

SHINING LAMP

A Bahá'í who served humanity with radiance

May Bolles Maxwell (1870–1940):

Community Builder By Gail Radley



At age 11, May Bolles dreamed of blazing sunlight so real that when she woke, she was blinded for the entire day. Later, she dreamed of being carried by angels to gaze down on Earth. On it, she could make out the letters B and H. What could it mean? She didn't know, but she felt those letters would change her life. She also saw a robed figure calling to her. Was it Jesus? she wondered.

Born in the U.S., May was 28 and living in Paris when she found her answer. In 1898, a group of Americans visited May's apartment. One of them, Lua Getsinger, heard about May's dream and told her that the robed figure was 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the leader of the Bahá'í Faith. May learned that her visitors were Bahá'ís traveling to meet 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in what is now Israel. As she often was, May was ill at this time. But learning of the new religion seemed to revive her. She accepted the Faith immediately and joined the travelers.

Transforming Visit

'Abdu'l-Bahá's loving spirit and spiritual power "overwhelmed" her. His prayers for her filled May with energy and joy. She became a devoted Bahá'í and knew she would return "never again, thank God, to the same life . . ."

With new purpose, May returned to Paris. She was the only Bahá'í in the city. She had only a few prayers and one slim Bahá'í book. But May's radiant heart attracted friends and strangers alike. By 1902, the Paris

Bahá'í community grew to 25–30 members, "deeply united in love and faith . . ." one wrote.

That year, May married William Sutherland Maxwell. The couple moved to Montreal, Canada. Before long, Sutherland became a Bahá'í, and their home was Canada's first Bahá'í center. As always, May reached out to everyone.



May Maxwell (left) in Paris with Edith MacKaye. May established Europe's first Bahá'í group in Paris.

Friend to All

May made many friends within the black community. She expressed her love through her actions. "We must first touch the heart to awaken it . . ." she explained. When the hospital wouldn't let a black woman have her baby there, May brought her home and hired her own doctor.

One evening, a policeman came to the door. Seeing black people among her guests, a neighbor had reported a disturbance.

After 'Abdu'l-Bahá promised to pray for May, the Maxwells had a child, Mary, in 1910. Mary became a well-known Bahá'í teacher and the wife of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's grandson, Shoghi Effendi.

Though her illnesses persisted, May wouldn't give up. Earning the title "mother of the Bahá'í community of Canada," May taught throughout Canada, helping Bahá'í communities grow. She also shared the Faith in Europe and the U.S. In 1940, at age 70, she went to teach in South America. Three days after arriving in Argentina, she died unexpectedly. Despite many difficulties, May had lived her vision, to "be to each other an inexhaustible source of life, strength, healing, joy, and blessedness."