

'Abdu'l-Bahá's Love for the Sacrifices Made By the Poor and Lowly

By Susan Gammage ¹

He respected even the most humble contributions:

The following touching incident took place one day when we were seated at table with the Master.

A Persian friend arrived who had passed through `Ishqábád,. He presented a cotton handkerchief to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Who untied it, and saw therein a piece of dry black bread, and a shrivelled apple.

The friend exclaimed: "A poor Bahá'í workman came to me: `I hear thou goest into the presence of our Beloved. Nothing have I to send, but this my dinner. I pray thee offer it to Him with my loving devotion."

'Abdu'l-Bahá spread the poor handkerchief before Him, leaving His own luncheon untasted. He ate of the workman's dinner, broke pieces off the bread, and handed them to the assembled guests, saying: "Eat with me of this gift of humble love." (Lady Blomfield, *The Chosen Highway*, pp. 161-162)

Once, when I lived in Baghdad," He ['Abdul-Bahá] went on, "I was invited to the house of a poor thorn-picker. In Baghdad the heat is greater even than in Syria; and it was a very hot day. But I walked twelve miles to the thorn-picker's hut. Then his wife made a little cake out of some meal for Me and burnt it in cooking it, so that it was a black, hard lump. Still that was the best reception I ever attended." (The Diary of Juliet Thompson, p. 171)

Even the contribution of one small coin was important to 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

All the Bahá'ís in Iran loved and respected Haji Amin, and many wonderful stories are told about his sincerity and devotion. Once, when he was about to set off for the Holy Land, a very poor woman gave him a small coin to take with him. Haji Amin thanked her and put it in his pocket. As soon as he arrived at the home of 'Abdul-Bahá, he presented to Him the donations he had collected, as he always did. The Master would usually thank him and praise him for his untiring labours. Haji Amin's integrity was not to be questioned, and he had never made a mistake in his calculations. Indeed, it was not difficult for him to keep his accounts as he never had any money of his own. This time, however, to his utter astonishment, when 'Abdul-Bahá was presented with the money, He looked at Haji Amin kindly and said something was missing from the amount. Haji Amin left the Master's presences with much sadness, unable to understand what could have happened. He went to his room in tears and prostrated himself in prayer. As he did so, he felt a hard piece of metal under his knee. It was the small coin the poor woman had given him to take to the Holy Land as he was leaving. The coin had slipped through a

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hole in his pocket into the lining of his long coat. Haji Amin immediately took the coin and went to 'Abdul-Bahá. The Master showered His praises on him . He kissed the coin and said this was worth more than all the other donations because it had been given with the greatest sacrifice. (Gloria Faizi, Stories about Bahá'í Funds, pp. 47-48)

He knew people's circumstances, appreciated their sacrifices and wished they would have kept the money for themselves:

One day 'Abdu'l-Bahá learned that a lady had cut her lovely hair in order to contribute to the building of the House of Worship in Wilmette. He wrote to her with loving appreciation: 'On the one hand, I was deeply touched, for thou hadst sheared off those fair tresses of thine with the shears of detachment from this world and of self-sacrifice in the path of the Kingdom of God. And on the other, I was greatly pleased, for that dearly-beloved daughter hath evinced so great a spirit of self-sacrifice as to offer up so precious a part of her body in the pathway of the Cause of God. Hadst thou sought my opinion, I would in no wise have consented that thou shouldst shear off even a single thread of thy comely and wavy locks; nay, I myself would have contributed in thy name for the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár. This deed of thine is, however, an eloquent testimony to thy noble spirit of self-sacrifice.' (Annamarie Honnold, Vignettes from the Life of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 98, #92)

In the afternoon He called me. He kept me in the room a long, long time, seeing many others while I sat there. When He had dismissed them all, He came close to me and took my hand.

"There is a matter," He said, "about which I want to speak to you. The photographs of the portrait you painted of Me, you have offered them for the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár. I know your circumstances, Juliet. You have not complained to Me, you have said nothing, but I know them. I know your affairs are in confusion, that you have debts, that you have that house, that you have to take care of your mother. Now I want you to keep the money" (for the photographs) "for yourself. No, no; do not feel unhappy," (as I began to cry) "this is best. You must do exactly as I say. I will speak about this Myself to the believers. I will tell them," He laughed, "that is it My command."

I thanked Him brokenly. (The Diary of Juliet Thompson, p. 389)

He loved when the poor prayed for Him:

One day the Master, with one of His daughters, approached a native woman, dirty and almost savage-looking. Hers had been a hard life as the daughter of a desert chief. Though she was not a Bahá'í, she quite naturally loved the Master, who was so genuinely kind. Lingering a moment, she bowed and greeted the Master. Kindly He made reply and, somehow knowing her need, 'pressed a coin into her hand' as He passed by. Obviously, she was filled with appreciation.

One of the Master's daughters told an observer that this woman had, in that brief encounter, said to the Master that 'she would pray for Him', and graciously He had

thanked her. (Annamarie Honnold, Vignettes from the Life of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 80, #61)

When 'Abdu'l-Bahá was knighted by the British, He chose to drive by horse and carriage, with His faithful servant, instead of in the chauffeured car that was sent for Him:

'Abdu'l-Bahá consented to accept the knighthood – but He was not impressed with worldly honour or ceremony. Even a formality must be simplified. An elegant car was sent to bring Him to the Governor's residence, but the chauffeur did not find the Master at His home. People scurried in every direction to find Him. Suddenly He appeared '... alone, walking His kingly walk, with that simplicity of greatness which always enfolded Him.' Isfandíyár, His long-time faithful servant, stood near at hand. Many were the times when he had accompanied the Master on His labours of love. Now, suddenly, with this elegant car ready to convey his Master to the Governor, he felt sad and unneeded. Intuitively, 'Abdu'l-Bahá must have sensed this – He gave him a sign. Isfandíyár dashed off – the horse was harnessed, the carriage brought to the lower gate and the Master was driven to a side entrance of the garden of the Governor. Isfandíyár was joyous – he was needed even yet. Quietly, without pomp, 'Abbas Effendi arrived at the right time at the right place and did honour to those who would honour Him when He was made Sir 'Abdu'l-Bahá Abbas, K.B.E. – a title which He almost never used. (Annamarie Honnold, Vignettes from the Life of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, pp. 16-17, #17)

Here's a story that always moves me to tears! It's the story of Nettie Tobin, a poor woman whose husband had died the day before, choosing a rock which 'Abdu'l-Bahá used as the corner-stone for the temple in Wilmette:

The story of the dedication stone is interesting in its own right. When the Temple had been first proposed in 1903, a Persian Bahá'í, had sent a letter to the American Baha'is saying that "the glory and honor of the first stone is equivalent to all the stones and implements which will later be used there." This excited Nettie (Esther) Tobin, a loving, humble woman who earned a meager living as a seamstress. Praying that God would send her something she could offer as a gift, she went to a nearby construction site, told the foreman about the Temple, and asked if she could have an inexpensive building stone. The foreman liked her story and showed her a pile of broken limestone blocks that were no good for building and said she could take one. With the help of a neighbour, she wrapped her stone in a piece of carpet, tied on a clothesline and dragged it home. To get the stone to the Temple site, it was carried by hand on two different streetcars, dragged on the ground, and carried in a wheelbarrow. One of the streetcar conductors was not thrilled to have a rock on board, but finally allowed them to put it on the back platform. The last six blocks from the closest streetcar station were the most difficult. At first, Nettie, her brother Leo Leadroot, and Mirzá Mazlúm, an elderly Persian Bahá'í neighbour, tried to carry the stone, but after three blocks, they were exhausted. Corrine True and Cecelia Harrison had been waiting at the Temple site for them and finally went to look for them. Mirzá Mazlúm had three women put the stone on his and he

managed to stagger another half block before coming to the end of his endurance. The stone was left there overnight. Nettie came back the next morning with a homemade cart. Trying to load the stone into the cart by herself, she managed to break the handle of the cart and injured her wrist. A helpful fellow repaired her cart and helped her load the stone into it. With two blocks to go, Nettie managed to persuade the newsboy to help her get the cart to the western corner of the Temple land and onto the site, where the cart promptly collapsed into pieces. There, the stone stayed. People in other parts of the world, including 'Abdul-Bahá, sent stones for the Temple, but none ever arrived. So, on the day He broke the ground, only Nettie Tobin's contribution of the "stone which the builders refused" would be available to serve as the marker dedicated by 'Abdul-Bahá. (Earl Redman, 'Abdul-Bahá in Their Midst, p. 114-115)