



# SHINING LAMP

A Bahá'í who served humanity with radiance

## Leonora Stirling Holsapple Armstrong

(1895–1980) By Susan Engle

Leonora Stirling Holsapple loved words. Starting at age two in New York, she astonished her parents, Grace and Samuel, by reading words formed by her alphabet blocks! It wasn't surprising that Leonora would grow up to be a translator.

Tragedy struck when Leonora was five years old, and her mother died. Her father was so saddened that he left Leonora and her younger sister, Alethe, in the care of others. Leonora wrote, "How we could endure through those years of our childhood and adolescence, such loneliness, such suffering, even cruelty, I do not know. . . ."

### Finding Faith

Assistance came from her Grandmother Stirling. When Leonora was in her early teens, her grandmother found the Bahá'í Faith. She gave books to Leonora and Alethe, teaching them prayers and hymns to sing around the piano. Her grandmother shared the Faith with everyone she met. Soon, Leonora did the same.

Leonora graduated from high school at age 15, then attended Cornell University in New York. After college, she taught Latin in high schools and did social work, helping girls cope with challenges in their lives.

At age 24, a Bahá'í convention in New York City changed her life. She read words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá that inspired her to want to travel to share the Faith. She wrote to him, offering her services. He wrote back, "My hope is that thou mayest become a spiritual physician." His hope became her dearest wish.

### Off to a New Life

Leonora planned a trip to Brazil. Her friends and family had tried to discourage her, telling her that traveling alone was dangerous. After all, she didn't speak a word of Portuguese and only had enough money to last about two weeks. With her eagerness to teach, she was unstoppable. She went to Rio de Janeiro on a ship in 1921.

Within a few months, after some lessons from a woman she met on the boat, Leonora began translating Bahá'í books from English to Portuguese. Though she didn't have strong self-confidence, she also gave hundreds of talks about the Faith. She often had little food and became ill, but still, that didn't stop her.

She traveled to every place she could in South America and the Caribbean islands. She said, "I was able to offer my services in carrying medicine, food, and clothing to many of the sick. It was a thrilling experience to visit them. . . . and to try to prove to them by deeds" that Bahá'ís have faith "in the oneness of humanity." Thousands were attracted to her talks over her lifetime.

In 1941, Leonora married an Englishman named Harold Armstrong. He supported her unceasing work for the Faith. Together, they lived in various places in Brazil and adopted several children.

For 60 years, Leonora translated books and spread the word about this new religion. At the time of her death in Brazil in 1980, she was named a "HERALD OF THE KINGDOM," 'Abdu'l-Bahá's "BELOVED HANDMAIDEN" and the "SPIRITUAL MOTHER" of South America by the Universal House of Justice. Her wish had come true.