

# Sparks among the Stubble

by Constance Elizabeth Maud  
Section on Abdu'l-Baha, p83-112

## Note and Info

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## Introduction

Constance Elizabeth Maud (1860 Brighton, England – 11 May 1929 Chelsea, London) was an English writer, who met 'Abdu'l-Bahá in London at Lady Blomfield's, 1911. She had a long-term connection to France and a great interest in the Suffrage movement, witnessed by her 1911 novel, "No Surrender"

Items of Baha'i importance from her pen are:-

"Abdul Baha (Servant of the Glory)" in The Fortnightly Review (London), vol. 97 (April 1912)

"The First Persian Feminist," in The Fortnightly Review (London), vol. 99 (June 1913)

"Sparks Among the Stubble" (1924) from which this work is taken.

## Abdu'l-Baha in London and His Teachings

In 1911 a great Persian teacher made his first appearance among us in London, though the rumour of his teaching had reached many in this country through travellers and pilgrims who had visited the small fortress town of Akka, where Abbas Effendi passed the greater part of his forty years' imprisonment and exile.

### *Universal Brotherhood and Love*

Rudyard Kipling, voicing the feeling of most of his countrymen, sang:

East is East and West is West,  
And never the twain shall meet.

Abbas Effendi - or, as his followers loved to call him, Abdul Baha, signifying "Servant of the Glory" - came to us with another song:

"East and West, North and South, all, all must join hands in one great brotherhood, unite their voices in one great prayer to the Abha Father, before the human race can rise to the divine heights and grow to the perfect stature to which the All-Father has destined it."

"War must cease," said Abdul Baha. "There is something above and beyond patriotism, and it is better to love your fellow men than to love only your countrymen."

But he did not leave this as a text to be used and misused by the pacifist and shirker to suit their purpose, for he [84] went on to show, how, just as you must begin with love of your own family before you are ready to go on to the love of your neighbour, so you must begin with your own country before you embrace all countries, and with love for your fellow man before ascending to the love of God. For "how can we love God whom we have not seen if we love not our brother whom we have seen?"

"When we realise fully this brotherhood of man, war will appear to us in its true light as an outrage on civilisation, an act of madness and blindness. If the hand fight against the foot, all the body must suffer, and no one part can possibly be the gainer. When the light drives away our present darkness, we shall recognise that we were like men in a dungeon fighting and slaying ourselves."

### *God and Soul; Baha'u'llah*

The existence of a Supreme Being, the God of all religions, and of a spirit in man which survives the death of the body, are regarded by the Bahaists as foundation principles never even called in question. The doctrine of the brotherhood of man which is the keynote of Abdul Baha's teaching is, of course, identical with that of the Founder of Christianity, but so forgotten by the world that it came to many, even in Christian countries, almost as a fresh revelation, a new illumination, when the Persian prophet Baha Ullah, father of Abbas Effendi, proclaimed it sixty years ago, and founded the great Bahai movement which now, it is said, numbers some million followers in Persia alone.

### *The Bab and Baha'u'llah*

Before Baha Ullah, Persia had been roused by his precursor the "Bab," who, like "the voice of one crying in the wilderness," foretold the advent of a greater than himself for whom he but paved the way, and indicated the line of teaching. The Bab met with the fate of his great prototype, and was martyred for the faith. Some [85] years later, Baha Ullah, one of his own followers, rose up proclaiming his message of Unity and Brotherhood, and was received by all faithful Babists as the long-awaited one.

In vain the authorities, civil and ecclesiastical, endeavoured by persecutions and wholesale massacres to

stamp out the movement. Bahaism but throve the more in consequence, as its leader prophesied, "like a tree pruned by the knife and watered by the blood of the martyrs."

### ***Abdu'l-Baha in Prison in the Holy Land, and His Release***

In 1892, Baha Ullah, The Blessed Manifestation, died at the age of seventy-five in an exile's prison, appointing as his successor to the leadership Abdul Baha, his son, a prisoner within the walls of Akka. According to the individual disposition and temper of the Governor holding office, Abbas Effendi was allowed more or less of liberty during those long years. If the Governor inclined towards severity, the bonds were tightened, the prisoner kept in strict seclusion, chains fastened to his wrists, ankles, and even round his neck. Under the rule of a more humane Governor, the chains would be knocked off, and the prisoner permitted to walk abroad within the walls of the city, to dwell with his wife and children, and to receive and teach those who came from all parts of the world to learn of him. For, like the light which could not be hid though men "put it under a bushel," the prisoner of Akka sent his rays far out across the Atlantic to the New World and over the Indian Ocean to the Old World.

During the last years of Abdul Hamid, the tyrant Sultan of Turkey, persecution of the Bahaists was renewed with savage energy, and the life of Abdul Baha hung by a thread. He was awaiting his death sentence, to him the glad opening of the Gate of Life, with serene equanimity, when the booming of great guns in the harbour announced [86] the fall of the tyrant, and the end, by order of the Young Turks, of his long captivity.

### ***Abdu'l-Baha Visits England; Archdeacon of Westminster***

Thus it was that three years later the Teacher and leader of the Bahai movement was able to come and visit his followers in England. The East did come to the West, the twain did meet, holding out to each other the hand of brotherhood. Surely the dawn of a new day was heralded on that Sunday evening when the late Archdeacon of Westminster walked hand in hand with the venerable Abdul Baha up the nave of St. John's Church, and invited him, not only to address the congregation, but to offer for them his prayers and blessing. For though, between the two, words and ideas were exchanged through an interpreter, both felt for each other a complete sympathy and understanding, making them feel they had reached the same standpoint though by widely divergent paths.

### ***Abdu'l-Baha's Physical Appearance, Presence and Transparency***

Of middle height and broadly built, in his flowing Persian robe and white turban Abdul Baha struck one as a very dignified personality. His presence conveyed an impression of great calm, and yet his face showed the spirit within most actively alive. His eyes seemed to reflect everything he was feeling, so that as he spoke, without knowing a word of Persian one could follow what emotion he experienced, whether pity, indignation, admiration, or love.

### ***At Lady Blomfield's in London***

To the house in London, where Abdul Baha and his suite were received as honoured, welcome guests, came a constant stream of all sorts and conditions of men and women - Christians of every denomination, Buddhists of every nationality, Theosophists, Zoroastrians and Mahommedans, Agnostics and Gnostics. To all he spoke some individual message, and to their varied questions gave a [87] simple, direct, and quite spontaneous answer. A remarkable serenity, an atmosphere of peace and aloofness from this material world, pervaded his whole personality. Everything he said was characterised by a crystal-clear lucidity of thought, and a penetrating wisdom which cleaved through the immense difficulties of language and disadvantages of transmitting his speech through an Oriental interpreter, whose knowledge of English was of necessity limited.

### ***Abdu'l-Baha's Ability to Connect to People***

In spite of having passed the greater part of his life within prison walls, Abdul Baha possessed an amazing power of going straight to the core of men and things. He saw people as Teufelsdrök tried to imagine them to himself, minus their trappings, whether of coronets, mitres, orders, or fine clothes; and whether the skin were white, brown, or black, he saw right to the heart, to the soul. A look of wonderful love, joy, and understanding came into his profoundly far-seeking old eyes, when he recognised in his visitor a pure heart, a soul of light; and it was as though he had found a brother or sister, someone near of kin, But when he spoke of the discord, misery, and sorrow of the world, his eyes took on an expression of unfathomable sadness, and pictures rose up before one of the ghastly scenes of death and torture those same eyes must have been forced to witness.

## ***Be Happy; Suffering from Well-Wishers; Relief by Children***

Still, sadness was far from the characteristic note of his face or character. He not only preached happiness, but radiated it, and, though he had learnt but a few words of English, he often repeated:

"No cry - no cry - be happy - that is good."

He could wear "the glorious morning face" enjoined by Robert Louis Stevenson, even at seven o'clock in the morning, when his zealous followers and importunate [88] visitors not infrequently began their daily visits. Like all popular prophets and preachers, he suffered not a little from his disciples; the incense-burners and daily adorers bored and wearied him to the core. I have often noted the happy smile of frank relief from strain with which he would turn to welcome some young thing, a wide-eyed child with fixed gaze of curiosity upon his turban, or one of his hostess' young daughters who, sitting at his feet, would mischievously imitate some of the 'yearners' till he laughed like a schoolboy.

### ***Abdu'l-Baha with Children***

Children always received a warm welcome. They refreshed him 'like a spring of water in a dry land,' as he said in his Eastern tongue. He kept pretty little presents of bead necklaces and rings and sweets ready for these small visitors, who were never shy with him, but talked away, helping him to add to his few English words, of which he made great stock. At parting he would bless them, placing his fingers on eyes, lips, and ears, with the prayer: "God bless your eyes - may they behold only the good and the beautiful; God bless your lips - may they speak only words of love and wisdom and truth; God bless your ears - may they listen only to what is pure and lovely and of good report; may the voice of God sound always louder than the voices of the world." His blessing recalled the prayer of the old Sarum Psalter, again showing that the East and West have met:

"God be in my head and in my understanding,

God be in my eyes and in my looking,

God be in my mouth and in my speaking,

God be in my heart and in my thinking,

God be in my end and at my departing."

### ***His Routine in London - Addresses, Questioners, Interviews, Meals, Correspondence, Morning Rise***

His custom while in London was to give short, informal addresses every morning to those assembled to hear him, [89] and to answer any questions that might be put to him by the various people of all classes, nationalities, and religions, who came, not only to learn, but to investigate and to argue. He met the latter with a courteous, gentle manner and a wisdom which recalled the sayings of Christ to the lawyers and Pharisees of Galilee.

To those who sought to see him alone he granted private audiences by appointment in his own room. Often these went on throughout the day. After his simple evening repast, at which he would invite sometimes as many as a dozen friends to join him and his suite, he would retire to his room and write and answer letters far into the night, in spite of rising at seven every morning.

### ***W. T. Stead; Mr Sprague***

Among the notable visitors who came to pay their respects to Abbas Effendi in London was W. T. Stead. It was a memorable meeting between the East and the West. The Persian prophet learned with interest that the editor of the *Review of Reviews* had been preaching the leading tenets of Bahaism ever since he inaugurated that 'pulpit,' as he called his publication. In 1907, Mr. Sprague, an American disciple of Abdul Baha, who had come to England on a propaganda mission, had received his most effective help from an interview granted him by Mr. Stead, fully reported in the Review, giving an admirable summary of Bahaism.

The two, therefore, found each other already closely linked by mutual ideals and aspirations. So eagerly they discoursed that difference of language seemed forgotten; their rapidly exchanging thought swept through the utterances of the halting interpreter like a bird cleaving the mist.

#### *Communication with the Dead; Doubting Thomases*

Only one subject did they find themselves at variance, and then not so much at variance as viewing the question [90] from a different altitude on the same road. For there was between these two, both shining with Divine light, a wide difference in age, not merely in years, but in soul-growth. W. T. Stead at fifty was a

boy, a glorious youth, an impetuous, spontaneous child of Nature, full of hope, trust, generous out-giving altruism. Abdul Baha was the wise seer, his eyes ever fixed on the guiding star, and the experiences of many pasts stored up in his soul's memory. "Trailing clouds of heavenly radiance" he had come to earth, and still they shone about him for those who had eyes to see, and gave him what Algernon Blackwood has described as "the indefinable, mysterious charm of an old soul."

"I have preached Bahai doctrine, but I have added to it a truth which Baha Ullah failed to give the world," said W. T. Stead eagerly, and blissfully regardless of the somewhat delicate ground on which he was venturing in his walking boots.

"What truth is *that*!" inquired Abdul Baha, alert, and, it must be admitted, somewhat surprised.

"The truth of actual present communication between dwellers on earth and our loved ones who have passed on to the other side."

Abdul Baha replied that he taught and believed absolutely and literally in the communion of saints, but to teach the expediency of seeking communication in séances he regarded as unwise.

"You make no provision, then, for the poor doubting Thomases<sup>1</sup>," rejoined Mr. Stead, "those longing for evidence, for proof, for consolation. Julia's Bureau<sup>2</sup>, dedicated to St. Thomas, opens a way for this sad and numerous company to belief in God, the soul, and immortality."

Abdul Baha, with infinite gentleness, explained that in [91] his opinion the average man needed all his energies concentrated on an actively holy life, and a danger lay in emphasising too much the unseen world around him, though he himself was vividly conscious of the reality of the Unseen, and knew as an experienced fact that "all religions are based on inspiration from the Unseen."

"You have this personal experience," W. T. Stead took him up quickly, "but see how, like the priest of all ages, you would keep the pearl of great price in your own hands, instead of giving it freely to all the people. To the poor you allow no access to truth except through certain prescribed channels."

"Meat is for strong men, not babes," replied Abdul Baha. "Christ said there were many things He could tell, 'but ye cannot bear them now.' "

The wise old eyes regarded his accuser with sympathy and affection. There were things, perhaps, aspects of truth he had attained, which few of his own hearers could have borne. You cannot pour more wine into a goblet than it will hold. But it was not for himself that W. T. Stead had taken up the cudgels, and this Abdul Baha felt instinctively, recognising in his visitor one whose very reason of being was love for his fellow men. He nodded his head in quick understanding as Stead explained that he himself had never been a Thomas; with him it was a case of adding knowledge to faith. But with many better men than he it was the reverse. They were unable to believe in any truth until it had been evidentially demonstrated; knowledge must precede faith. hence the value of spiritualism and all psychic research. A great feature in the Founder of Christianity was His recognition of the necessity of providing for these seekers after truth. He gave them miracles; He showed them [92] materialised spirit forms after the change called death, His own and others, Moses and Elias.

Abdul Baha listened with absorbed interest, without, however, letting go of his point, i.e. the danger of seeking your spiritual nourishment in psychic experiences rather than a holy life.

#### *Eastern and Western Style; English Justice*

It was interesting to note in this conversation the temperamental gulf between the East and the West. The Eastern, it would appear, lives for the most part in conscious awareness of the Unseen, and never doubts the survival and continuity of the soul. The Western has rarely any such inherent consciousness. He is, unless of Gaelic race, not a mystic, but temperamentally a materialist, even his religion tending always in this direction. His moral code guides his life, and with the English race at least, Abdul Baha affirmed, it proves a very good code too. "The justest rule in the world is that of the English, wherever you find them,"

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas in the New Testament, doubts in Jesus' survival of the crucifixion and has to be given a tangible experience to convince him.

<sup>2</sup> Mr Stead set up "Julia's Bureau", a séance circle that met each morning. "On April 24th I opened a Bureau in London for the purpose of attempting to bridge the abyss between the Two Worlds. It is established in my old office at Mowbray House, Norfolk Street, London, and is under the direct control of the Friend on the Other Side who, for the last fifteen years, has been urging me to allow her the opportunity of making good her words."

he repeated with emphasis.

### ***Universal Brotherhood; Universal Language***

His favourite theme was the universal brotherhood of mankind and the various means by which this ideal goal might be attained, one of the fundamental preliminaries being a universal language. He was strongly in favour of each people retaining their own tongue<sup>3</sup>, and in perfect accord with Mistral, the poet of Provence, in saying that the soul of a people lies deeply embedded in their language. Take away that, and you destroy their past, their noblest traditions, the faith of their fathers, their soul. But he advocated for all a second language, constructed on a broad and simplified basis; he did not regard Esperanto as quite meeting the demand, though welcoming it as an excellent beginning in the right direction. Once given a [93] common tongue, Abdul Baha maintained, the dangers of war would be reduced to a minimum. Only let people speak one with another, face to face, heart to heart, and the great walls of ignorance and misunderstanding fall down like the walls of Jericho.

### ***Universal Religion***

He taught also a universal religion, where in the same Temple all the children of men might meet and worship the Father of all, while yet retaining their own particular Prophet by whom they had been led to the Father. To the representatives of each faith he gave an individual message applying specially to their need.

### ***Putting Truth into Practice - Theosophist Asks***

Some leading Theosophists came greeting him as master; to them he preached a practical living of the noble truths to which they professed to have attained:

"To know the Truth, to have attained knowledge, is good, but it is only the first step, it is not enough. The only thing that avails for the soul's growth, is to *live* the truth. Of what use is it that we know for a fact there are ten thousand people cold and hungry if we do not feed and warm them? To know of the right road to the mountain top if we do not walk in it? To know there are bad laws if we do not mend them? Or to know Divine truths concerning God if we do not listen and obey His voice?"

"Granting that I know the truth," one of his listeners asked in reply, "how am I to acquire the right spirit and incentive to live this life?"

Abdul Baha answered: "Faith in God will create in you that spirit and incentive. But by faith must be understood the real, living, active faith. There are three kinds of faith. First, there is the faith of tradition, of the accident of birth; you are born in a Mahomedan home, you are Muslim; if in a Christian home, you are Christian; [94] and so on. This faith is of a very weak, unstable quality; it does not touch the soul. Next, there is the faith which springs from a mental conviction, a personal perception of the truth; you *know* God is, therefore you believe. But neither does this faith touch the soul, nor make it grow and bear fruit. Only one kind of faith can do this. It is as though there were a lamp which these of the first class believe to exist merely on the report of others; the second class on the evidence of their own eyes, though seen only from a distance; but the third class of persons believe in it, because, having approach near the lamp, they have become so illuminated by the rays, and warmed through and through by the heat, that they are enabled to give out to others light and love, manifesting God. This alone is the real faith."

### ***Equality of Religion - Theosophist Asks***

Another Theosophist asked: "Does the Master consider all religions equally efficacious, all the great Teachers equally Divine?"

"To this Abdul Baha replied:

"There is but one God, and all the great Teachers and Prophets are sent forth into the world by Him, but all have not an equal amount of truth. They are like the various branches growing on one tree. Some are great branches bearing much fruit and many leaves, others are far smaller and less important, yet all, even the smallest and weakest branch, draw life from the same great stem and root. That stem is God. But no man can say, for instance, that the branch of Mahomet can be compared to that of Jesus Christ, that most vital of the branches on the tree of life, when we clear away the dogma with which the Christian

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<sup>3</sup> Perhaps what was really meant, was that any adoption of a universal language as the primary tongue has to be a fully voluntary wish by the people and not something imposed.

Churches and sects have encrusted it, and go back to the divine Teacher Himself<sup>4</sup>."

"The religion of Christianity *was* the best and most [95] enlightened in the world. The Christian teaching was illumined by the Divine Sun of Truth; therefore its followers were taught to love all men as brothers; to fear nothing, not even death; and to forget their own selfish interests in striving for the greater good of humanity. If the followers of the Lord Christ had continued to carry out these principles with steadfast faithfulness there would have been no need of a renewal of the Christian message, no necessity for a re-awakening of his people, inasmuch as a great and glorious civilisation would now be ruling the world, and the kingdom of heaven would have come on earth. But men turned away their faces from following the Divinely illumined precepts of their Master, and the coldness of winter fell upon the hearts of men. For as the body of man depends for life on the rays of the sun, so cannot the Celestial Virtues grow in the soul of man without the radiance of the Sun of Truth."

### ***Vegetarianism - A Theosophist Asks; The Hindoo and the Glass of Water; Simple Diet***

Another Theosophist questioned him closely concerning diet, whether, in his opinion, it was right to abstain from all animal food. He replied that though he hoped for the time when we should no longer kill the animals in order to sustain our own life, yet the law that each kingdom, animal, vegetable, and mineral, drew its substance from the others, was God's law for this world, which we cannot escape if we would. He then told a story of a Hindoo<sup>5</sup> who came to him one day, his ears and nose stopped up with cotton wool lest he should be the cause of death to some small insect or microbe. While they were talking the Hindoo asked for a glass of water. When he had drunk half the amount, Abdul Baha sent for a microscope and showed him the multitude of living organisms the [96] water contained. The Hindoo left minus his cotton wool.

"We should give our bodies a healthy, simple diet, just enough to keep them for good service - no more; to think too much of what we shall or shall not eat is making too much of the material," he concluded.

#### *Healing through Spiritual and Material Means*

This subject led on to the question whether he thought that the mind ought to be able to control and heal the body.

"Yes," Abdul Baha answered, "when the complaint is mental in its cause and source. Many diseases springing from inside the body" (I give the interpreter's exact words) "have a mental origin. These can be best healed by mind cure. But purely physical ills, such as a broken bone or a wound from a weapon, must be healed by physical remedies. God gives us such remedies in the natural world, even as He supplies our physical needs by physical means. You suffer hunger, you take food. You suffer cold, you put on warm clothes. You do not use a mental treatment for ills of the body that are not caused by the mind. Still, there is no doubt the body and the mind act and react, the one on the other, and the mind can greatly aid and modify even the ills that are purely of a physical and outside origin."

### ***Equality of Women and Suffrage; The Story of Tahirih***

#### *Equality*

To women, especially those working for the uplifting of their sex and the redemption of the children, Abdul Baha had a special message. "Sixty years ago," said he, "Baha Ullah taught the perfect equality of the sexes, essential difference in sphere, in point of view and service to their joint humanity, but each like two pillars supporting the arch of life, the necessary complement one of the other. What absurdity, then, to talk of superiority or [97] inferiority, and what folly to base life on such a fallacy! It is as though a man tried to run a race with one leg tied up and crippled. So the race, with one half crushed and undeveloped, halts and is unable to progress."

#### *Education of Women*

The education of women he regarded as of paramount importance, so much so that, should the family funds permit only half the children being well educated, the girls, declared Abdul Baha, should come first, as being the trainers of the race. "No nation," he said, "ever advances beyond the point of progress to

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<sup>4</sup> The gist being said here, would be that, whilst Muhammad and Jesus as persons were equal, the religions they brought were different, with Christianity being focussed simply on the timeless essence of spiritual teaching, which, if carried out with perfection, would have engendered the necessary practical actions for each age and nothing else would have been needed. Islam had all these things plus a temporal element that would in time need renewal.

<sup>5</sup> Perhaps a Jain.

which its women have attained; the two legs belong to the one body. Or," he added, "one may think of humanity as a bird which soars into the height by means of two wings, the male wing and the female wing. If one of these two wings be fettered humankind can make no real progress upwards. As long as woman is prevented from attaining her highest possible, so long will man be unable to attain the greatness that might be his."<sup>6</sup>

#### *Women in Persia*

It is no wonder that the gospel of Baha Ullah and his son found small favour with the Mahommedan Persians of their day, whose womankind were degraded to the level of slavery, their bodies not their own, their minds kept as far as possible in the darkest ignorance, and the very existence of their souls considered a debatable point.

#### *Political Vote for Women - Suffrage Leader Asks*

Asked by a leader of one of the Women's Suffrage Societies whether he approved of the political vote for women, Abdul Baha replied earnestly:

"Yes, yes, of course I do. In all questions which concern the welfare of a nation, is not the woman's view as important as the man's, if one would get a just and true consideration of all sides of that question? Therefore I am in favour of votes for women on every subject. This great woman's movement which is stirring and vibrating <sup>[98]</sup> all round the whole world is a sign of spirit awakening; even in Persia they stir, they awake, and many have become Bahaists and are freed from the old chains.

#### ***The Story of Tahirih***

That one who first awoke them, who gave her life for this noble cause, was Qurratu'l'Ain. Blessed is she among women!"

#### *Tahirih Abdu'l-Baha's Mother Heroine and Living Link to Youth*

One day at my earnest request he told me her story. Alas, I cannot give it straight from the mint, for it had to pass through the interpreter and again through my imperfect notes and reconstruction. One thing was evident from the light in his eyes as he spoke of her, Qurratu'l'Ain had been the Madonna of his boyhood. She had been to him what *Stella Maris*<sup>7</sup> is to the Brittany fishermen. She was the living link of his youth with the earliest steps of the Bahai movement, for she, like his father, had first received the light from the Bab, the prophet precursor of Baha Ullah. After the martyrdom of the Bab, Qurratu'l'Ain had followed Baha Ullah until she too was martyred for the cause. The story of his remarkable countrywoman was one Abdul Baha loved to tell to English and American women, for, placing them in the vanguard of civilisation, he felt assured they must rejoice to claim as a sister this first Persian feminist and courageous pioneer. In his simplicity Abdul Baha could not conceive of women in these enlightened countries who might be anti-suffragists and anti-feminists, and we forbore to lower his high ideal of Englishwomen.

#### *Her Upbringing and Scholarship*

Strange to say, this Persian woman, who first preached the Bahaist gospel of woman's emancipation and equality of the sexes, was the wife of a Mahommedan priest. There are some plants of such forceful vitality they will flourish in a dungeon and push up a stone slab to reach the light. Even before her marriage Qurratu'l'Ain had achieved <sup>[99]</sup> a good deal for the veiled and purdahed daughter of a Mahommedan priest, for her father also was of this exclusive order, though fortunately for her of a large and easy-going disposition, very rare in men of his calling. Seeing his child was not only possessed of great beauty, but of a quite unusual intelligence, impossible to hold down in the narrow groove allotted to women, he permitted her great concessions in respect to books and teachers, with the result that she became a scholar of no mean order and a writer of verse showing a great poetic gift.

#### *Encounters the Call of the Bab*

She was twenty-eight and the mother of two children when that happened which changed the world for Qurratu'l'Ain. In her heart she had always rebelled against the subjection of women, believing, however, as her religion taught, that this evil condition was the will of Allah, she stifled the protesting voice within her

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<sup>6</sup> Whilst there are various hints that the stories in this text are from England, such as references to London and Englishmen, this particular saying, found in Paris Talks, and the reference to Brittany in France just below, suggest perhaps that some stories such as the one about Tahirih, may have been told in France.

<sup>7</sup> *Stella Maris* ("Star of the Sea") - a title used for Mary the Mother of Jesus, emphasising her role as a sign of hope and guiding star for Christians, especially gentiles, whom the Old Testament Israelites metaphorically referred to as the sea.

and submitted in silence.

But one memorable day, while staying with relations at Kerbela, she heard a new message from Allah. From behind a curtained window overlooking the courtyard Qurratu'l'Ain listened to a voice. Who the speaker was she did not know, but he was addressing a crowd of men who sat in a circle round him listening intently.

His mission was, he declared, not only to Persia, but to all the world, proclaiming the universal brotherhood of man; the unity of all religions, having as one centre God the Father of all; and the absolute equality of the sexes, sons and daughters alike of God. "Religion," said this new teacher, "must evolve with the needs of man, the message of Truth can never be final, the esoteric law alone being eternal, the exoteric law changeable and mutable even as man himself."

Behind her barred window Qurratu'l'Ain felt her soul stir, [100] and, like a winged creature emerging from the chrysalis, her spirit shook off the old bonds and fetters and came forth into the light, conscious of her Divine nature and the wings which could bear her to Heaven.

She knew beyond doubt this message was from Allah, for he brought the water of Life for which her soul had so long been athirst, he opened the doors of her dim prison-house; and she rose up and knew herself free in a world which might be flooded with beauty and joy if only men would receive the truth. No more war, no more race-hatred, no more sex slavery and oppression. Woman had been created and ordained by Allah to be free; man only had willed it otherwise for his own lust, to the irreparable injury of the children as well as the mother.

#### *Persecution and Growth*

This was the message of Mirza Muhammed Ali, called by his followers the Bab, or the Gate, for it was he to whom Qurratu'l'Ain had listened that day at Kerbala. He had commenced his mission about the year 1844. From the first his bitterest foes had, naturally, been the all-powerful priests of Islam, but the disciples of the Bab increased only the more in number and fervour with persecution. "By the martyr's blood the tree must be watered before it can grow strong," said the Bab.

#### *Her Uncle a Babi Enlightens Her*

Through one of her uncles, who had become a follower, Qurratu'l'Ain learnt more of the new religion and held a conversation with the Bab<sup>8</sup>. He discerned in her a rare spirit to aid him in his work by carrying the gospel to her downtrodden sisters. He handed her the torch, and joyfully she accepted the task, for it was Allah Himself who had called her.

#### *Refuses to Accept Husband's Arbitrary Rule; Divorce*

It did not occur to her at first that a teaching of such lofty beauty could excite wrath and bitterness, but she had a rude awakening on her return to her husband's [101] house at Quaswin. Hitherto Muhammed had found Qurratu'l'Ain a model wife. In spite of her quite unnecessary intellectual gifts, she had shown herself always submissive and obedient to his will. But now here was a lamentable change. No longer was the approval of her lord and master the touchstone of all her actions, the final appeal in all questions of right and wrong. Allah, His Spirit as revealed in her own heart, was the supreme court to which she now appealed, just as though a mere "female woman" could have direct access to the Highest, even as a God-created male! The soul of the priestly husband was filled with righteous indignation. Muhammed had of course heard of the mad Bab and his seditious teachings, but little had he thought to come up against him in his own well-ordered home. The poor man was beside himself with wrath and impotence. For his wife, instead of showing, as formerly, repentance and humility when reprimanded for her errors, became only the more earnest in upholding them, and even tried to convert him to the monstrous doctrines of the Bab. He silenced her sternly, and gave her the choice between resuming her right mind as an orthodox Mahomedan wife and restoration to his favour, and the disgrace of divorce, which would involve separation from her beloved children.

It was a terrible struggle, but she dared not disregard the voice of Allah. Muhammed divorced her, and being a consistent priest he could not possibly do otherwise with the wife who openly dared to defy and disobey both himself and the Prophet.

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<sup>8</sup> Although this may suggest face-to-face with speech, a conversation can also be held by letter.

Qurratu'l'Ain returned to her easy-going father, who appears to have felt a secret sympathy and admiration for the offender though obliged to keep it to himself, all Babis being under suspicion and Qurratu'l'Ain under detention in his house. After a [102] time, a fresh persecution breaking out, she escaped one night, and scaling the city wall joined the camp of the Babis under Baha Ullah. One day it was reported that the leader lay dangerously ill in his tent, whereupon Qurratu'l'Ain flung aside her veil, proclaiming to all that the trumpet had sounded and the dead must arise - the dead soul of woman. The veil, like the grave-clothes, must be cast aside, as she cast aside hers now. And to the scandal of many, even among the enlightened Bahaists, she walked unveiled into the tent of Baha Ullah, and there nursed and tended him till he was restored to health. She was only putting principles into practice, but that is always the most startling and unexpected thing to do. Everywhere she preached, both men and women were drawn to her, and for a time the authorities were afraid to interfere.

#### *Arrested and Incarcerated*

A woman who possessed such uncanny powers they felt it wiser to let alone; but at last, goaded to action by the indignant priesthood, they arrested her. The Governor, forced to decide her fate, placed her in his own house, and here she promptly proceeded to convert his family and household. Her eloquence and zeal were irresistible, but again the priests pursued her, and insisted this time that she should be incarcerated in a foul and dark dungeon. Qurratu'l'Ain accepted whatever befell her with perfect serenity. "The thought of death can but give serenity when it is known to be the Gate of Life." From this time till the day of her death two years later little is known except through vague rumours.

#### *Martyrdom*

It was said that hardened ruffians, sent to her cell to torture and dispatch her, came out declaring they could not do this thing, they dare not lay hands on such an one. Others left her, tears streaming from eyes unknown to weep, saying she spoke words to [103] their souls which changed all things for them from that day forth.

At last the people clamoured so loudly for their beloved lady's release, it was decided to let her out of prison and do away with her by stealth. She was conveyed to an empty pavillion and told to await her friends. The friend she awaited she knew well to be Death, and that friend she was ready to meet with joy, knowing her task was finished. She had handed the torch to her Persian sisters, and saw with the eye of faith the day when they would shake off their shackles and stand up free human beings, rejoicing instead of deploring that Allah had decreed them to be women.

The new day was dawning in the deserted garden when a negro, hired for the purpose at the price of his own life, crept up to the quiet pavilion. He kept his eyes averted and cotton wool in his ears, lest the sound of that voice which had awakened so many souls should cast its spell over him. In his hand he held a long scarf. With fierce rapidity he accomplished the deed, then fled, trembling at the remembrance of that shining face. "But being dead she yet speaketh, for death had no dominion over her."

#### ***Reincarnation***

One of the most frequent subjects on which Abdul Baha was questioned was that of reincarnation. In the sense of the same ego being educated and evolved through many lives he may be said to hold this doctrine, but he gave clearly as his own belief that we are here as human beings on this earth for the first and last time. When asked his reason for this belief, he answered:

"We have grown up step by step, always to a state in advance of the last. God's processes are never retrogressive. No butterfly goes back into the chrysalis: [104] constant change, never a repetition, is the fundamental law. So with what comes after this life. Here we are subject to the conditions of matter; after this will succeed life on the mental plane, a life freed from this material body. But according to the life we have lived here depend the conditions of life on that next plane. What we sow here, that we reap there. Even though on leaving this body we enter upon a life of the spirit, the conditions of that spirit-life must depend upon the degree of development to which the spirit has attained."

#### ***Conditions of the Next Life, Communication Limited***

When asked what were his ideas as to the conditions of the next life, and whether we should be reunited to those we had loved on earth, Abdul Baha replied:

"Love, that potent magnet, will surely re-unite all those whom physical death has parted. But it must be remembered that we can only be in perfect touch with those on the same plane of development as

ourselves. It is so here, but we are not so acutely conscious of it now as we shall be. You can understand perfectly those below you, but not those in advance of you, though *they* can come down to you. It is the same law as we find in this world.

"The mineral kingdom is distinct in its conditions from the vegetable. It is impossible for the mineral to comprehend the powers of the vegetable, which grows and changes from a seed into a flower or tree, drawing its nutriment from earth and air and water. So, again, it is impossible for the vegetable to conceive of the kingdom above it, the animal whose powers and senses so entirely transcend its own. Equally, the animal can never comprehend the working of man's brain. For man alone of all the animals is not governed by the conditions in which he finds himself. he has no wings, but he does not submit himself to this [105] fact; he makes wings and conquers the air. He has no fins, but he conquers the sea. He conquers the night by creating for himself light; the cold by making heat; his limited senses by supplementing and extending them. He assails Heaven itself that he may rise to God, his Father and Creator. To the animals other than man, the attainments of man are inconceivable, just as inconceivable as the next plane above and beyond this is now inconceivable to us. For there we shall find new powers, new senses, as far transcending those we now have as these transcend the powers of those on the planes below us."

### ***Forgiveness and Mercy***

Someone observed that since most of us make but a sorry business of life, our sins and shortcomings being many and our good deeds few, it would be but a sad plane, that one which comes next in order. Abdul Baha looked at the speaker - his whole face lit as though for a moment he saw beyond the mists of earth into that future as he answered:

"It might be so if we were not in the Hands of the great Father who is perfect love and endless mercy. The best among us will need that grace and mercy, and will find it joyfully awaiting him. God judges not as we judge; He looks at the intentions of the heart. Also His punishment is always to cure, to redeem, to educate, so that we may become radiant sons of God."

### ***Seeing This World from the Next***

He was asked whether he thought those on the Other Side were able to see what happened to those they love still on earth.

To this he replied: "They see all as it affects the spirit. A great joy, a great sorrow, a sin, or a good deed: as these things darken or cloud the soul, or cause it to rise into greater light, so they see every earth event that touches you for good or ill, reflected in your soul. That is the [106] meaning of 'the angels who rejoice over one sinner who repents.' "

### ***Abdu'l-Baha's Station and Mission***

Concerning himself and his own mission Abdul Baha was very explicit. Some people came to him asking if he were not a reincarnation of the Christ. He laughed at the question in his kindly, wise way: "No, no, no," he answered emphatically. "No Christ - no prophet - Baha Ullah was prophet. I, his son, am only Servant of the Glory - like you and you also," he turned to another; "servant, not Lord!"

#### *Zoroastrians Make Him Their Head; the Garland*

A party of Zoroastrians came to him saying he was that One for whom they had been waiting, the Teacher, the Light. They hailed him as a reincarnation of Zoroaster. He received them with his usual kindly courtesy, and answered their philosophic and religious questions to their satisfaction; but when the chief representative present insisted on performing a kind of ceremony which he declared proclaimed Abdul Baha as Head Master of their religion, and proceeded to hang a symbolic garland of roses round his neck, the "Servant of the Glory" remonstrated in English with all the emphasis at his disposal, for he had no language in common with these gentlemen.

"Enough, enough," he said, waving them aside and hastening to remove the garland. "No Zoroaster!" But at their earnest entreaty that he would at least accept and wear their flowers, he promised, lest their feelings should be hurt, that he would do so later.

#### *Weariness at Remonstrating*

To a young Parsee who spoke with him in his own tongue he confessed that the good people who insisted on his being Christ, or Zoroaster, or some other deity or semi-deity, tried him sorely. He was weary of assuring them, so he said, that he was nothing of the sort. But they [107] seemed to think that a false

modesty, rather than a perfect sincerity, actuated his remonstrances and persistent repudiation of the exalted position to which they would force him to mount.

### ***Universal Language***

Among other positive teachings for the conduct of life he enjoined the adoption of a universal language to be taught in all schools; the exercise of some profession, trade, art, or definite occupation to be compulsory for every man and woman; the organised provision of work for all; the care of the children, and the duty of every adult, whether married or single, man or woman, to take their share in this service to the human family, by all making themselves responsible for at least one child.

### ***Prohibitions***

Among the prohibitions of the Bahaist teachings are a priesthood set apart from the laity or living in seclusion, slavery in any form, cruelty to animals, gambling, and taking either alcohol or drugs.

### ***Foretelling the Calamity of War***

#### *Insight and Preparing People*

Abdul Baha's insight pierced not only to the heart of the life he then saw around him, but with the seer's wisdom he beheld the great calamity so soon to come upon the world, and sought to prepare his hearers so that they might play their part, whether as nations or as individual members of nations, with true understanding of the great issues at stake when the ordeal came.

#### *In California Prophecy*

In October, 1912, while travelling in California, Abdul Baha uttered the following words of prophecy:

"We are on the eve of the Battle of Armageddon, referred to in the 16th chapter of Revelation, when only a spark will set aflame the whole of Europe. The social unrest in all countries, the growing religious scepticism prophesied as antecedent to the millennium, will set aflame [108] the whole of Europe, as is prophesied in the 1st of Daniel and in the Book of John. Before 1917 kingdoms will fall and cataclysms will rock the earth."

#### *On America*

Speaking of the American part in the coming conflict he said:

"May you serve the brotherhood of mankind.

May you come to the help of the afflicted.

May you be nurses for the sick.

May you be a refuge for the homeless refugees.

May you be wells of healing to the broken-hearted."

#### *In Paris Prophecy*

In Paris also he prophesied in 1912 of the things that were already at the gate, though no sign even of a man's hand had yet appeared on the horizon<sup>9</sup>.

"Set your faces steadily towards the Light of the World," he cried, like a second Baptist. "Terrible miseries have been brought to numberless homes, breaking the hearts of myriads of men and women. How many widows mourn their husbands! How many orphaned children are crying for their dead fathers! How many mothers weep for their slain sons! In this day, I ask for you all, that the consolations of God may encompass you, that your hearts may become radiant, that your eyes may be illumined by perceiving the sign of God, that your ears may be unstopped so that you may hear the Anthems of Heaven, that your faces may be set aglow with the shining Light of the Word of God. For this is the Radiant Century, the time when deeds must take the place of words. Blessed is that soul which does not attach itself to transient conditions and comfortable things, but rather seeks to grasp with a firm hold the purity, nobility, and splendour of that Kingdom which endures from everlasting to everlasting. Turning your eyes from the horrors of this dark world, look upward and heavenward and you [109] shall behold Light upon Light stretching on from Eternity to Eternity."

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<sup>9</sup> After years of blue sky, a man's hand of cloud arising before a swirling great black storm fills the sky - a reference to 1 Kings 18:44 in the Bible.

### *In Paris, Its Future*

On another occasion, gazing out upon Paris, where he had seen such approaching woe and desolation, he had another vision:

"Behold I bring you glad and joyful tidings. Paris will become a garden of roses. The fame of their fragrance and beauty will be spread in all lands. When I think of Paris in the future I seem to see her bathed in the Light of the Holy Spirit. Verily the day is dawning when France will receive her illumination, and the goodness and mercy of God will be visible to every living creature. With loving care and much thought I examined the soil and found it to be very good, for the seed of God's love has been sown in this ground and I can see the new growth of Spirituality."

### *During the War on Mount Carmel*

During the anxious years of the Great War which were so soon to follow, Abdul Baha dwelt in retirement on Mount Carmel, following with poignant interest and sympathy the march of events, as news poured in from various sources. First, bewildering contradictory reports; then incredible but, alas, amply confirmed facts of massacres, atrocities on defenceless prisoners, civilians, including women and children, as the invading German hordes swept over France and Belgium, destroying and devastating even as he had foreseen two years before, to be followed by the engulfing of one country after another in the horrors of War. His soul was torn with pity and grief for all the sufferers, the victims of the men who make wars, of whatever nation. How far away seemed that ideal of brotherhood for the human family! But still he continued to <sup>[110]</sup> preach it daily to the people who gathered round him, belonging to the various communities of that neighbourhood, Druses, Arabs, Turks, Kurds, Jews, Christians, while to all the poor and destitute he was 'Father,' dispensing from his slender means food, clothes, medicines, and small sums of money every week.

### *British Approach Haifa; General Allenby*

When the British were approaching he bade his people have no fear - they were their deliverers, and their guns would but signal the freeing from the Turkish yoke. It was truly foretold. When General Allenby swept up the coast from Egypt, the cities of Acre and Haifa were taken over without any loss of life, the guns firing far overhead, and General Allenby, who had received instructions from the Government at home to ensure the comfort and safety of the revered Bahai leader, himself paid his respects and sought the counsel of Abdul Baha.

### *People Come for Advice*

When Zionists arrived in their Promised Land they too came to him for advice, and men of all nations and creeds went to the prophet of Mount Carmel, feeling he had something to give them, for his judgment was based on a rare and penetrating wisdom which, though not of this world, threw a clear illuminating light on the affairs of men, making always for a better understanding and more far-seeing eye on results.

### *Knighthood*

The services Abbas Effendi had rendered so unostentatiously were recognised after the War by the Order of K.B.E. from King George. As a token of good will and kindly feeling this warmed his heart, as a basket of peaches from the Royal gardens would have probably equally done. One cannot help feeling, however, there is something strangely incongruous in knighting a prophet, who is already Master of such an order as "Servants of the Glory," the only star that meant anything to his old eyes <sup>[111]</sup> of wisdom being that followed by Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthazar.

### *Busy Life till the End; Fatigue; His Departure from this World*

Up to the last, he continued to lead his usual active, busy life, rising early, receiving strangers in his hospitable home, instructing his disciples, attending the noonday prayer at the Mosque, dictating answers to his numerous correspondents all over the world. But gradually he was failing, a great fatigue constantly overcame him, and his family recognised afterwards that during the last few weeks he must have been trying gently to prepare them for his coming departure, but so gently that at the time they did not understand the sorrow that was drawing nearer and nearer to that serenely happy home. Within two days of his death he continued to go to the Mosque and dispense to the poor; he received the Mufti of Haifa, and in the evening attended a meeting of friends in his audience chamber. Though losing strength he constantly assured his family that he was quite well, only tired, very tired, and when on Sunday night, with his daughter by his side, he lay back and closed his eyes, they thought him asleep, so calm and serene was the passing out of his spirit.

### *Burial*

His body was laid to rest in the Tomb of the Bab, which is enclosed in a garden on the heights of Mount Carmel. Ten thousand mourners of many races, religions, and tongues wended their way up the mountain in a long funeral procession, headed by the British High Commissioner, the Governor of Jerusalem, the chief officials of the Government, Consuls of various countries, priests of the Christian, Druse, Mahommedan, and Hebrew faiths, all met together to pay reverent homage to the Servant of the Glory; while the vast throng of people, great and small, rich and poor, with weeping and sorrowful lamentations, mourned as [112] members of one family the loss of their Father, Comforter, and Guide.

It was a fit closing scene to the life of Abdul Baha, who had devoted all his days to the ideal of a united human family.

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