

Word Portraits of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá

We have sent Him (‘Abdu’l-Bahá) down in the form of a human temple. Blest and sanctified be God Who createth whatsoever He willeth through His inviolable, His infallible decree. They who deprive themselves of the shadow of the Branch, are lost in the wilderness of error, are consumed by the heat of worldly desires, and are of those who will assuredly perish.

(Bahá’u’lláh quoted by Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 135)

You have written that there is a difference among the believers concerning the “Second Coming of Christ.” Gracious God! Time and again this question hath arisen, and its answer hath emanated in a clear and irrefutable statement from the pen of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, that what is meant in the prophecies by the ‘Lord of Hosts’ and the ‘Promised Christ’ is the Blessed Perfection (Bahá’u’lláh) and His holiness the Exalted One (the Báb). My name is ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. My qualification is ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. My reality is ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. My praise is ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Thralldom to the Blessed Perfection is my glorious and refulgent diadem, and servitude to all the human race my perpetual religion . . . No name, no title, no mention, no commendation have I, nor will ever have, except ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. This is my longing. This is my greatest yearning. This is my eternal life. This is my everlasting glory.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá quoted by Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh* , p. 139)

Horace Holley

. . . As the party rose I saw among them a stately old man, robed in a cream-coloured gown, his white hair and beard shining in the sun. He displayed a beauty of stature, an inevitable harmony of attitude and dress I had never seen nor thought of in men. Without having ever visualized the Master, I knew that this was He. My whole body underwent a shock. My heart leaped, my knees weakened, a thrill of acute receptive feeling flowed from head to foot. I seemed to have turned into some most sensitive sense-organ, as if eyes and ears were not enough for this sublime impression. In every part of me I stood aware of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s presence. From sheer happiness I wanted to cry - it seemed the most suitable form of self-expression at my command. While my own personality was flowing away, even while I exhibited a state of complete humility, a new being, not my own, assumed its place. A glory, as it were from the summits of human nature, poured into me, and I was conscious of a most intense impulse to admire. In ‘Abdu’l-Bahá I felt the awful presence of Bahá’u’lláh, and as my thoughts returned to activity, I realized that I had drawn as near as man now may to pure spirit and pure being. This wonderful experience came to me beyond my own volition. I had entered the Master’s presence and become the servant of a higher will for its own purpose. Even my memory of that temporary change of being bears strange authority over me. I know men can become; and that single overcharged moment, shining out from the dark mountain pass of all past time, reflects like a mirror I can turn upon all circumstances to consider their worth by an intelligence purer than my own.

(Horace Holley, quoted in *The Bahá’í World* Volume 13 p. 851)

Louis Gregory

'Abdu'l-Bahá appeared about the medium height, with a strong frame and symmetrical features. His face is deeply furrowed and His color about that of parchment. His carriage is erect and His entire form strikingly majestic and beautiful. His hands and nails are shapely and pure. His silver hair is long enough to touch the shoulders. The beard is snow white, the eyes light blue and penetrating, the nose slightly aquiline. The voice is powerful, but capable of infinite pathos, tenderness and sympathy. His dress was that of the Oriental gentleman of the highest classes, simple and neat and very graceful. The color of His apparel was light, the outer robe being made of alpaca. On His head rested a light fez, surrounded by a white turban. The meekness of the servant, the majesty of the king, are in His brow and form.

(Louis Gregory, Louis G. Gregory Pilgrim Notes)

Howard Colby Ives

And when, under His encouraging sympathy, the interviewer became emptied of his words, there followed a brief interval of silence. There was no instant and complete outpouring of explanation and advice. He sometimes closed His eyes a moment as if He sought guidance from above himself; sometimes sat and searched the questioner's soul with a loving, comprehending smile that melted the heart...

And He never argued, of course. Nor did He press a point. He left one free. There was never an assumption of authority, rather He was ever the personification of humility. He taught "as if offering a gift to a king." He never told me what I should do, beyond suggesting that what I was doing was right. Nor did He ever tell me what I should believe. He made Truth and Love so beautiful and royal that the heart perforce did reverence. He showed me by His voice, manner, bearing, smile, how I should be, knowing that out of the pure soil of being the good fruit of deeds and words would surely spring.

There was a strange, awe-inspiring mingling of humility and majesty, relaxation and power in His slightest word or gesture which made me long to understand its source. What made Him so different, so immeasurably superior to any other man I had ever met? ...

I have mentioned several times the impression He always made upon me of an all-embracing love. How rarely we receive such an impression from those around us, even from our nearest and dearest, we all know. All our human love seems based upon self, and even its highest expression is limited to one or to a very few. Not so was the love which radiated from 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Like the sun it poured upon all alike and, like it, also warmed and gave new life to all it touched....

No matter what subject was brought up He was perfectly at home in its discussion, yet always with an undercurrent of modesty and loving consideration for the opinions of others. I have before spoken of His unfailing courtesy. It was really more than what that term usually connotes to the Western mind. The same Persian word is used for both reverence and courtesy. He "saw the Face of His Heavenly Father in every face" and revered the soul behind it. How could one be discourteous if such an attitude was held towards everyone!...

In all of my many opportunities of meeting, of listening to and talking with 'Abdu'l-Bahá I was impressed, and constantly more deeply impressed, with His method of teaching souls. That is the word. He did not attempt to reach the mind alone. He sought the soul, the reality of every one He met. Oh, He could be logical, even scientific in His presentation of an argument, as He demonstrated constantly in the many addresses I have

heard Him give and the many more I have read. But it was not the logic of the schoolman, not the science of the class room. His lightest word. His slightest association with a soul was shot through with an illuminating radiance which lifted the hearer to a higher plane of consciousness. Our hearts burned within us when He spoke.

(Howard Colby Ives, *Portals to Freedom*)

Welsley Tudor Pole

Although of a little less than medium height, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá made an impression on all who met him by his dignity, friendliness, and his aura of spiritual authority. His blue-grey eyes radiated a luminosity of their own and his hands were beautiful in their grace and healing magnetism. Even his movements were infused with a kind of radiance. The most abiding impression I received from intimate contact with him was his immense breadth of outlook, permeated with the spirit of deep and loving kindness. Whatever the topic under discussion—ranging from religion to weather, from the sunsets to the flowers, from ethics to personal behavior, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá always struck the universal note, the note of Oneness as between the Creator and all His creation, great or small . . .

(Welsley Tudor Pole, *Writing on the Wall*, pp. 142-6)

E.G. Browne

Seldom have I seen one whose appearance impressed me more. A tall strongly-built man holding himself straight as an arrow, with white turban and raiment, long black locks reaching almost to the shoulder, broad powerful forehead indicating a strong intellect combined with an unswerving will, eyes keen as hawk’s, and strongly-marked but pleasing features—such was my first impression of ‘Abbás Effendí, ‘the master’ (Áká) as he par excellence is called by the Bábís. Subsequent conversation with him served only to heighten the respect with which his appearance had from the first inspired me. One more eloquent of speech, more ready of argument, more apt of illustration, more intimately acquainted with the sacred books of the Jews, the Christians, and the Muhammadans, could, I should think, scarcely be found even amongst the eloquent, ready, and subtle race to which he belongs. These qualities, combined with a bearing at once majestic and genial, made me cease to wonder at the influence and esteem which he enjoyed even beyond the circle of his father’s followers. About the greatness of this man and his power no one who had seen him could entertain a doubt.

(E.G. Browne *A Traveller’s Narrative*, introduction, p. xxxvi.)

Ali M. Yazdi

I went there often, sometimes on the way home from school, sometimes on weekends, I spent most of my time outside of school in His garden. I would wait to get a glimpse of Him as He came out for His customary walk or conversed with pilgrims from faraway places. To hear His vibrant and melodious voice ringing in the open air and to see Him exhilarated me and gave me hope. Quite often He came to me and smiled and talked. There was a radiance about Him, an almost unlimited kindness and love that shone from Him. Seeing Him infused me with a feeling of goodness. I felt humble and at the same time exceedingly happy.

I also had many opportunities to see the Master (Sarkár-i-Áqá as we called Him) at meetings and festive occasions. I especially remember the first time He came to our house to address a large gathering of believers. The friends were all gathered, talking happily, waiting. All of a sudden there was quiet. I could hear from the outside the voice of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá—very resonant, very beautiful - before He entered the room. Then He swept

in, with His robe flowing.

He was straight as an arrow. His head was thrown back. His silver-gray hair fell in waves to his shoulders. His beard was white. His eyes were keen; His forehead, broad. He wore a white turban around an ivory felt cap. He looked at everyone, smiled, and welcomed all with “Khushámadíd. Khushámadíd.” (“Welcome. Welcome”).

(Ali M. Yazdi, *Blessings Beyond Measure*, p. 18)

Florence Khan

One evening, after sunset, Khan [Ali-Kuli Khan] came in great enthusiasm and excitement to our room. ‘Do you remember,’ he asked, ‘that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá said He would answer all the letters we brought to Him from America before we left?’ ‘Yes, I do.’ ‘Then come quickly. It is too wonderful! The Master is pacing to and fro, in His sitting room- I cannot see the secretary—and He is replying to those letters, as if he had known the inmost secret of the writers’ hearts, from the cradle! Yet He has never met nor seen one of them. You can see Him from the corridor beyond the little room, each time He passes the open doorway!’ So, Rahím being peacefully asleep, I returned with Khan, to his post, outside the doorway which led to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s long room with its many windows looking over the Bay of ‘Akká to the Mediterranean and beyond.

I heard the dear Master’s beautiful voice, and then saw Him, as He strode by the doorway of His lighted room. We were in the dark, looking through the small darkened antechamber. I recalled how, never, at the daily luncheon table, and never at the late evening dinner, and never at any time, had I satisfied my longing to gaze more fully upon the Master’s beautiful, noble, and spiritual face. I used to glance admiringly at the snowy, scarf-enfolded headdress, and at the beautiful, silver-white hair falling softly to the shoulders; and at the lofty arch of His forehead, at the expression of His eyes, indescribable in human language; now they seemed blue-and now brown- and again partly of each colour, or hazel—but always illumined, loving and understanding; sometimes raised in holy reverence, in silent prayer, sometimes gently smiling-but always kingly and supreme. . . . Then, I could never get my fill, so to speak, of the Divine perfection of spirituality—a gentleness-a holy patience—no sign whatsoever in lines or expression of the lower traits of human nature, only a Divine perfectness. It was astounding. I had never seen a face like it. Selfless. The stamp of suffering upon it; alas for humanity, which crucifies God’s messengers!

“So, I thought exultingly, ‘Now if only the Master would pause a moment in His doorway, as I am here in the dark, I could look upon His face to my heart’s content, and no one would notice me!’

“Instantly, the Master stopped in His doorway.

“Silhouetted against the light, I clearly saw Him in His beauty, and I began a sort of ‘visual devouring’ of that wonderful face! I *looked*, and I *looked*, and I *looked*. After a few moments, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá withdrew, and resumed His pacing to and fro and revelation of the Tablets.

“After watching for a while, half timorously the thought arose in my heart, ‘Oh! if only He would *stop once more* in the doorway!’

“At *once* the Master stood in the doorway, silent, and seemed to be looking upwards towards the stars. ‘Now, I *will* look!’ I thought in breathless joy.

“This time as I gazed silently upon that matchless face, a golden light shone forth from His entire figure. This light intensified, and intensified, as I looked, and looked, until I began almost to be afraid.

“I said to myself, ‘However bright it grows I am going to keep my eyes open! What a wonderful sight! What a miraculous opportunity!’

“The outline of light grew more and more intense, yet I looked, and I looked, until it seemed to me, I must fall upon my knees. Just as it seemed I could no longer bear such a vision, the Master

withdrew.”

(Florence Khanum, *The Sheltering Branch*, pp. 26-29)

Stanwood Cobb

And so, in the case of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, I noticed upon many occasions that He never expressed spiritual power for the purpose of dazzling people, or of winning them to a spiritual allegiance for which they were not inwardly prepared. The greater the receptivity of the individual, the greater was the revelation of spiritual potency which 'Abdu'l-Bahá displayed. Thus Juliet Thompson, who painted 'Abdu'l-Bahá's portrait, has testified to the glorious revelations of Himself which her Subject at times made to her. In similar vein have testified the Kinneys, with whom 'Abdu'l-Bahá spent several weeks. And May Maxwell once told me that she had received, upon one sacred occasion in the presence of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, such a revelation of Him that she would never attempt to describe it. But materially-minded people, 'Abdu'l-Bahá met upon their own plane, as He did Porter Sargent. And as I also saw Him do in Washington with the Turkish ambassador, on the occasion of Mrs. Parson's reception. This being a social affair, 'Abdu'l-Bahá did not play the part of the Master, but the part of a guest amenable to the situation. And anyone who had looked into the large reception room, as I did, and had seen 'Abdu'l-Bahá sitting in a corner and exchanging funny stories with the ambassador, would have seen in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's facial expressions no trace of spiritual power. For He was not here primarily for spiritual purposes, but to play a social part.

(Stanwood Cobb, *In His Presence* pp 57-58)

Albert Vail

Bahá'u'lláh brought this great revelation to the world, but it came in Him with such sublime light that people were almost dazzled by its splendour. His splendour is so bright we can hardly look upon it. And so the next great Herald of the Kingdom takes the form of a servant, the humblest form a human being can assume. He lays aside His title; He calls himself simply, The Servant of the Glory of God.

He comes down right into the midst of men, living their life. He plants his garden; He cooks the meals for the sick people; He makes them broth in the prison; He goes up and down the country like a ministering angel of God's mercy; He is the tenderest, the simplest, the lowliest of beings in the world. When He is put in prison for teaching universal peace and universal brotherhood He counts this imprisonment the joy of His life. 'Abdu'l-Bahá tells us how when He was one day in the streets of 'Akká and the chains were around His waist and His neck, the jailer, His tender-hearted jailer, said, "Why don't you put a robe over those chains so the boys won't throw stones at you?" 'Abdu'l-Bahá, turning to him, replied: "These chains are my badges of honour, my badges of glory, I could not conceal them."

Now it is this quality of service, in annihilation of self, that makes God's Holy Spirit manifest. When we visited 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Chicago and He met us there with all the freshness and joy of this eternal morning shining through His human spirit in its brightness and its beauty, and our hearts were thrilled with the consciousness that here was one who saw God face to face, nay, that made God's love manifest right in our midst. And He said to us, "*You know it doesn't make any difference what happens to one in the physical world. I was a prisoner in a Turkish prison for forty years.*" Then He told us how He slept upon the ground or upon the stone floor, how He was starved and chained and put into dungeons. "*And yet,*" He said, "*every day when I awoke in the morning I praised God that another day was before me in which I could serve Him in His prison. And every night when I lay down on the stone floor of the prison I thanked God that He had allowed me to serve His Kingdom one more day in His prison.*"

Then 'Abdu'l-Bahá, turning to us with a light in His face and a joy that was almost

overwhelmingly beautiful said, "*I was in prison for forty years, and every day was a day of perfect joy.*" As he said "*joy*" His spirit shone so bright that in our hearts we thought we had never before known what joy and happiness meant. The people who were in the room said, "Isn't it amazing; when we are talking here with this Servant of God, all we can think of is God; we do not even see 'Abdu'l-Bahá." And one woman said: "I do not even know He is here; all I see is the Spirit of God shining in Him as in a crystal or a diamond." When she went away she did not think anything about 'Abdu'l-Bahá the human personality; all she knew was that for one-half hour she had been in the presence of the eternal world. Like a door into the Kingdom was 'Abdu'l-Bahá, transmitting the light of eternity. As she left His presence she said for the first time in her life she knew that God was King, and that there was no God but the God of this universe, and we could trust our lives to Him, our fortunes to Him, everything to Him because God is the Reality of realities.

(Address by Albert Vail, of Chicago, 30 April 1919 from *Star of the West*, XI:3, 28 April 1920, pp 45-57.)

Howard Colby Ives

So I was somewhat withdrawn from the others when my attention was attracted by a rustling throughout the room. A door was opening far across from me and a group was emerging and 'Abdu'l-Bahá appeared saying farewell. None had any eyes save for Him. Again I had the impression of a unique dignity and courtesy and love. The morning sunlight flooded the room to center on His robe. His fez was slightly tilted and as I gazed, His hand, with the gesture evidently characteristic, raised and, touching, restored it to its proper place. His eyes met mine as my fascinated glance was on Him. He smiled and, with a gesture which no word but 'lordly' can describe, He beckoned me. Startled gives no hint of my sensations. Something incredible had happened. Why to me, a stranger unknown, unheard of, should He raise that friendly hand? I glanced around. Surely it was to someone else that gesture was addressed, those eyes were smiling"! But there was no one near and again I looked and again He beckoned and such understanding love enveloped me that even at that distance and with a heart still cold a thrill ran through me as if a breeze from a divine morning had touched my brow!

Slowly I obeyed that imperative command and, as I approached the door where still He stood, He mentioned others away and stretched His hand to me as if He had always known me. And, as our right hands met, with His left He indicated that all should leave the room, and He drew me in and closed the door. I remember how surprised the interpreter looked when he too was included in this general dismissal. But I had little thought then for anything but this incredible happening. I was absolutely alone with 'Abdu'l-Bahá. The halting desire expressed weeks ago was fulfilled the very moment that our eyes first met.

Still holding my hand 'Abdu'l-Bahá walked across the room towards where, in the window, two chairs were waiting. Even then the majesty of His tread impressed me and I felt like a child led by His father, a more than earthly father, to a comforting conference. His hand still held mine and frequently His grasp tightened and held more closely. And then, for the first time, He spoke, and in my own tongue: Softly came the assurance that I was His very dear son.

What there was in these simple words that carried such conviction to my heart I cannot say. Or was it the tone of voice and the atmosphere pervading the room, filled with spiritual vibrations beyond anything I had ever known, that melted my heart almost to tears? I only know that a sense of verity invaded me. Here at last was my Father. What earthly paternal relationship could equal this? A new and exquisite emotion all but mastered me. My throat swelled. My eyes filled. I could not have spoken had life depended on a word. I followed those masterly feet like a little child.

Then we sat in the two chairs by the window: knee to knee, eye to eye. At last He looked right into me. It was the first time since our eyes had met with His first beckoning gesture that this had happened. And now nothing intervened between us and he looked at me. He looked at me! It seemed as though never before had anyone really seen me. I felt a sense of gladness that I at last was at home, and that one who knew me utterly, my Father, in truth, was alone with me.

As He looked such play of thought found reflection in His face, that if He had talked an hour not nearly so much could have been said. A little surprise, perhaps, followed swiftly by such sympathy, such understanding, such overwhelming love—it was as if His very being opened to receive me. With that the heart within me melted and the tears flowed. I did not weep, in any ordinary sense. There was no breaking up of feature. It was as if a long-pent stream was at last undammed. Unheeded, as I looked at Him, they flowed.

He put His two thumbs to my eyes while He wiped the tears from my face; admonishing me not to cry, that one must always be happy. And He laughed. Such a ringing, boyish laugh. It was as though He had discovered the most delightful joke imaginable: a divine joke which only He could appreciate.

I could not speak. We both sat perfectly silent for what seemed a long while, and gradually a great peace came to me. Then 'Abdu'l-Bahá placed His hand upon my breast saying that it was the heart that speaks. Again silence: a long, heart-enthraling silence. No word further was spoken, and all the time I was with Him not one single sound came from me. But no word was necessary from me to Him. I knew that, even then, and how I thanked God it was so.

Suddenly He leaped from His chair with another laugh as though consumed with a heavenly joy. Turning, He took me under the elbows and lifted me to my feet and swept me into his arms. Such a hug! No mere embrace! My very ribs cracked. He kissed me on both cheeks, laid His arm across my shoulders and led me to the door.

That is all. But life has never been quite the same since.

(Howard Colby Ives, *Portals to Freedom*, pp. 30-33)