of his presence. Most noticeable was the silence of even the roughest men when ‘Abdu’l-Bahá appeared. One poor tramp exclaimed “He is a good man,” and added, “Ay, he’s suffered!”

He took particular interest in the sick, crippled and poorly nourished children. Mothers carrying their little ones followed him, and a friend explained that this great visitor had come over the seas from the Holy Land where Jesus was born.

All day long people of every condition gathered about the gate for a chance of seeing him, and more than sixty drove or cycled to Vanners to see him, many wishing to question him on some special subject. Among them were the clergy of several denominations, a head master of a boys’ public school, a member of Parliament, a doctor, a famous political writer, the vice-chancellor of a University, several journalists, a well known poet, and a magistrate from London.

He will long be remembered as he sat in the bow window in the afternoon sunshine, his arm round a very ragged but very happy little boy, who had come to ask ‘Abdu’l-Bahá for sixpence for his money box and for his invalid mother, whilst round him in the room were gathered men and women discussing Education, Socialism, the first Reform Bill, and the relation of submarines and wireless telegraphy to the new era on which man is entering.

During the evening a young betrothed couple in the village, who had read some of the Bahá’í books, begged permission to come to him. They entered shyly, the man, led by the girl. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá rose to greet them, and made them take a place in the circle. He talked earnestly to them upon the sacredness of marriage, the beauty of a real union, and the importance of the little child and its education. Before they left he blessed them, and touched their hair and foreheads with a Persian perfume.

Education

'Abdu'l-Bahá laid great stress on Education. He said "The girl's education is of more importance today than the boy's, for she is the mother of the future race. It is the duty of all to look after the children. Those without children should, if possible, make themselves responsible for the education of a child."

The condition of the destitute in the country villages as well as in London impressed 'Abdu'l-Bahá greatly. In an earnest talk with the Rector of a Parish, 'Abdu'l-Bahá said: "I find England awake; there is spiritual life here. But your poor are so very poor! This should not be. On the one hand you have wealth, and great luxury; on the other hand men and women are living in the extremities of hunger and want. This great contrast of life is one of the blots on the civilization of this enlightened age."

"You must turn attention more earnestly to the betterment of the conditions of the poor. Do not be satisfied until each one with whom you are concerned is to you as a member of your family. Regard each one either as a father, or as a brother, or as a sister, or as a mother, or as a child. If you can attain to this, your difficulties will vanish, you will know what to do. This is the teaching of Bahá'u'lláh."

The Change of Heart

To one who spoke of the people's desire to possess the land, and of the strong under-current of rebellion on the part of the labouring classes, 'Abdu'l-Bahá said: ""Fighting, and the employment of force, even for the right cause, will not bring about good results. The oppressed who have right on their side, must not take that right by force; the evil would continue. Hearts must be changed. The rich must wish to give! Life in man should be like a flame, warming all with whom it comes into contact. The spiritually awakened are like to bright torches in the sight of God, they give light and comfort to their fellows.""

When asked if he did not find the manners of the English rude and awkward, compared with those of the East, 'Abdu'l-Bahá said he had not felt this. As a nation increases in spirituality, the manners become different.

Christ and Bahá'u'lláh

A friend asked how the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh contrasted with the teachings of Jesus Christ. "The teachings are the same," declared 'Abdu'l-Bahá; "It is the same foundation and the same temple. Truth is one, and without division. The teachings of Jesus are in a concentrated form. Men do not agree to this day as to the meaning of many of His sayings. His teachings are as a flower in the bud. Today, the bud is unfolding into a flower! Bahá'u'lláh has expanded and fulfilled the teachings, and has applied them in detail to the whole world."

"There are no solitaires and no hermits among the Bahá'ís. Man must work with his fellows. Everyone should have some trade, or art or profession, be he rich or poor, and with this he must serve humanity. This service is acceptable as the highest form of worship."

Art

A painter asked: "Is art a worthy vocation?" 'Abdu'l-Bahá turning to her impressively, said: "Art is worship."

An actor mentioned the drama, and its influence. "The drama is of the utmost importance," said 'Abdu'l-Bahá. "It has been a great educational power in the past; it will be so again." He described how as a young boy he witnessed the Mystery Play of 'Alí's Betrayal and Passion, and how it affected him so deeply that he wept and could not sleep for many nights.

Symbols

Someone wished to know if it were a good custom to wear a symbol, as, for instance, a cross. He said: "You wear the cross for remembrance, it concentrates your thoughts; it has no magical power. Bahá'ís often wear a stone with the greatest name engraved on it: there is no magical influence in the stone; it is a reminder, and companion. If you are about to do some selfish or hasty action, and your glance falls on the ring on your hand, you will remember and change your intention."

Esperanto

A friend enquired concerning Bahá'u'lláh's prophecy in the Words of Paradise, that a universal language would be formed, and desired to know if Esperanto would be the language chosen.

"The love and effort put into Esperanto will not be lost," he answered, "but no one person can construct a Universal Language. It must be made by a Council representing all countries, and must contain words from different languages. It will be governed by the simplest rules, and there will be no exceptions; neither will there be gender, nor extra and silent letters. Everything indicated will have but one name. In Arabic there are hundreds of names for the camel! In the schools of each nation the mother tongue will be taught, as well as the revised Universal Language."

Tolstoy

The same questioner said: "I have read much of Tolstoy and I see a parallel between his teachings and yours. In one of his books he speaks of the Enigma of Life, and describes how life is wasted in our endeavour to find the Key. But Tolstoy goes on to say: 'There is a man in Persia who holds the secret.'"

"Yes," said 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "I received a letter from Tolstoy, and in it he said that he wished to write a book upon Bahá'u'lláh."

Healing

A friend interested in healing quoted the words of Bahá'u'lláh: "Resort ye, in times of sickness, to competent physicians..."

'Abdu'l-Bahá said: "There is but one power which heals — that is God. The state or condition through which the healing takes place is the confidence of the heart. By some this state is reached through pills, powders, and physicians. By others through hygiene, fasting, and prayer. By others through direct perception."

On another occasion 'Abdu'l-Bahá said with regard to the same subject, "All that we see around us is the work of mind. It is mind in the herb and in the mineral that acts on the human body, and changes its condition." The talk developed into a learned dissertation on the Philosophy of Aristotle.

Death

A friend asked: "How should one look forward to death?"

'Abdu'l-Bahá answered: "How does one look forward to the goal of any journey? With hope and with expectation. It is even so with the end of this earthly journey. In the next world, man will find himself freed from many of the disabilities under which he now suffers. Those who have passed on through death, have a sphere of their own. It is not removed from ours; their work, the work of the Kingdom, is ours; but it is sanctified from what we call 'time and place.' Time with us is measured by the sun. When there is no more sunrise, and no more sunset, that kind of time does not exist for man. Those who have ascended have different attributes from those who are still on earth, yet there is no real separation."

"In prayer there is a mingling of station, a mingling of condition. Pray for them as they pray for you! When you do not know it, and are in a receptive attitude, they are able to make suggestions to you, if you are in difficulty. This sometimes happens in sleep, but there is no phenomenal intercourse! That which seems like phenomenal intercourse has another explanation." The questioner exclaimed; "But I have heard a voice!" 'Abdu'l-Bahá said: "Yes, that is possible; we hear voices clearly in dreams. It is not with the physical ear that you heard; the spirit of those that have passed on are freed from sense-life, and do not use physical means. It is not possible to put these great matters into human words; the language of man is the language of children, and man's explanation often leads astray."

Someone present asked how it was that in prayer and meditation the heart often turns with instinctive appeal to some friend who has passed into the next life.

'Abdu'l-Bahá answered: *"It is a law of God's creation that the weak should lean upon the strong. Those to whom you turn may be the mediators of God's power to you, even as when on earth. But it is the One Holy Spirit that strengthens all men."* Hereupon another friend referred to the communing of Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration with Moses and Elijah; and 'Abdu'l-Bahá said: *"The faithful are ever sustained by the presence of the Supreme Concourse. In the Supreme Concourse are Jesus, and Moses, and Elijah, and Bahá'u'lláh, and other supreme Souls: there, also, are the martyrs."*

When asked about the individual persistence of the animal's personality after death, 'Abdu'l-Bahá said: *"Even the most developed dog has not the immortal soul of the man; yet the dog is perfect in its own place. You do not quarrel with a rose-tree because it cannot sing!"*

A True Bahá'í

A student of the modern methods of the higher criticism asked 'Abdu'l-Bahá if he would do well to continue in the church with which he had been associated all his life, and whose language was full of meaning to him. 'Abdu'l-Bahá answered: "You must not dissociate yourself from it. Know this; the Kingdom of God is not in any Society; some seekers go through many Societies as a traveller goes through many cities till he reach his destination. If you belong to a Society already do not forsake your brothers. You can be a Bahá'í-Christian, a Bahá'í-Freemason, a Bahá'í-Jew, a Bahá'í-Muḥammadán. The number nine contains eight, and seven, and all the other numbers, and does not deny any of them. Do not distress or deny anyone by saying 'He is not a Bahá'í!' He will be known by his deeds. There are no secrets among Bahá'ís; a Bahá'í does not hide anything."

Spreading the Teaching

When asked by an American friend: "Which is the best way to spread the teaching?" he said: "By deeds. This way is open to all, and deeds are understood by all. Join yourselves to those who work for the poor, the weak and the unfortunate; this is greatly to be commended. To teach by words requires the skill of a wise physician. He does not offer help to those who do not want treatment. Do not press help on those who do not need your help. The work of teaching is not for all."

The following incident shows how 'Abdu'l-Bahá's attention is given to the smallest details where others are involved. On hearing that some of his friends had come down from London, and had planned to stop the night in the village so as to be near him 'Abdu'l-Bahá immediately made them his guests at the Inn, and being concerned for their comfort, went over personally to inspect the rooms, as the nights were getting cold.

At Brooklands

The morning of the second day, a neighbour sent over her car asking if 'Abdu'l-Bahá would not like to take his guests to the Brooklands aviation ground. Though it was windy, an aviator was on the track, when he heard who the visitor was offered to fly for him. 'Abdu'l-Bahá left his friends and walked out into the middle of the course, where he stood alone watching the biplane making wide circles above him.

A Hindu who was learning to fly at the school joined 'Abdu'l-Bahá's friends and asked: "Who is the man in Eastern dress?"

When told, he exclaimed, "Oh I know him very well through his teachings, which I have studied," and immediately he went to meet 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

They talked together for some time in Arabic, the young man showing great joy at being in his presence. He afterwards said that for many years he had longed for this moment.

While having tea out of doors, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the young Hindu, sitting at the head of the long benches that had been arranged, talked merrily to everyone.

'Abdu'l-Bahá noticed two of the airmen who were wrestling on the grounds, and when they stopped, he went to them clapping his hands and crying in English, "Bravo! Bravo! That is good exercise."

Since his return to Egypt, 'Abdu'l-Bahá has sent a kind message of remembrance to the people of Byfleet, saying that he will never forget them.

