



mother from going to the Columbian Exposition in Chicago that fall. We lived nearby, in Milton, Illinois, and I remember her saying later that she would have liked to attend, but I was just a few months old and she was busy with her home and with me."

Grace was the only child of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Benning who survived to adulthood. Her mother, Elvira, had lost two sons at birth and another daughter, Frankie, died at the age of nine. One of Grace's early memories was of a Persian Bahá'í coming to Kenosha at a time when her mother was pregnant and very ill.

"My sister and I were sent next door to stay with a neighbor, as it was time for my mother's confinement and there were complications," she continued. "We stood in the yard, and saw a Persian man come to our well and get water. Then he went back into the house and gave some of it to my mother who later improved. (We heard afterwards that when he had arrived, my mother was being attended by a German nurse. He had asked for water, but the nurse didn't think it would save my mother's life and wouldn't tell him where it was.) My father always believed that my mother's life was saved through the power of prayer. Dad never felt the water had done it, but he used to say, "Through the mercy of Bahá'u'lláh, she lived.""

Grace said that because she and her sister had not yet seen a picture of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, but were very familiar with Him through the teaching of their parents and the Kenosha Bahá'í community, they assumed that the Persian who came to their home was the Master. "We bowed our heads when we saw him in the yard," she remembered, "because we believed we were seeing the Master." This happened when she was about seven years old. At the time the Persian came to visit, she and her sister were attending the Presbyterian Sunday school. When her father questioned the visitor about this, he replied: "As yet, we do not have too much for the children, but you can teach them who Bahá'u'lláh is and who the Báb and 'Abdu'l-Bahá are." Only a few prayers and some of the Hidden Words had been translated, and the Persian encouraged her father to teach them those. "So," recalled Grace, "Dad took us right out of Sunday school and that's all the churchgoing that we did."

Long before the Master's visit to Kenosha, many distinguished Bahai teachers came there. Grace could remember the Hand of the Cause Corinne True, Thornton Chase, Lua Getsinger, Albert Dealey, and countless others who attended Feast or other meetings in the community. Often the Bahá'ís of Kenosha would travel to Chicago for some special occasion.

When she began to speak of the actual day of the Master's visit, her face became so animated and her blue eyes shone with the excitement of remembrance. "It was all excitement," she began, "that's all I can tell you. We had just come from Michigan, my husband Alfred and I. I guess we came a week or so ahead to get a room and get settled. Alfred found a job right away and we were ready when 'Abdu'l-Bahá came. We didn't go to the station, because the Master had asked that only one or two of the friends meet Him there, so most of us went to

the Bahá'í center, which was then located upstairs in the G. A. R. Hall, on Park street.

"It's funny the things you remember," she smiled. "There was a tavern downstairs in this hall, and some of my friends teased me that I was going to a tavern, but I explained that wasn't true. There was a stairway that led up to the second floor and our center was there.

"The committee was preparing for the dinner that evening when we arrived, so I did what I could to help, setting the table and arranging the decorations.

"When the Master first arrived in Kenosha, He went to rest at the home of Mrs. Emma Voelz. Mrs. Goodale lived upstairs and had put her apartment at the disposal of the Master and His entourage. Later in the day, He went to the hall, where a large crowd of Bahá'ís and non-Bahá'ís had gathered.

"I can't remember exactly what time He came," Grace said, "but my husband and I were in that crowd waiting for Him. The Master shook hands with each one of us, every single person who came up that stairway and approached Him. He was standing at the head of the stairs, near a railing that led towards a long hallway."

Grace struggled for adequate words to describe the moment of that meeting. "It's something you can't explain, exactly. It's not for anybody to describe unless they have themselves experienced it. I don't think I can describe it, the moment when He shook my hand. The only thing I can liken it to at all would be an electric shock. Not unpleasant. But like something just kind of went through you. It thrilled you. And He looked at you. Right through you. And the first thing He did was to say to you in English, 'Are you happy?'

"That was all. Just that moment. And then you went on. Of course there were so many people, there was not the chance to do or say anything more then, but later in the evening when the crowds subsided and only the Bahá'ís were left, there was a big dinner.

"We had at that time a big hall, quite long, and tables had been put together on wooden horses, with long boards on top and beautiful table cloths over these. We were then quite a big community, perhaps around forty. I don't know who had started the custom, but in those days we had two chairs, one placed at the head of the table and one at the foot. The chair at the head was for Bahá'u'lláh and the one at the foot was for 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Nobody ever sat in them. There was a red ribbon on each one and at Feast or any other gathering the chairs were there, ready and waiting. I don't know who originated this but it was always done. 'Abdu'l-Bahá came in and welcomed everybody with a smile. He walked straight to the chair which was His. Then 'Abdu'l-Bahá said to us, 'This is where I am to sit.'"

Of the meal itself Grace remembers the Master serving food to the children who were present and taking a number of them into His arms. She spoke of the room being filled with happiness and elation. "Of course, you drank in every word that He said and you liked to be as close to Him as you could, but you always

had to help the others to get close to Him too," she recalled. "It was one of those situations where you had to be careful that you didn't push somebody away. Everybody wanted to be close. Afterwards, when He had spoken, everyone went and shook hands with Him before leaving." Grace recalled, also, climbing into a balcony seat at the Congregationalist church when the Master spoke there. "The church was so crowded, every seat was taken. The Master greeted everyone from the platform and each word He said was eagerly received."

Some extra details of the visit remained clear in Grace's memory. She spoke of Mr. Epstein, the owner of a men's clothing store who had one of the few automobiles in Kenosha at that time. When he heard of the visit of 'Abdu'l-Bahá he offered to drive Him to His engagements. "Mr. Epstein was crippled and had a hunched back," she mentioned. "He never became a Bahá'í but he always was very friendly to the Faith."

The experience of being a Bahá'í in a small Wisconsin community, rather conservative in its outlook, always seemed to Grace to be a great privilege. She remembered one day, when she was about fifteen, being asked by some school friends if she would like to attend church with them the following Sunday. Although she was inwardly dubious about it, she asked her father's permission and he immediately gave it.

"So I went," she recalled, and began laughing at the memory of it. "I guess I had a little more nerve then than I've got now, because I noticed that when the minister gave his text, his sermon didn't match it. It didn't relate to it at all. So I went up to the minister after the service and asked him about it. I was curious, not having been to church before, and I asked if he would mind explaining what he meant by the text, and why he had read it but not talked about it. He said to me, 'I never talk about it.' So I said, 'Well, why do you read it then?' He answered, 'I read it because it is from the Bible.' I said, 'Shouldn't you talk from the Bible?' He said, 'Well, I do in the sermon.' I said, 'But the sermon had nothing to do with the text!' Then he said to me, 'Well, what do you think the text means? I began telling him my understanding, from the Bahá'í books, and he said, 'I'm not going to contradict you but I don't know where you get your information.' I said, 'Well, I'm a Bahá'í.' Since that day, I haven't been back to church!"

Speaking of Bahá'í children's classes, she said that they memorized a great deal, later rememorizing passages when the improved translations became available. When she herself became a teacher, she wrote to 'Abdu'l-Bahá to ask what she should teach. He replied that it would be best to use the Hidden Words and other books then available, and that the children should be encouraged to memorize portions of these. "So that is what we did!" she said.

Perhaps the best tribute to Grace is that she would turn to the Center of the Covenant, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and follow implicitly the advice He gave. To experience hospitality in her home, to be with her at a Bahá'í gathering, to hear her sharing her precious memories with the friends, would help any Bahá'í to deepen in his understanding of the Faith, for her actions were

permeated with the love of God, a wholehearted acceptance of His Manifestations, and lifelong efforts to serve His Cause and His servants. Distinguished in her fidelity to the Cause, she now enjoys her reward, and her earthly remains lie at the side of her husband's in a small cemetery outside of Kenosha, the scene of her memorable happiness.

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