

Heralds of the Covenant

Historical monologues by THOMAS LYSAGHT

BAHÁ'Í
WORLD
CONGRESS
NEW YORK 1992



A play performed at the World Congress looked at the early days of the Bahá'í Faith in New York, a city of much significance to the religion. The play had two Australian connections — playwright Thomas Lysaght became a Bahá'í in Canberra and one of the performers, Phillip Hinton, comes from Sydney. On the following pages, we reproduce the full text of the work, with photographs of the real-life characters and the actors who portrayed them.

(The set is simple. a painter's easel, left; at centre, a couch with end table, bowl of fruit and diary on table.)

(As LIGHTS RISE we see JULIET THOMPSON in artist smock over dress, painting at easel. CAPTION on monitors says, "Juliet Thompson, New York City, 1912.")

JULIET

When I was 10 years old, a very presumptuous idea took hold of me. I began to dream of someday painting a portrait of Jesus Christ. I think I always knew I would paint. Even before that time. But when I was 10 — I remember my age because it was the year we were living with my grandparents; my father had just died, and my mother had no money — it was then I became determined to paint Jesus. I even prayed that I might. "O God," I would pray, "You know Christ didn't look the way all the pictures of Him look. Please let me paint Him when I grow up as the King of Men." And I never lost hope of this. All through art school. Until I met the Master. When I met 'Abdu'l-Bahá, then I knew: no one could paint the Christ.

(puts down paint brush, removes smock)

It was on pilgrimage in Akká that I began this

diary. Oh Akká ... white city by the sea, where I dedicated my heart to 'Abdu'l-Bahá ... But like this diary, my dedication was also a life-long effort. "When you return to America, Juliet," the Master said, "I want you to do your best to bring about unity. You are going back to New York to serve me ..." But how could I unify the friends, when my own heart was divided?

(beat)

You see, I was in love with the Rev Dr Percy Grant.

(gazing off to wings)

His church of the Ascension was just half a block from my studio. For years, I would go there to hear him preach. Admiration soon became something more. I fell in love. I've only had one strong love in my life — and that was Percy, the charismatic rector who not only championed social justice, but world brotherhood as well. What better partner could be found for me? ... But in Akká, 'Abdu'l-Bahá told me that I might have to break with Percy. "Either you must marry him," the Master said, "or separate yourself from him, cut yourself entirely from him."

(pause)

CHARACTERS:



JULIET THOMPSON



LOUIS GREGORY



HOWARD MACNUTT



LUA GETSINGER



Why was this asked of me? Maybe I was more anxious to lead Percy Grant to the Kingdom than to go there myself. Maybe I wanted romantic union with Percy more than I wanted eternal union with God. After all, I did miss spending an extra day with 'Abdu'l-Bahá because of my haste to get back to New York and to Percy. Oh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá knew my heart so well. "Can you transfer this love to God?" He asked. Could I? That was the question. "There are degrees of love," the Master said. And then He explained that He carried a measuring-rod in His hand by which He measured the love of the friends. And that rod was obedience.

(pause)

All that winter I refused to see Percy. My heart was still attached to him, but in staying away, I felt I was at least in part obeying the Master. Then a note arrived from Percy. It was an invitation. He wanted 'Abdu'l-Bahá's first public address in New York to be at the church where he himself was minister. If half-hearted obedience brings forth such fruit, I thought, what will full obedience bring forth?

(pause)

Oh, on that day at the Church of the Ascension, Percy arranged everything with the touch of an artist. Everything choreographed so perfectly. First, the procession with flowers and music. Then, Percy

addressed the congregation. He read a prophecy from the Old Testament pointing directly to the Promised Day, to Bahá'u'lláh. Then on cue, the choir burst into a chorus of "Jesus Lives Again", and Percy introduced the Master. I sat there, happier it seemed to me than I had ever been in my life. I was in the Presence of my Lord, and the one I loved best in all this human world had at last recognised Him. Maybe all my suffering had been for this reconciliation. For what else could that exquisite service have meant, with the theme of Resurrection stressed throughout? Such a bold, daring proclamation in the very church itself — it never occurred to me to think it had really meant something else.

(pause)

When the service was over, I waited joyously for Percy in the rectory. At last he rushed in, his cheeks flushed. "My darling," he said, "my darling."

"You made everything so beautiful," I told him. "I can't find the right words to thank you." But something in his look — something false — awakened me.

"Julie," he said, "my darling. I did it all for you."

And then I realised: he had staged a performance. He had used the Master as a pawn to woo me, manipulating the Cause for his own purposes. I saw with complete clarity then how right 'Abdu'l-Bahá had been. Horrified, sick at heart, I turned away. Thank God, I had obeyed.

(Juliet sits. She writes in diary during following speech.)

(LIGHTS RISE on LOUIS GREGORY, standing at a distance, left. CAPTION on monitors says, "Louis Gregory, Hand of the Cause of God.")

LOUIS

My grandmother was entirely of African blood. She was a slave in South Carolina. Her white master kept her as mistress, and made her pregnant with my mother. After my mother was born, she too became a slave — on her white father's plantation... After the Civil War, my grandmother and mother were freed.

(pause; comes forward)

The most common response to oppression is to hate, or to stay put in one's place. But my grandmother's response was to raise a grandson who could not be intimidated. She was illiterate, but she schooled me in dignity and courage. She taught me that whites were not just the oppressors. They were also my playmates, my teachers, and — my grandfather. She taught me the truth, the whole truth: that my people HAD suffered — and still suffer — from



prejudice and injustice; but that whites were my people too.

(downstage centre)

But a young man gets angry when he sees hundreds of lynchings every year, white mobs destroying Negro property, and nothing being done about it. My grandmother had kept my heart free from bitterness for the white man, but she could not keep my mind free from suspicion of him.

(crosses right)

I began outlining strategies for black action I became influenced by W.E.B. DuBois and his cry for civil rights. Religion held no interest for me at this point. I had been seeking, but not finding truth — and so had given up.

(downstage centre)

But when I met 'Abdu'l-Bahá, my vision changed. The shining reality of the Master, the personification of all Bahá'í ideals beckoned to me, and I became a confirmed believer. 'Abdu'l-Bahá expressed the hope that I become the means whereby the white and black peoples should close their eyes to racial difference. I took His words to heart and obeyed them as commands. I abandoned my profession as a lawyer and became a racial amity worker.

(pause; humorous)

The majority of my friends thought I had become mentally unbalanced. A leading Washington newspaper gave me two columns of ridicule for becoming a Bahá'í.

(serious)

But all this I could bear. What pained me more was the fact that the Bahá'ís in Washington were still holding segregated Bahá'í meetings. Washington D.C. was a thoroughly segregated society. Even churches were segregated. But if this were a new religion dedicated to unity, why were its believers divided? Bahá'u'lláh's writings said this was wrong. Why did the Bahá'ís not meet altogether in one place? Were the Bahá'ís full of prejudice like other people?

(crosses left)

'Abdu'l-Bahá again came to my rescue. He insisted that the Bahá'ís hold integrated meetings. But 'Abdu'l-Bahá did not stop with the Bahá'ís. While the Master was in Washington, a formal luncheon was planned at the Persian Embassy in His honour.

(story teller mode)

Admiral Peary, the North Pole explorer, and Alexander Graham Bell were just two of the prominent people in attendance. Now place cards had been arranged at the plates to seat people according to strict Washington protocol. But at the last minute,

just before everyone was to be seated, 'Abdu'l-Bahá gathered up the name cards, shuffled them, and redistributed them around the table. Then, He took ME by the hand, and brought ME to the head of the table at the place of honour. And this, at an almost all-white luncheon!

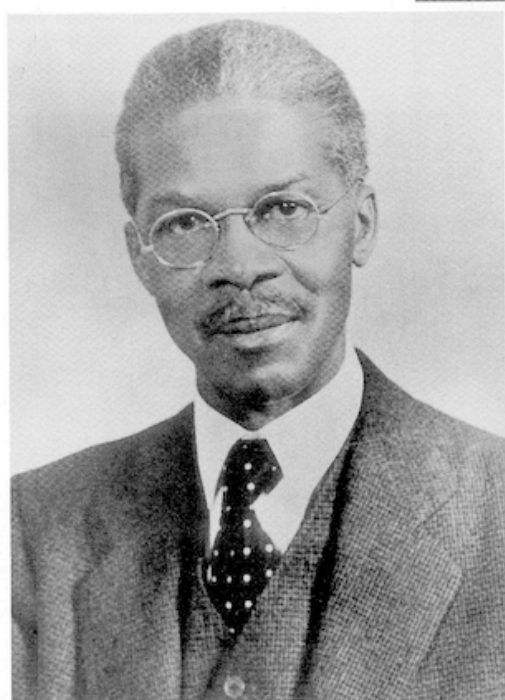
(rises from sitting on step)

I had been taken to still another height by the Master. With one light and loving gesture, He pointed out the foolishness of prejudice and segregation both.

(pause)

'Abdu'l-Bahá had urged me to become the means whereby the white and black peoples should close their eyes to racial differences. He told me to not look upon my limited capacity, but upon the bounties of the Lord. He also introduced me to Miss Louisa Mathew, a Bahá'í from London, a white woman. He mentioned in our presence that interracial marriage was a good way to end racial prejudice. I remembered my grandmother's words: "The whites are not just your oppressors. They are also your playmates, your teachers, and — your grandfather." On September 27, 1912, in New York City, the City of the Covenant, I was married to Louisa Mathew. We were middle-aged, mature persons. We respected, and were very fond of each other. But our union was the work of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Our love

BAHÁ'Í
WORLD
CONGRESS
NEW YORK 1992





for the Master gave us both the courage to confront the social prejudice of those days. In 38 states of the Union, it was illegal for a black and white couple to travel together. Our marriage was difficult. But it was a happy one.

(after a beat; light)

How could it not be? ... When it was the Master who had brought us together?

(LIGHTS DOWN on Louis Gregory. LIGHTS RISE on Juliet Thompson. She puts down her pen.)

JULIET

The week I witnessed the Master lead Louis Gregory to the head of that table was the week this painting came into existence.

(During the following speech, Juliet dons her painting smock again.)

I was visiting with Edna, when 'Abdu'l-Bahá suddenly entered the room. "I am going out for a drive," He said, "but wait till I return, Edna, and you too, Juliet, wait. I will see you in a short time." So I waited. And waited. Half-past six came. Then seven o'clock. We were due at half-past seven at the Elkins', and their house was a long way off, rather indirect on the bus line. "Go, Juliet," urged Edna. "I will explain." But how could I leave? My Lord had told me to stay. And so I waited. And waited. It was a little after seven when the Master came back from His drive. Entering the room in which He had left me — and where, of course, I was still waiting — He said: "Ah, Juliet! For your

sake I returned. Mrs Hemmick wanted to keep me, but I had asked you to wait; therefore I returned." After a pause, He added: "Would you like to come up tomorrow and paint me?"

(pause)

So I learned once again the reward of obedience.

(picks up brush with confidence)

Such a reward for so small an act of obedience! My childhood dream was about to be fulfilled after all. Once in Haifa, the Master had said to me: "Keep My words, obey My commands, and you will marvel at the results."

(throw-away line)

And by a miracle, I wasn't late for dinner. The dinner at the Elkins' had been postponed by half an hour.

(Juliet continues painting as LIGHTS FADE on her and RISE on HOWARD MacNUTT, sitting, hands meditatively in lap. Monitor CAPTION reads "Howard MacNutt..." He stands)

HOWARD

In the early days of the Faith in New York, we were confused about 'Abdu'l-Bahá's station. William Dodge — the designer of the Dodge motor car who also established the first Bahá'í Spiritual Assembly in New York — William Dodge was one of a number of Bahá'ís who taught that the Master was the return of Christ. He also ridiculed me for allowing an Eastern swami to live in my house. Dodge and I were often at odds. We rarely attended an Assembly meeting when we knew the other was going to be present. For I knew that 'Abdu'l-Bahá was not a Manifestation of God; not the return of Christ. He is a man, a great man, of as great a station as St Peter, but no different in spirit from other men. I knew we too could attain 'Abdu'l-Bahá's station, if we would only obey Bahá'u'lláh's teachings.

(pause)

You can see how wrong I was. In teaching that the Master was like St Peter, I implied that 'Abdu'l-Bahá could make mistakes, the way Peter three times denied Christ. And the Centre of the Covenant cannot err. That is the whole significance and safeguard of the Covenant. Nonetheless, I taught this notion in all the communities in which I travelled. In one year, I managed to travel 25,000 miles, visiting 100 Bahá'í communities. But my teaching that 'Abdu'l-Bahá was like St Peter caused confusion at the Bahá'í meetings. Finally, Bahá'í communities stopped inviting me to speak. In Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington D.C., I was no longer welcome. Some Bahá'ís even refused to associate with me. I was shunned. Then, a special election was



held to remove me from the New York Spiritual Assembly. I was cast aside. I felt discarded, thrown away. All my services were ashes in my mouth.

(pause)

But then 'Abdu'l-Bahá came to New York to educate us as to His station as the Centre of the Covenant. When He arrived, He treated me like a son. He allowed me to meet His ship, and to escort Him to His hotel. He permitted my wife and me to make a short motion picture of Him at our Brooklyn home. He even consented to my request to record His blessed voice — the voice of the Master chanting.

(pause)

But then my test came. There were Covenant breakers in Chicago, followers of Kheiralla. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the Centre of the Covenant, dispatched me to Chicago to warn and reprimand them. I was also instructed to sever my own relationship with Kheiralla. This was very difficult for me. Kheiralla had taught me the Faith. He was my spiritual father. When I arrived in Chicago, I met with the Covenant breakers. But I did nothing about the diseased situation. Worse, I even wired back to the Master that I had found them all to be "angels".

(LIGHTS RISE on Juliet. She puts down paint brush and addresses audience. MacNutt stands with head bowed. SPLIT SCREEN on monitors.)

JULIET

(picks up diary)

Howard MacNutt had just returned to New York. For the first time since his unfruitful trip to Chicago, he was to meet with the Master. I was standing in the hall with 'Abdu'l-Bahá, on the second floor of the Kinneys' home, when Howard arrived. The Master immediately took him into another room. For quite a while they were closeted alone together. Meanwhile, a large crowd was gathering downstairs, anticipating a talk by 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

Finally, the Master emerged with Howard. Howard looked wilted. I heard 'Abdu'l-Bahá say to him: "Go down and tell the people, 'I was like Saul. Now I am Paul, for I see.'"

HOWARD

(miserably)

But I don't see.

JULIET

The Master repeated: "Go down and say, 'I was like Saul.'"

(approaches MacNutt)

I pulled at his coat tail. "For God's sake, Howard," I said. "Go down!"

HOWARD

(miserably)

Leave me alone.

JULIET

'Abdu'l-Bahá commanded: "Go down!"

(Howard slowly turns. He will take a few steps upstage, looking slumped.)

Poor Howard. Finally he turned, and as he went down the stairs to face his ordeal, his back looked shrunken to me. The Master leaned over the stair rail, His head thrown far back, His eyes closed in anguished prayer.

(looks toward easel)

I sat on the top step, watching the Master. This is like the Agony in the Garden, I thought. Christ's Gethsemane.

HOWARD

(turning again to audience; mumbles)

I was like Saul.

JULIET

We both could hear Howard, stumbling through his admission. He seemed to be dragging it out of himself, unconvinced, saying it like rote.

HOWARD

Now I am Paul, for I see.

JULIET

Nonetheless, when Howard came back upstairs, the Master deluged him with love. 'Abdu'l-Bahá ran forward to meet him. And as he ran, His arms wide open, He looked like a great flying bird. He enfolded Howard in a close embrace, kissed his face and neck, welcomed with ecstasy this broken man who, though bewildered, had obeyed. He had obeyed the Centre of the Covenant.

(During the preceding speech, Howard MacNutt has gradually raised his head; his face has gradually brightened.)

HOWARD

Whatever 'Abdu'l-Bahá wishes me to do, I will do; and whatever He wishes me not to do, I will not do.

(LIGHTS STAY on Howard and FOLLOW Juliet back to easel, where she resumes painting.)

JULIET

For his obedience, Howard MacNutt was given the privilege of compiling all the Master's talks in America. He published them in a volume called *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*. "This service shall cause thee to acquire an effulgent face in the Abhá Kingdom," 'Abdu'l-Bahá told him, "and shall make thee the object of praise and gratitude of the friends in the East as well as the West."

(LIGHTS have briefly RISEN on Howard's face and now FADE completely on him. LIGHTS SOFTEN on Juliet, and RISE on LUA GETSINGER, reclining on the couch, watching Juliet paint.) ►

**BAHÁ'Í
WORLD
CONGRESS
NEW YORK 1992**





(During the following speech, a large background scrim shall be seen to RISE out of BLACK into a sharp image. It is the photo of the Master which He said depicted His station as Centre of the Covenant.)

(CAPTION on monitor says, "Lua Getsinger, 'Mother Teacher of the West.'")

LUA

The Master had also asked Juliet to paint MY portrait. I don't know why. I was not very taken with the idea. In any case, Juliet started painting me at the time she was still working on the portrait of the Master. And this then gave me an idea. You see, 'Abdu'l-Bahá had expressed His desire that I travel to California. But I dreaded the notion of being separated from the Master. I intended to obey — just not right away.

(to Juliet)

Did you tell them about the poison ivy?

(Juliet continues to paint.)

LUA

She's ignoring me. Julie does not want to encourage my rebelliousness.

(smiles; rises from couch)



I'll tell you what happened ... When 'Abdu'l-Bahá was preparing to leave New York for California, He asked me to go on ahead to make arrangements for His visit there. But as I mentioned, I dreaded the idea of being separated from Him. So, at the Unity Feast in Teaneck, New Jersey, I deliberately walked in poison ivy. Back and forth I trampled through it until my feet were thoroughly poisoned.

(after demonstrating how she walked through poison ivy, Lua returns to the couch and sits down.)

Now, Julie, He can't send me to California. Go to the Master and tell Him, "How can Lua travel now? Look at her feet."

JULIET

(still painting at easel)

I don't know why, but I did. I went and told 'Abdu'l-Bahá what had happened. But He laughed out loud. Then He handed me an apple and a pomegranate. "Take these to Lua," He said. "Tell her to eat them and she will be cured."

(Lua has propped herself up on a couch like a child in her sick bed.)

Oh precious Lua — strange mixture of disobedience and obedience — and all for love! I think that is why the Master did not mind her disobedience. It was out of love, not out of rebelliousness. When it came to the Covenant, Lua was ALWAYS obedient. She taught May Maxwell the Faith. She travelled alone to India. She pioneered to Egypt, and died there.

(Lua reaches for apple and pomegranate in fruit bowl on end table. She obediently chomps away.)

I shall never forget her, first seizing the apple, then the pomegranate, and obediently chewing them all the way through, till not even a pomegranate seed was left, obediently eating the cure which was certain to send her to California. Later that afternoon, we were surprised by a visit from the Master Himself. He drew back the sheets and looked at Lua's feet. They were healed. 'Abdu'l-Bahá burst out laughing. He knew Lua would always be firm in the Covenant.

LUA

So then I tried another strategy. As I said, 'Abdu'l-Bahá had also asked Juliet to paint MY portrait. But she had had only one sitting of me before the Master wanted to send me off to California.

(rises from couch)

Julie, please, go to the Master now and say, "If Lua is in California, how can I paint her? Her portrait is already begun."

(continued on page 25) ►

(continued from page 22)

(Juliet sighs and shakes her head with the memory. But she keeps painting.)

But when Juliet went to the Master, He only burst out laughing. As usual, He saw right through me. I did obey. Then 'Abdu'l-Bahá called Juliet in to finish her portrait of Him.

(Projection on scrim begins to take blurry shape. Lua speaks dramatically now. The lightness of tone has vanished.)

It was June 19, 1912. Now, earlier that day, the Master had passed Julie and myself on the stairs. Both of us remarked that we felt a peculiar power in His step that morning as He passed us — as though some terrific Force had possession of Him; a Force too strong to be caged in the body.

Later that day, as Juliet was putting her finishing touches on the portrait of the Master, He closed His eyes and dozed off. Julie laid down her paint brush. What she saw then was too sacred, too formidable to portray.

(Lua leans forward from her seat on the couch, staring at the easel. Juliet sits beside her, also mesmerised by the easel. Photo of Master on scrim comes in FOCUS.)

Suddenly, with a great flash like lightning, 'Abdu'l-Bahá opened His eyes. The room seemed to rock like a ship in a storm with the Power released. The Master was blazing. The thousand veils concealing His station as the Centre of the Covenant had suddenly been burnt away. We were exposed to the very Flame itself. Julie and I sat shaking.

Then the Master spoke to me.

JULIET

"Herald of the Covenant," He called her.

LUA

I?

JULIET

Never will I forget that moment: the flashing eyes of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the reverberations of His voice, the Power that still rocked the room. God of lightning and thunder! I thought. His Voice then boomed: "I appoint you, Lua, Herald of the Covenant."

LUA

I?

JULIET

"And I AM THE COVENANT appointed by Bahá'u'lláh," He said of Himself. "And no one can refute His Word. Go forth and proclaim, 'This is THE COVENANT OF GOD in your midst.'"

(Lua rises)

A great joy seemed to lift Lua up. She looked like a winged angel.

LUA

"Oh, re-create me, that I may do this work for Thee!"

(Lua drifts downstage. Juliet takes up her diary, as if to record the event.)

JULIET

The Master then sent Lua downstairs. To proclaim the Covenant to the friends.

LUA

"When the ocean of My presence hath ebbed, and the Book of My Revelation is ended, turn your faces toward Him ...

(indicates large overhead portrait)

... Who hath branched from this Ancient Root ..."

JULIET

The Master soon followed Lua downstairs, and then spoke Himself about His unique station as Centre of the Covenant. It was then He declared New York as the City of the Covenant. Then, to underscore this historic declaration, 'Abdu'l-Bahá instructed that Bahá'u'lláh's *Tablet of the Branch* be immediately translated, and read aloud to the entire gathering. The believers crowded into the room, and even sat on the stairs, listening attentively to the words of Bahá'u'lláh.

LUA

(Lua comes even farther downstage. Photo of Master looms over stage.)

"There hath branched from the Sadratu'l-Muntahá this sacred and glorious Being, this Branch of Holiness; well is it with him that hath sought His shelter and abideth beneath His shadow ... Render thanks unto God, O people, for His appearance; for verily, He is the most great favour unto you, the most perfect bounty upon you; and through Him every mouldering bone is quickened. Whoso turneth toward Him hath turned toward God, and whoso turneth away from Him hath turned away from My Beauty, hath repudiated My Proof, and transgressed against Me. He is the Trust of God amongst you, His charge within you, His manifestation unto you ... We have sent Him down in the form of a human temple. Blest and sanctified be God Who createth whatsoever He willeth through His inviolable, His infallible decree."

(Swell of MUSIC.)

• This piece of work was performed at the Bahá'í World Congress in New York, November 1992. ■

BAHÁ'Í
WORLD
CONGRESS
NEW YORK 1992

