

Days in London

‘Abdu’l-Bahá

Original English



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DURING ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s stay in Cadogan Gardens people arrived all day and every day, from early morning to nightfall, hoping for the privilege of seeing him and of hearing him talk. Many were the gatherings round the board of that hospitable house and hundreds of people were made welcome. Many came without introduction and no one was refused. Among them were clergy of various denominations, members of Parliament, magistrates, and literary men.

The visitors were not only English; numerous Persians had journeyed from Tīhrán and other Eastern cities to meet freely one who had so long been withheld from them by his captivity.

The editor of a journal printed in Japan, altered his return route to Tokyo in order that he might spend the night near ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, and a late visit was paid by a Zoroastrian physician of Bombay, on the eve of his return to India.

Woman’s Work

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s interest in women’s work and progress is well known, and among the notable leaders who came to see him, may be mentioned Mrs. Annie Besant, President of the Theosophical Society, the organizers of various suffrage bodies, civic and philanthropic workers, the principals of several women’s colleges and lady doctors.

A spirited conversation due to the visit of an ardent suffragist will be long remembered by those who had the privilege of being present. The room was full of men and women, many Persians being seated in their familiar respectful attitude on the floor.

After contrasting the general position of the Eastern and the Western women, and then describing how in many respects the Eastern woman has the advantage of her Western sister, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá turned and said to the visitor: “Give me your reasons for believing that woman today should have the vote?”

Answer: “I believe that humanity is a divine humanity and that it must rise higher and higher; but it cannot soar with only one wing.” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá expressed his pleasure at this answer, and smiling, replied: “But what will you do if one wing is stronger than the other?” Answer: “Then we must strengthen the weaker wing, otherwise the flight will always be hampered.”



ORIGINAL



AUDIO

'Abdu'l-Bahá smiled and asked: "What will you say if I prove to you that the woman is the stronger wing?"

The answer came in the same bright vein: "You will earn my eternal gratitude!" at which all the company made merry.

'Abdu'l-Bahá then continued more seriously: "The woman is indeed of the greater importance to the race. She has the greater burden and the greater work. Look at the vegetable and the animal worlds. The palm which carries the fruit is the tree most prized by the date grower. The Arab knows that for a long journey the mare has the longest wind. For her greater strength and fierceness, the lioness is more feared by the hunter than the lion."

"The mere size of the brain has been proved to be no measure of superiority. The woman has greater moral courage than the man; she has also special gifts which enable her to govern in moments of danger and crisis. If necessary she can become a warrior."

Zenobia

'Abdu'l-Bahá asked the company if they remembered the story of Zenobia and of the fall of Palmyra. He then continued as follows, using his hands in the grave and simple gesticulations characteristic of him:

"There was once a Governor in Ancient Syria, who had a beautiful and clever wife. She was so capable that when the Governor died, she was made ruler in his stead. The land prospered under her sway, and men acknowledged that she was a better ruler than her husband. After a time the legions of Rome invaded the country, but again and again she drove them out with great confusion. She let down her beautiful hair, and herself rode at the head of her army, clad in a scarlet cloak, wearing a crown of gold, and wielding a two-edged sword in her hand. The Roman Caesar then withdrew his strength from five other provinces in order to subdue her. After a long and brave fight Zenobia retired into the city of Palmyra, which she strengthened with wonderful fortifications, and there she endured a siege of four months, Caesar being unable to dislodge her. The food she had stored within the walls at last was gone, and the misery of her starving and plague-stricken people compelled her to surrender.

"Caesar was full of admiration for this great woman, because of her courage and endurance, and he asked her to become his wife. But she refused, saying that she would never consent to take as her husband the enemy of her people. Thereupon, Caesar was enraged, and determined to humble her. He took her back with him in his ships to Rome. For his triumphal entry a great procession was prepared, and the streets were filled with people. In the procession came first elephants, after the elephants came the camels, after the camels came the tigers and the leopards, after the leopards came the monkeys, and lastly, after the monkeys, walked Zenobia with a gold chain round her neck. Still she carried her head high, and was firm in her determination. Nothing could break her spirit! She refused to become the Empress of Caesar, so she was thrown into a dungeon, and eventually she died."

'Abdu'l-Bahá ceased. Silence fell upon the room, and it was some time before it was broken.

Upon another occasion 'Abdu'l-Bahá said to a group of friends around him: "Taken in general, women today have a stronger sense of religion than men. The woman's intuition is more correct; she is more receptive and her intelligence is quicker. The day is coming when woman will claim her superiority to man."

"Woman has everywhere been commended for her faithfulness. After the Lord Christ suffered, the disciples wept, and gave way to their grief. They thought that their hopes were shattered, and that the Cause was utterly lost, till Mary Magdalene came to them and strengthened them saying: 'Do you mourn the body of Our Lord or His Spirit? If you mourn His Spirit, you are mistaken, for Jesus lives! His Spirit will never leave us!' Thus through her wisdom and encouragement the Cause of Christ was upheld for all the days to come. Her intuition enabled her to grasp the spiritual fact."

'Abdu'l-Bahá then added: "But in the sight of God sex makes no difference. He or she is greatest who is nearest to God."

One morning 'Abdu'l-Bahá, on entering the room looked about and said: "It is just like a miracle, our being here together. There is no racial, political or patriotic tie. We are drawn together by the words of Bahá'u'lláh, and in like manner will all the races of the earth be drawn together. Of this, rest assured!"

The True Bahá'í

"I have never heard of Bahá'u'lláh," said a young man. "I have only recently read about this movement, but I recognize the mission of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and desire to be a disciple. I have always believed in the brotherhood of man as the ultimate solvent of all our national and international difficulties."

"It makes no difference whether you have ever heard of Bahá'u'lláh or not," was the answer, "the man who lives the life according to the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh is already a Bahá'í. On the other hand a man may call himself a Bahá'í for fifty years and if he does not live the life he is not a Bahá'í. An ugly man may call himself handsome, but he deceives no one, and a black man may call himself white yet he deceives no one: not even himself!"

The Coming of Peace

"By what process" continued the questioner, "will this peace on earth be established? Will it come at once after a universal declaration of the Truth?"

"No, it will come about gradually," said 'Abdu'l-Bahá. "A plant that grows too quickly lasts but a short time. You are my family" and he looked about with a smile, "my new children! if a family lives in unison, great results are obtained. Widen the circle; when a city lives in intimate accord greater results will follow, and a continent that is fully united will likewise unite all other continents. Then will be the time of the greatest results, for all the inhabitants of the earth belong to one native land."

The Pure Heart

When asked for a definition of a pure heart, 'Abdu'l-Bahá said, "The pure heart is one that is entirely cut away from self. To be selfless is to be pure."

True Spirituality

Another morning 'Abdu'l-Bahá began at once to speak as he joined the group of seekers. He said: "Praise be to God, this century is a glorious century; may love increase every day; may it strike fire to light the candle in the darkness, like a gift and mercy of God."

"Know, O thou possessors of insight, that true spirituality is like unto a lake of clear water which reflects the divine. Of such was the spirituality of Jesus Christ. There is another kind which is like a mirage, seeming to be spiritual when it is not. That which is truly spiritual must light the path to God, and must result in deeds. We cannot believe the call to be spiritual when there is no result. Spirit is reality, and when the spirit in each of us seeks to join itself with the Great Reality, it must in turn give life. The Jews in the time of Christ were dead, having no real life, and Jesus actually wafted a new breath into their bodies. Behold what has been accomplished since!"

Knowledge must result in Action

A representative from a well known society made reference to its meetings for the purpose of a search into the reality of truth, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá said "I know of your work. I think a great deal of it. I know your desire is to serve mankind, and to draw together Humanity under the banner of Oneness; but its members must beware lest it become only a discussion. Look about you. How many committees have been formed, and living for a little while, have died! Committees and Societies can not create or give life."

"People get together and talk, but it is God's Word alone that is powerful in its results. Consider for a moment: you would not trade together if you had no income from it and derived no benefit! Look at the followers of Christ. Their power was due to their ardour and their deeds. Every effort must have its result, else it is not a true effort. You must become the means of lighting the world of humanity. This is the infallible proof and sign. Every progress depends on two things, knowledge and practice. First acquire knowledge, and, when conviction is reached, put it into practice.

"Once a learned man journeyed to see me to receive my blessing, saying he knew and comprehended the Bahá'í teachings. When I told him that he could receive the blessings of the Holy Spirit at any time when he put himself in a receptive attitude to accept them, he said he was always in a receptive attitude.

"'What would you do,' I asked 'if I were to suddenly turn and strike you?' He instantly flared with indignation and strode angrily about the room.

"After a little I went over and took his arm, saying, 'But you must return good for evil. Whether I honoured you or despised you, you should follow the teachings; now you merely read them.

Remember the words of Jesus who said, 'The first shall be last, and the last first.' The man turned, shook my hand and departed, and I have since heard of many kind acts he has done."

When 'Abdu'l-Bahá was addressed by the name of prophet, he answered, "My name is 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the Servant of God" [literally, the Slave of Glory.]¹

Visit to the Lord Mayor

At the express wish of the Lord Mayor, 'Abdu'l-Bahá paid him a visit early one morning at the Mansion House. The talk turned chiefly upon the social conditions of great cities, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá said that London was the best regulated city he had seen.

He said: "Every man walking in the street is free as if he were in his own kingdom. There is a great spiritual light in London. The effort made for justice is real and in this country the law is the same for the poor as for the rich." He took great interest in hearing of the care that is taken of prisoners as they leave jail, and spoke of the land being happy where the magistrates are as fathers to the people.

Before 'Abdu'l-Bahá left London, he went to an East-end hospital to visit there a young writer lying seriously ill, who was very anxious to see him.

Some Personal Characteristics

There is a note in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's character that has not been emphasized, and with which no idea of him is complete. The impressive dignity which distinguishes his presence and bearing is occasionally lighted by a delicate and tactful humour, which is as unaffected as it is infectious and delightful.

On his last afternoon in London, a reporter called to ask him of his future plans, finding him surrounded by a number of friends who had called to bid him good-bye. When, in answer to this query, 'Abdu'l-Bahá told in perfect English of his intention to visit Paris and go from there to Alexandria, the press representative evinced surprise at his faultless pronunciation. Thereupon 'Abdu'l-Bahá proceeded to march with a free stride up and down the flower-scented drawing room, his Oriental garb contrasting strangely with his modern surroundings; and, to the amusement of the assembly, uttered a string of elaborate English words, laughingly ending, "Very difficult English words I speak!" Then, a moment later, with the swift transition of one who knows both how to be grave and gay, he showed himself terribly in earnest.

He had left orders that none were to be turned away, but one who had twice vainly sought his presence, and was, through some oversight, prevented from seeing him, wrote a heartbreaking letter showing that he thought himself rebuffed. It was translated by the Persian interpreter. 'Abdu'l-Bahá at once put on his coat, and, turning towards the door, said, with an expression of unspeakable sadness, "A friend of mine has been martyred, and I am very grieved. I go out alone," and he swept down the steps. One could then see how well the title of "Master" became him.

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Another phase of his character which none who saw him could ever forget was his attitude towards children who were brought to him. Many of his talks were given as he sat with his arm encircling one of them.

He invariably admonished the parents thus: "Give this child a good education; make every effort that it may have the best you can afford, so that it may be enabled to enjoy the advantage of this glorious age. Do all you can to encourage spirituality in them."

One who sought the presence of 'Abdu'l-Bahá realized the father-like sympathy which is his. Speaking of his and others' love for 'Abdu'l-Bahá the reply was: "I know that you love me, I can see that it is so. I will pray for you that you may be firm and serve in the Cause, becoming a true servant to Bahá'u'lláh. Though I go away I will always be present with you all." These words were spoken with the greatest loving sympathy and understanding of difficulties; during the moments of this little talk 'Abdu'l-Bahá held and stroked the speaker's hands, and at the end took his head and with a gentle touch drew it to him kissing the forehead of the young man, who felt that he had found a father and a friend.

