

# above all barriers

the story of Louis G. Gregory



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## *About This Essay*

*He is like pure gold. This is why he is acceptable in any market, and is current in every country.*

—'Abdu'l-Bahá

When Louis G. Gregory died in 1951 Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, cabled: "Profoundly deplore grievous loss of dearly beloved noble-minded, goldenhearted Louis Gregory pride example Negro adherents Faith keenly feel loss one so loved admired trusted 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Deserves rank first Hand Cause his race. Rising Bahá'í generation on African continent will glory his memory emulate his example. . . ."

While this tribute to Louis G. Gregory's life was written primarily for the many Bahá'ís around the world who either knew him personally or had been influenced by his life, it is a story which inspires all men of good will. In dedicating his life completely to the service of all humanity, Louis G. Gregory gained the love and admiration of thousands of people of many races and

lands. In Central Africa, in Uganda, two schools founded by the Bahá'ís have been named for him. In the United States a permanent Bahá'í school, the Louis G. Gregory Bahá'í Institute, has been established in South Carolina.

### *About the Author*

Elsie Austin, who has written this moving tribute, is herself a distinguished person. She served as Cultural Attaché with the U.S. Department of State at Lagos, Nigeria, for several English and French speaking nations of West Africa. Prior to going to Africa, she served four years as executive director of the National Council of Negro Women; eight years on the national administrative board of the Bahá'í Faith in the United States (the National Spiritual Assembly); and was the first woman of her race to hold the office of Assistant Attorney General in Ohio. As a Bahá'í she has worked many years for world peace and order through the principles of the oneness of all mankind and the universality of religious truth.

## *Above All Barriers*

By Elsie Austin

**T**HE quality and beauty of the life of a godly man survive both time and death, because they have been multiplied in the lives of others. We know a man is good by the way he finds and inspires goodness in the lives of others. We know a man is great by the courage, the vision, and pure ambition he calls forth in the lives of others. This is the kind of goodness and greatness which crosses the oceans, climbs the mountains, bridges the great distances, and goes through the subtle barriers—because it passes from heart to heart.

Louis Gregory had this goodness and greatness. 'Abdu'l-Bahá said of him: "He is like pure gold. That is why he is acceptable in any market, and is current in every country."

The noble character and distinguished service of this much loved man made him achieve one of the highest spiritual stations in the Bahá'í Faith. The memory of his human personality is treasured by those

who saw and will never forget that radiant countenance, the dignity, the genuine courtesy, the kindness, the gentle humor, the sweetness of speech, and the spiritual dedication which illumined his person. The effects of his saintly life will bear endless fruit in the changed hearts, the uplifted spirits, the renewed courage, and the dedicated service he brought and is to bring in the lives which come under his influence.

Louis Gregory's story is an illustration of God's guidance to a receptive soul. His life did not begin in gentleness and shelter. He was born on June 6, 1874, in Charleston, South Carolina. Early in his time he learned what cruel pressures life could bring. The eager happy adventure of his childhood was marred by violence and hate when, on one terrible night, a hate inspired mob of white men seized and lynched his grandfather. The bitterness and distortion which might have developed from this experience were deflected by the prayers and teaching of his grandmother, whose life was miraculously spared by the mob. It was she who taught him constantly the need for love, pity, and prayer for those who are sick with the cancer of hate, so

Louis came to learn forgiveness and forbearance the hard way.

His young manhood was filled with hardship and need. Louis dreamed of education and higher things, and he learned to work and plan for the dream. There were long years of day and night work, of sacrifice, and of frugality before that proud moment came when he was able to graduate in June 1896, from Fisk University, one of the oldest Negro colleges in America. From Fisk he went to Washington, D.C., his nation's capital, and took up the study of law in Howard University. By 1902 he had completed the course and formed a partnership with a man who later became one of the first Negro judges of that city. Then came years of material success and achievement which earned for him recognition.

At this period of his life, two men had been attracted by his sincere and friendly personality and his serious mind. One was a Northern "Yankee" and the other was a Dixie Southerner. Louis' rare ability to draw people together had made friends of these potential enemies. Strangely enough it was the Southerner who first led Louis

Gregory to the Bahá'í Faith. The man was not himself a Bahá'í, but he discussed the principles of the Faith with Louis Gregory and, seeing his intense interest, said, "I think this is something you should know about." From this Louis sought his first Bahá'í meeting in 1908 and was soon in contact with some of the most ardent and effective early Bahá'í teachers in the United States. He eagerly attended the meetings held in the homes of Mr. and Mrs. J. H. Hannen and Mrs. Lua Getsinger. From the moment he began to investigate the Bahá'í principles and to learn of the teachings on the oneness of God and His prophets, the oneness of mankind, and the true purpose and meaning of religion, Louis Gregory exhibited an attitude of eagerness, of thorough and sustained study, reverence, and attraction. 'Abdu'l-Bahá often referred to him as a "Wooer of Truth." And as such he became one of the most faithful and informed Bahá'ís.

Now, some men falter when they perceive the summons of a Divine Truth. And some men avoid or defer the moment of complete dedication, fearing its price. But others, knowing when they have found the



highest altar of life, and felt "the Spirit's Breath," place all they are and hope to be upon its altar with a love which banishes reluctance and fear. Such a man was Louis Gregory. No man can estimate the inward victory which he achieved. Surrounded by the beckonings of material achievement, torn by the need for leadership among his own people, stirred by the groundswell of their rising protest against the discrimination and injustice that dogged their lives, and pressured by the demands and duties of his chosen profession and the ambitious course he had chartered for his life, Louis made that great choice which took him from a world of blackness or whiteness into a realm for all humanity. He turned his heart to Bahá'u'lláh, Prophet of a rising World Faith, and committed his life to the advancement of its teachings and standards.

After intense study of the teachings, Louis Gregory wrote to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the beloved Exemplar of its Teachings and Center of its Institutions, and supplicated permission for a pilgrimage to visit the Master, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá was called, and the holy shrines of the Faith in Haifa,

Palestine. In 1911 'Abdu'l-Bahá granted this permission, and Louis went with love, eagerness, and a radiant and receptive heart. The record of his visits and his talks with 'Abdu'l-Bahá and of his joyous spiritual experience in His presence and at the holy shrines was published in a booklet called *A Heavenly Vista*. In it he speaks with reverence of this first meeting with 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Ramleh, Egypt:

"Majesty and beauty are His adornments. Following a natural impulse, my knee was bent reverently before Him. Feeling Him bend over me, I knew He touched my head with his lips. He then raised me up and directed me to a seat."

During these talks upon spiritual subjects with the Master, it was only natural that Louis Gregory, an ardent lover of his people and a firm believer in the dignity and future of the black races, should have asked about them. He asked 'Abdu'l-Bahá what could be done to improve their condition and overcome the antagonism and hostility which surrounded them. 'Abdu'l-Bahá answered that the best means was to accept the Bahá'í Cause, as all differences would fade among the believers, and con-

fidence would develop between the races. He emphasized that the Bahá'í teachings would improve the condition of colored peoples because these teachings revealed the means of both material and spiritual progress. He emphasized the importance of the removal of hatreds and antagonisms from both races and warned that in them was great danger to both races. On one occasion Louis Gregory requested that the Master pray especially for the Africans. 'Abdu'l-Bahá replied, "I shall supplicate for them at the Throne of Abhá. You must be a leader to them. Guide them to the Truth."

On another occasion, Louis asked about the Egyptians and Ethiopians, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá said that they were once mighty peoples and that many of the arts of the ancients were lost to the present civilization.

Toward the end of that pilgrimage, 'Abdu'l-Bahá summoned Louis Gregory and Louisa Mathew, a white English pilgrim. He questioned them, and, to their surprise, expressed the wish that they should join their lives together. In deference to His wishes they were married, and he sent them forth as a symbol of the spiritual unity, cooperation, dignity in re-

relationships, and service He desired for the races of mankind. That marriage presented many challenges. It brought all the obstacles to understanding and amity and often cruel pressures. But it endured because the two souls it joined were ever guided and protected by a love beyond themselves and the pressures of the world. Theirs was a demonstration of the love which is prompted by the knowledge of God and reflected in the soul. They saw in each other the Beauty of God; and, clinging to this, they were sustained throughout the trials, the accidental conditions of life and the changes and chances of human experience.

There was no question but that Louis Gregory was given a spiritual mission during his pilgrimage. During the last days 'Abdu'l-Bahá said to Louis: "Go forth and speak the Cause of God. Visit the friends. Gladden their hearts. You will be the means of Guidance to many souls. The Divine Bounties will be with you. You are always on My mind and heart."

Later in one of His tablets to Louis Gregory, the Master seemed to summarize his mission: "I hope that thou mayest become the herald of the Kingdom;

become the means whereby the white and colored people shall close their eyes to racial differences and behold the reality of humanity: . . . Rely as much as thou canst upon the True One and be thou resigned to the Will of God, so that like unto a candle thou mayest become enkindled in the world of humanity and like unto a star thou mayest shine and gleam from the horizon of Reality and become the cause of the Guidance of both races."

From that period throughout the rest of his life Louis Gregory was a brilliant candle for the Faith. He gave forth both heat and light of the love of God. His service knew no barriers of race, nation, or language. He served in sickness and in health, through days of adversity and good fortune. The change and bestowal which came from his days of pilgrimage transfigured his life. 'Abdu'l-Bahá commented on this in a letter to friends in Stuttgart, Germany, who had written to tell the Master of their joy and appreciation of Louis' teaching services. 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote in His reply:

"Mr. Gregory, by visiting the Blessed Tomb, has received a new power and a new life. When he arrived at Stuttgart he

shone as a bright light in the meeting of the friends. Verily he has much advanced on this journey. He received another life and obtained another power. When he returned, Gregory was quite another Gregory. He had become a new creation. Reflect upon the grace of the Kingdom of Abhá and see how it enlightened such a person. It has made him spiritual and heavenly, and divine, and the manifestation of graces of the world of humanity. This man shall progress."

When Louis returned to Washington after his pilgrimage, he was given a happy reception by the American friends. 'Abdu'l-Bahá had written them: "Mr. Gregory is at present in great happiness. He will return to America very soon, and you, the white people, should then honor and welcome this shining colored sun in such a way that all the people will be astonished."

It was Louis who astonished the friends with his shining spirit and his complete dedication to the Faith. After his return, he traveled from city to city teaching the Faith, and it was apparent that he placed service to Bahá'u'lláh above all other interests in his life. The fame of his speeches on the Faith spread, and there was a great

demand for him as speaker before audiences of both races.

In 1912 'Abdu'l-Bahá fulfilled the cherished dream of the American Bahá'ís by visiting the United States and Canada. During that memorable visit He came to Washington, D. C., and Louis Gregory knew again the joy of being with his beloved Master. How eagerly he worked with the friends to arrange speaking engagements and appointments so that the outstanding organizations and leaders of Washington could have the privilege of meeting and hearing the great Bahá'í Exemplar of the Bahá'í Faith.

During that memorable Washington visit, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's love for Louis Gregory was demonstrated, and some of his most compelling lessons on the oneness of mankind were given. There was one occasion when the Master sent for Louis just an hour before the time for an important luncheon, at which distinguished officials and members of the diplomatic circles were to be presented to 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Louis arrived, and the Master sat and talked with him until His host came to take Him in the dining room. He rose and led the way.

However, when He reached the room where all the guests were seated, He looked around and immediately asked for Louis Gregory. Louis, meanwhile, not having been invited, had remained behind in one of the sitting rooms. 'Abdu'l-Bahá refused to have the luncheon start until Mr. Gregory had been seated at His right in a place of honor. He then electrified the already startled guests by giving one of His most wonderful talks on the unity of mankind.

On another occasion 'Abdu'l-Bahá had announced that He wished to give a Unity Feast for the friends. The Committee arranging for the affair had taken it to one of the city's most exclusive hotels, famed for its color bar. The colored friends, troubled by the prospect of insults and discriminatory treatment, decided not to attend. When 'Abdu'l-Bahá learned of this, He insisted that all the friends should attend. The banquet was held with all the friends, white and colored, seated side by side, in great happiness and without one unpleasant incident. At this banquet the Master showed great favor to Louis Gregory and indicated that he would achieve a great station in the Faith.



New courage and perspective appeared in all the Bahá'ís after 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit. And among those who seemed to reflect the fire of His love, none glowed more brightly than Louis Gregory. He became indeed a "herald" for amity and understanding among the peoples of all races. With other friends he worked untiringly for the planning of amity conferences in large cities. Many people still recall the impressive Race Amity Conference in Washington which Mrs. Parsons, an outstanding Bahá'í and social leader of that city, planned with Louis Gregory. To these conferences came many of the outstanding public figures and leaders of that period.

In all of this organization and committee work, Louis Gregory found time to teach and confirm new souls to the Faith. He traveled to all parts of the United States. On the western Coast during one season, three fourths of his talks on the Faith were given to audiences not of his race. In the South he was the first Bahá'í to open the doors of the colleges to talks on the Bahá'í Faith. He made such friends for the Faith in his presentation of its principles and teachings that both colored

and white colleges were opened to speakers by the mere mention of his name and his prior visits.

In 1922 he became one of the nine original members of the first National Assembly elected by the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada. He continued service with the National Bahá'í Assembly of his country for twenty-four years, working untiringly at its tasks and on its committees. At the annual conventions, his tall figure and radiant face were a familiar and cherished sight. He usually served as convention secretary. His contribution to the general consultation and deliberations of the delegates was respected and appreciated as deeply as he was loved. In 1941 he received from the assembled delegates the highest number of votes when they elected their National Assembly.

His administrative responsibilities on the national body were efficiently combined with his teaching services. He never lost touch with the friends and was always willing, during the increasingly taxing years, to go out to the communities and groups and help with their teaching activities. There he helped spread the message

of the World Faith and shared his deepened understanding and perspective with the friends.

At the Bahá'í summer schools, Louis' courses were always well attended by young and old. He was particularly loved at Green Acre Bahá'í School, where he had done so much in arranging summer amity conferences and other programs which brought liberal thinkers and leaders to the Bahá'í schools.

In the quiet atmosphere of Green Acre and the delightful little New England village of Eliot, Louis Gregory found time for reflection and writing. He wrote many interesting and effective articles and pamphlets on the Faith which were used by study groups and also as gift literature to those who seemed interested in learning about the Faith. Among these were "Bahá'í to Jew," "Awakening to Reality," "New Visions of the Human Unity," "The Oneness of the Human World," "The Search for Truth," and "Faith and the Man."

If the friends loved his articles, they cherished his letters which conveyed so delightfully his warm human interest and always some thoughtful and refreshing ap-

plication of the teachings. He seemed to get at the heart of the friend to whom he was writing and to address his words to that which deeply concerned the reader. How often he changed the perspective of the complainer about life and the criticizer of people! How often he shamed the gossip into true and constructive forbearance and understanding.

In 1946 serious illness sapped Louis Gregory's energies, and his health began to fail. He retired from the National Assembly service, but not from his lifetime of teaching and living the Faith. He seemed to grow more deeply spiritual and detached from earthly things. He rarely spoke about himself, but close friends who recall the last year of his life have mentioned the rare spiritual atmosphere that seemed to surround him. He seemed to be living in this world, but not of it.

Studying his life and his influence, one can see in them those patterns which stand out in the life of the sincere seeker of truth, and the great teacher. He had the gift of winning the heart. Often in the audiences to which he spoke, as Louis Gregory's clear convincing talks on the Faith

progressed, one saw the hostility melt into interest and admiring respect. He was not unconscious of the barriers. It was rather that he was so pure a channel for the spirit of the Word and had such implicit faith in its power to attract the soul that he drew people in before they could shut him out.

He presented Truth simply and clearly and used language to explain, never to confuse. There was, in his discussion, the ease and fluency which comes with a background of serious and sustained study and reflection on the Teachings.

Humility and modesty stood out in his personality. He was utterly lacking in vanity and self-consciousness. As he wrote in one of his letters to a friend: "I know it is all the Will and Power of 'Abdu'l-Bahá which brought success. Every day I ask 'Abdu'l-Bahá not to let me forget that I am dust, and to acknowledge my absolute nonexistence in that Court. The love of 'Abdu'l-Bahá is the sole magnet that renders life possible."

Louis Gregory died on July 30, 1951, and in death, even as in life, he brought the races together. There were expressions of love and inspiration which came from

all parts of the world. Everywhere he had come to be known as a true Bahá'í, a lover of mankind, and a devoted servant of his Lord. We can apply those beautiful words of the Master to him:

“O Ye Cohorts of God, if you observe that a soul has turned his face completely toward the Cause of God, his intention is centralized upon the penetration of the Word of God, he is serving the Cause day and night with utmost fidelity, no scent of selfishness is inhaled from his words and deeds, and no trace of egotism or prejudice is seen in his personality . . . know ye of a certainty that he is confirmed with the powers of the Kingdom . . .”

Upon this worthy soul the beloved Guardian of the Faith, Shoghi Effendi Rabbani, has seen fit to bestow the great honor which goes to those whose lives are dedicated to helping advance and protect the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh. Louis G. Gregory is now a Hand of the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh. May we ever honor his memory by emulating his example.

## *Some Bahá'í Books*

### **Bahá'í World Faith**

A comprehensive selection of the Bahá'í sacred Writings explaining the mission of the Prophets, the fulfillment of religious promises, the nature of the soul of man, practices and laws for the new age.

### **The Divine Art of Living**

Selected Bahá'í Writings on the qualities which characterize wholeness of living and the means to attain it through spiritual development.

### **Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era**

By J. E. Esslemont. A standard introductory text on the Bahá'í Faith, outlining its history and teachings.

### **The Renewal of Civilization**

By David Hofman. A brief account of the foundation and rise of the Bahá'í community, the practical nature of the Bahá'í teachings and the promise they contain.

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## *References to the Bahá'í Faith*

**“You hold in your organization the key that will settle all of our difficulties, real and imaginary.”**

**—Dr. George Washington Carver  
Director, Tuskegee Research Station,  
Christian Scholar**

**“I have . . . read several times the three extracts from Bahá'í writings on social regeneration. . . . they form an unanswerable argument and plea for the only way that the world can be made over. If we could put into effect this program, we should indeed have a new world order.”**

**—Dr. Herbert Adams Gibbons,  
Historian and Christian Scholar**

**“The Bahá'í movement is the greatest light that has come into the world since Jesus Christ.”**

**—Prof. Benjamin Jowett,  
Master of Balliol College, Oxford**