At 48 West Tenth (memories of Juliet Thompson)

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Marzieh Gail
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Contents Chapter 2

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by Marzieh Gail

Whether or not General Tom Thumb (Barnum's midget, and at the start of his career twenty-five inches long, weighing in at fifteen pounds) ever owned the Greenwich Village brownstone where Juliet and Daisy (Marguerite Pumpelly Smyth) lived so many years, we do not know. At the time when we knew the place, Daisy was renting it from Romeyne Benjamin, brother of Dorothy Benjamin who married Enrico Caruso.

Like its fellows in the row, it was narrow and high, with black railings to either side of the front steps, other steps leading down to a long basement room, and a strip of garden in back. Inside, up from the front hall, narrow stairs hugged the wall on your right.

The old house, painted light blue when we last saw it, long after the inmates loved by us were gone, might well have been the wealthy midget's, as Juliet was inclined to believe: it was just such a place.

When Daisy asked 'Abdu'l-Bahá how to live, He said, "Be kind to everyone," and Daisy was. The house was a haven for a motley crowd. Here, Daisy's brother Raphael told me he had once, during the Depression, left his bed briefly in the night, and returned to find a sailor in it, complete with live parrot. Here, at one given time, in an upstairs room Dimitri Marianoff, Einstein's former son-in-law, who had become a Bahá'í, was writing a book on Táhirih, while Juliet was revising her I, Mary Magdalene on a lower floor and I, at ground level, refugeeing from the family apartment uptown, was finishing Persia and

the Victorians. Here Daisy, like Juliet a fine artist, sat among their many guests at the firesides. Usually inaccessibly vague, Daisy would from time to time utter a great truth. Once when her cat unsheathed its claws and raked delicate upholstery, Daisy spoke: "Cats are more fun than furniture," she said.

'Abdu'l-Bahá had been all over the house. His living presence had blessed it all. In a dark corner of Juliet's whispering old studio stood a fragile armchair of black oak--it would later be willed by her to Vincent Pleasant--surprisingly small, with a cord across it, none ever to sit in it again, the chair of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. He loved her studio room. He said it was eclectic, part oriental, part occidental, and that He would like to build a similar one.

Here, Juliet had read in manuscript the books of her friend and neighbour Kahlil Gibran. Here she had struggled with her love for Percy Grant. Here, by my time, we talked a little about the land in Chiriqui which (such is my memory of it) Lincoln had helped her father, Ambrose White Thompson, his close friend, to acquire. A rich tract of land in northern Panama it was, and Juliet believed that somewhere in Colombia, which then owned the area, a government building had burned down, and all the relevant documents about the property had gone up in flames.

After her father's death, Juliet and her mother were poor. Juliet could, of course, have married money. Many men sought, as they used to say, her hand. Two prominent Bahá'ís who proposed to her were John Bosch and Roy Wilhelm. Come to that, Mason, Admiral Remey's son, whom 'Abdu'l-Bahá wished her to marry, was not a poor man. Juliet told me that in those days Mason had grown a red beard, and as they sat together he would talk of the children they would have, and Juliet would visualize, floating in the air about her, the Remey babies, each with a small red beard.

Mostly, we discussed the progress or lack thereof of our Bahá'í community in New York and the nation at large, and one day we decided that what our Faith most needed in America was the qualities of George Townshend. Immediately, we determined to cable the Guardian and ask him to send us George Townshend--a pre-eminent Bahá'í who was the former Canon of St. Patrick's cathedral in Dublin and Archdeacon of Clonfert--to travel nation-wide and teach. Far from ignoring our doubtless brash suggestion, the Guardian at once replied, with a radiogram received 19 February 1948:

JULIET MARZIA 48 WEST 10TH STREET NEW YORK

REGRET TOWNSHEND'S EFFORTS DUBLIN VITALLY NEEDED

SIX YEAR PLAN LOVE SHOGHI.

'Abdu'l-Bahá teaches that we must never "belittle the thought of another" (Bahá'í Administration, p. 22), and although Shoghi Effendi was carrying the whole Bahá'í world on his back, he did not belittle ours, and he took the time to answer.

Once, when the powers that be were making life difficult for me in another city, Juliet wrote them a letter in my favour. To this, there was no reply. What status did Juliet have? She was only one, the Master said, that future queens would envy, only one who would be remembered long after the rest of us were gone and forgotten.

She was always a rebel. She did not hesitate to speak well of the Germans during World War I, and to exhibit the Kaiser's picture on her living room table. Something like setting up a statue of Herod in a cathedral, at the time. In later years, she decided to rewrite I, Mary Magdalen and make Judas a certain leading individual who afterward lived on to receive great honours in our Faith.

Juliet was a Celt, from a long line of early bards, and she was kin to Edward Fitzgerald, of the Rubaiyat. Her Irishness did not, apparently, extend to that country's religion. She told me that when her father was dying, he was by chance in the hands of the nuns, and they moved about, seeing to it that Extreme Unction (as it was then called) was duly administered, while her non-Catholic mother wrung her hands. Reassuring, the moribund raised his head and said: "Never mind, Celeste, it doesn't amount to a damn."

Rebels are valuable, but they are not always right. Once, contrary to everyone's advice, Juliet's strong feelings about an individual led her and Daisy astray. She made us all come to the man's talks, or rather talk, which was always about love. We got so we hated love. "No wonder he advocates love," was Harold Gail's comment, "look what it's done for him." It had certainly given him Juliet and Daisy, and only later on did they see the light--the light being that his main interest seemed to be Daisy's bank account.

As the Guardian once commented, our World Order is founded on justice, not love. Our governing institutions are Houses of justice, not love.

The man did bring many to hear about love at Juliet's, which used to remind me of Romeyne Benjamin's gloomy prophecy, that the ceilings would fall in.

It was the unconventional, rebel quality in Juliet--this, plus her sympathy and true love--that attracted so many to her, particularly the young. All ages, sexes, skin colours, and degrees of wealth and servitude, used to foregather at 48 West Tenth. Her name was, incidentally, in the New York Social Register, along with her brother's--"but I am only there as a junior," she laughed.

This unconventional quality of hers, frightening to any establishment, appealed to the Guardian, as it had to the Master before him. We remember writing to the Guardian once, about a town where the activity was barely detectable, and he replied that the situation was due to "the lethargy and conservatism of certain elements in the community."

'Abdu'l-Bahá praised Juliet repeatedly for her absolute truthfulness. On her second pilgrimage, when the Guardian asked her, "Do you like the (Wilmette) Temple?" She answered: "No, it looks like a wedding cake." She added, relaying the conversation to me: "We used to call it 'Mrs True's church.'" (Mrs Corinne True, later a Hand of the Faith, was known as "the Mother of the Temple.") She said Mason Remey withdrew his design, in favour of Louis Bourgeois', although each received the same number of votes.

Needless to add, the ethereal, lacy, floating House of Worship at Wilmette does not look like a wedding cake, but Juliet had an opinion and she voiced it. "Let us remember," the Text says, "that at the very root of the Cause lies the principle of the undoubted right of the individual to self-expression, his freedom to declare his conscience and set forth his views." (Bahá'í Administration, p. 54).

We read in her diary of the Master's telling Juliet "a thing so wonderful" that she could not repeat it. In after years she confided to Bahá'í pioneer Bill Smits what that thing was. "You are nearer to me than anyone here," 'Abdu'l-Bahá had said, "because you have told me the truth." Asked what He meant by " here," she said, "Oh, New York, the United States--I don't know."

This diary we have here is not the original, longhand one. She destroyed that. She was essentially a private person and all those secrets have blown away. This diary is the core of the original: she kept whatever she wanted posterity to have, sat up in bed with the portable on her knees and typed it herself. I was one of (necessarily) few to receive a carbon, and mine has some of her own hand-written notes in the margin. Some years afterward I had the carbon professionally typed for the National Spiritual Assembly, but years later it could not be discovered in their files. Also, Philip Sprague mimeographed parts of it, but where that material is, we do not know.

Still more years later, when Harold and I were back from Europe and living in New Hampshire, I became aware that with so few copies in the world it might be lost forever, and consulting with fellow Bahá'ís we had xeroxes made, so it would stay safe. Meanwhile someone--was it Daisy?--had brought out a handsome booklet, printed by the Roycrofters, East Aurora, New York, and titled 'Abdu'l-Bahá's First Days in America, From the Diary of Juliet Thompson. It bears no date or copyright, is forty pages long and contains only excerpts: a teaser, as it were.

The truth seems to be that during her lifetime the Bahá'ís in charge of publishing did not cotton to the dairy. "Too personal," they said. They probably meant that there was too much love in it. We understand this, but we note that the mass of the believers were always eager for it. Here was a woman blessed as perhaps no other occidental Bahá'í was blessed. Not only was she received by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in the Holy Land, in Switzerland and the eastern United States, but she had an artist's eye and a writer's pen, and thus, better perhaps than any, she was able to evoke those so often irretrievable days and hours.

'Abdu'l-Bahá prophesied of her that: "In the time to come, queens will wish they had been the maid of Juliet." Certainly she received priceless opportunities, and proved adequate to her good fortune.

Love is not blind, it is "quick-eyed," George Herbert said. 'Abdu'l-Bahá likened Juliet to Mary Magdalene because she loved, and saw, so much. She had that same storied love that Mary had--that love which after all is the only thing that holds the Bahá'ís together, or for that matter holds the Lord to His creatures, or keeps the stars in their courses.

She says here that one early morning (on that breathless, ecstatic, tear-drenched pilgrimage) she gave up her will, made over her desires and her life to the Will of God, and saw how, when we are able to do that, "the design takes perfect shape." Then peace comes, she says, and "beauty undreamed of blossoms upon our days."

Again she tells how the Master once gathered the American pilgrims together--they being symbols of all--and said He hoped that a great and ever-growing love would be established among them. He knew that their one main desire was to live in His presence, and He told them how this could be done.

"The more," He said, "you love one another, the nearer you get to me. I go away from this world, but Love stays always."

Juliet's death notice in the New York Times says that she was born in New York, but the jacket to her book, I, Mary Magdalene, undoubtedly more to be trusted, has her a Virginian by birth, and brought up in Washington, D.C.

She was a cult figure. People became possessive about her, regarded her as theirs and only grudgingly doled her out. This was particularly true of Helen James, who came from the Caribbean area and was a long-time companion. I can remember Helen angrily barring the door to me one day, when Juliet was sick. It did not bother me too much--I knew from mythology that dragons guard treasures. Then there was another time when I had prevailed on a man to come over to the Village all the way from Brooklyn, and record Juliet's voice as she read from her diary. (On wire, it was. The business was new then.) And Helen tried, in the midst of it, to break in from the other room and let in even more noise, besides what was already being reproduced from the traffic on West Tenth.

You can say for Helen that she was a true friend to Juliet, and faithful. One mid-day, years after all this, as Juliet lay in her bed, it seems that she looked up at Helen and asked, "Do you want to come with me, and be with 'Abdu'l-Bahá?"

"No," Helen told her, "I am not ready yet."

And then, as she watched, she saw Juliet die. It was 4 December 1956. They had moved by then, the Times said, to 129 East Tenth. I was glad that she did not die at number 48.

The Guardian's cable, received by Daisy Smyth on December 7, said "DEEPLY GRIEVED" and "HER REWARD

ASSURED." To the National Spiritual Assembly he cabled, "DEPLORE LOSS," and he directed that a memorial gathering be held for her in the House of Worship. In this cable among other praises he referred to her "IMPERISHABLE MEMORY," said that she was "FIRED WITH ... CONSUMING DEVOTION" to the Centre of Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant, and called her "MUCH LOVED, GREATLY ADMIRED ... OUT-STANDING EXEMPLARY HANDMAID [OF] 'ABDU'L-BAHá."

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48 West Tenth Street was a house dedicated to 'Abdu'l-Bahá.
Often when you were let in the front door, you heard His voice--the recorded, spontaneous chant made in 1912--loudly reverberating through the rooms.

One day Juliet took Robert Gulick and me up the street to the corner of Fifth Avenue, and we entered the beautiful Church of the Ascension that had once been Percy Grant's pride before his ruin, and she showed us exactly where 'Abdu'l-Bahá stood, delivering His first American public address on 14 April 1912.

He came out of the vestry on the right, just as the choir burst into "Jesus lives." He sat in the Bishop's chair--which broke the nineteenth canon of the Church, for the unbaptized may not go behind the chancel rail. The red plush chair with its high back was still there, just as it had been that other day, although no flame burned on the altar then. When He spoke as you looked past the low steps to the altar, He was on the right, and He stood on the fifth flagstone.

'Abdu'l-Bahá had told Juliet she must either break with Percy Grant or marry him. She had broken with him. Percy had arranged this meeting for the Master as a peace offering to Juliet. From this very pulpit, to win Juliet away from her Faith, he had often inveighed

against the decadent East, had even denounced "the Bahá'í sect," but today he had filled the church with lilies and arranged for One from the East, and Head of the Bahá'ís, to speak.

Juliet said that she used, in her story of Mary Magdalene (whom, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá remarked in the diary, she even physically resembled) many things she learned from the Master himself. This book has inclined many a heart toward our Faith, and Stanwood Cobb considered it "one of the most graphic and lofty delineations of Christ ever made in literature."

She illustrated her story with portraits, three of them: one haloed, of the Master's face; Mary wears Juliet's face, they being look-alikes; and the handsome lover, Novatus, wears the face of Percy Grant. She was a serious artist, frequently exhibited, and a member of the National Arts Club. She had studied at the Corcoran Art School, then at Julien's in Paris, and with Kenneth Hayes Miller in New York.

During the Coolidge era, Juliet's beauty and social background, along with her artistic gifts, carried her into the White House. (It is interesting to note how many Bahá'ís have been received at the White House, all the way from 'Alí Qulí Khán and Florence, and Laura Barney, in the early days to moderns like Robert Hayden and Dizzie Gillespie). Juliet was there to make a portrait of Mrs Coolidge, incidentally one of the most popular of First Ladies.

"The President came in to watch," said Juliet, "chewing on an apple, and I told Mrs Coolidge I could not put up with that."

The portrait she did of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, described here in the diary, no longer exists, except in a photograph.

Time-damaged, it had to be restored, and Juliet felt the original was gone forever. The Kinneys maintained that He did like it because He said it made Him look old. 'Abdu'l-Bahá greatly encouraged her art, and told her it was the same as worship, but toward the end she no longer cared to go on with it, nor even cared for her once-loved New York as it had become, and all she wanted to do was teach the Faith.

Sometimes Juliet and Marjorie would recline at the top of Juliet's large bed, while Daisy and I would sit on chairs at the foot. The sooty warm spring air would blow in from the little back garden, down where Rebecca--a statue picked up by Romeyn Benjamin--stood scanning the horizon, endlessly waiting on her pedestal, left hand to brow. It was one such time when the conversation centred on Percy Grant, that dramatic preacher who, in our view, certainly merits a biographer, not only for his small role in our Faith but because he represents so much of New York history at the century's turn.

"Poor Julie. How long did you love him?" I asked.

"Seventeen years, darn it." (In those days it went without saying that the love was Platonic.)

And that is how, reinforced by Marjorie, Juliet told me how things turned out for Percy Grant. Significantly, his end is relegated in the dairy to a footnote. The story of it goes like this:

Grant was--as 'Abdu'l-Bahá remarked to 'Alí Qulí Khán, comparing the popular society clergyman to his disadvantage with the fine Unitarian minister, Howard Ives--a womanizer. (Here, 'Abdu'l-Bahá used a graphic Persian word.) His remark was prompted by the fact that, as they were leaving the church by a side door, they accidentally encountered the rector with a woman in his

embrace. Later the Master, father to daughter, even more graphically but in other words, warned Juliet to the same effect. And in the long run, it is of note that finally a woman toppled Grant down.

She was a Cuban--descended beauty of great wealth, whose luxurious car would be seen outside Grant's rectory by day and night. She had a dead-white face with bright, red-painted lips, and was a given to wearing evening gowns which did not hide the fact one breast had been completely removed, while the other remained without flaw. No intellectual, she was what Marjorie called "eruditized" by her association with famous artists and scholars.

Wherever Percy Grant went, she went, gazing up at him as he towered over her, and calling him "Little Rector." Without his knowledge, she spent $60,000 redoing his house. When she had their engagement announced in the Paris Herald, his only comment for the press was: No comment.

Next, she sensed that Percy was unfaithful--it was his chambermaid this time-put detectives on his trail, and turned over their findings to the vestrymen (the Episcopal administrative body) of his church. On a given Sunday, when Grant was scheduled to preach, they forced him to resign, and took down his name.

He was also required to pay back the $60,000, which wiped him out, and at that time Juliet went about among the parishioners, collecting funds to help. Most of the press, except for the Times, was brutal, she said. No church but one, Guthrie's, St. Mark's in the Bowery, would let him preach. In any case, the words would not come any more.

As to the woman, she lived on, constantly under the

surgeon's knife, constantly giving sumptuous dinner parties at which all she herself could eat was a little rice from a silver bowl--meanwhile assuring the guests that this was simply the best way of maintaining her (slim and lovely) shape.

At the very last meeting Percy and Juliet ever had--it was in a drug store, and the conversation languished--she asked herself how she could ever have loved him.

With her final moments in the presence of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Juliet brings her diary to a close.

On 5 December 1912, the ship sailed away, taking the Master out of this hemisphere for always. Physically, He would be unobtainable now. That was the last, sad day when He uttered His final spoken words to America, words in time to be read by millions, then heard by only a few. Florence Khánum remembered only four automobiles coming to the pier, she and 'Alí Qulí Khán being in the second one. These two believers, as well as Juliet, although they could not know it that day, would never look upon His earthly face again.

Juliet tells how, aboard the Celtic, more and more Bahá'ís crowded into the Master's cabin, and how they all went above to a spacious lounge. There, 'Alí Qulí Khán translating (as the Star of the West reports, giving his Bahá'í name, Ishti'ál), the Master paced up and down as He spoke:

"The earth is ... one home, and all mankind are the children of one father. ... Therefore ... we should live together in ... joy. ... God is loving and kind to all men, and yet they show the utmost enmity and hatred toward one another. ... You have no excuse to bring before God if you fail to live according to His command,

— At 48 West Tenth (memories of Juliet Thompson) (Used by permission of the curator)