

# SHINING LAMP

A Bahá'í who served humanity with radiance

## Agnes Parsons (1861–1934)

What would you have done if you met 'Abdu'l-Bahá, who led the Bahá'í Faith in the early 1900s? When Agnes Parsons visited him in Israel in 1910, she said a brilliant light passed from his eyes into hers. She was so overwhelmed by his powerful presence that she fell to the floor! She thought she had fainted, because when she opened her eyes, he was kindly helping her to stand.

Agnes was 49 years old, an influential woman in Washington, D.C., society. She had been raised an only child in a wealthy, strict family, and she rarely associated with anyone outside of her circle. But that changed after she met 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

She'd heard of the Bahá'í Faith two years earlier, and she arrived in Israel feeling curious and hopeful, looking for proof. When she visited the tomb of Bahá'u'lláh, the flowers shook mysteriously, though it wasn't a breezy day. A little bird nestled in Agnes's dress. She felt as though God were speaking to her. She returned home a devout Bahá'í.



lived with her husband and two sons. After meeting with people and giving public talks each day, 'Abdu'l-Bahá spoke there each evening. Hundreds gathered to hear his words.

Agnes was hospitable and generous. One day, she offered 'Abdu'l-Bahá a large sum of money to help with the cost of his journey. He gently declined and advised her to give the money to the poor.

In August, 'Abdu'l-Bahá spent three weeks in New Hampshire, where Agnes had a summer home. She had hoped that he would have a chance to rest. But he said, "We have come for work and service and not for leisure. We . . . must make such servitude the cause of our solace and the joy of our souls."

'Abdu'l-Bahá was 68 years old and had lived a life of exile and imprisonment. Yet his energy seemed nearly boundless as he met with people from all walks of life and spoke to large audiences about the oneness of humanity, the elimination of prejudice, and the need for world peace. His loving presence encouraged and inspired Agnes and many others.

In November, he again visited Washington. In his last talk at Agnes's home, he said, "May you be well-wishers of all humanity. May you be assistants of every poor one . . . May you be sources of comfort to the broken in heart."

### Hospitality and Generosity

Agnes had invited 'Abdu'l-Bahá to stay at her home when he visited the U.S. When he arrived in Washington, D.C., in April 1912, Agnes joyfully welcomed him to the grand home where she

### A Challenging Assignment

In 1920, Agnes returned to Israel. This time, 'Abdu'l-Bahá gave her an important task—to arrange a convention promoting harmony among all races.

"I thought I would like to go through the floor," Agnes later said, "because I did not feel I could do it . . ." Racism and segregation were widely accepted in the U.S. at that time. Race unity was challenging even for some Bahá'ís, who only gradually grew to understand the true meaning of oneness. Agnes explained, "Then a very extraordinary thing happened. I felt suddenly the power of his creative words . . . I was really getting the confidence that of course was necessary . . ."



Agnes became inspired and sprang into action. She asked for advice from an African American Bahá'í lawyer, Louis Gregory, who wrote to her, "Nothing short of a change of hearts will do. Unless the speakers are able to make the power of love felt, the occasion will lose its chief value." Months of planning

followed, along with widespread publicity arranged by a Bahá'í journalist, Martha Root.

On May 19, 1921, the race amity convention began. Two thousand people from diverse backgrounds attended the first evening! Over



Agnes Parsons, standing behind 'Abdu'l-Bahá, made her home available to him on his two visits to Washington, D.C. In one talk there, he told the audience, "I ask . . . that your hearts may become radiant . . ."

three days, the program included political leaders, singers from Howard University, a presentation on African American poetry by a female Bahá'í professor, and more. Afterward, 'Abdu'l-Bahá praised Agnes's work, saying that the convention was carried out "in utmost perfection."

In the following years, other communities around the country held similar events. Agnes continued to work diligently to share the Bahá'í teachings and promote race unity.

In 1934, Agnes passed away at the age of 73. Shoghi Effendi, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's grandson and head of the Bahá'í community, called her a "distinguished handmaid of Bahá'u'lláh," praised her "manifold pioneer services," and said she had "proved herself worthy" of the "implicit confidence" 'Abdu'l-Bahá had placed in her.