



“Get the Races to Inter marry”

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IMAGINE, IF YOU WILL, a boathouse of large dimensions, tucked into the trees on the shore of Dublin Lake. Water is lapping at the pylons which support it, rooted into the lake bed. It is built of natural wood and has a dock for the boat to moor. Perhaps there are some chairs or benches and the comforting smell of wood and rope.

It is Saturday, August 4, 1912, and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is meeting with the servants of the summer residents of Dublin. They are mostly black. Their names will vanish from history because they were never recorded. They are known only by the names of their employers, such as Parsons’ cook and Cabots’ maid.

Now imagine ‘Abdu’l-Bahá making an announcement, and the boathouse going quiet in astonishment.

Louise Mathew had been astonished when he had told her, too. She had first heard about it on the steamer to America, but hadn’t quite grasped what he meant. In fact, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had been planning for this moment for more than two years.

Louise Mathew was born in England to wealthy parents. She did not marry, but instead she enrolled into one of the women’s colleges in Cambridge University, where she studied economics, languages, and voice. She was into middle age before she went on pilgrimage to Alexandria to meet ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. It was here that Louise met Louis Gregory. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had delayed Gregory’s pilgrimage to make sure the two of them arrived at the same time.

Louise was shy and in delicate health. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá invited her to travel to America with him aboard the *Cedric*, which she did. One morning, while walking on the deck with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Louise realized what ‘Abdu’l-Bahá wanted: he wanted her to marry Louis Gregory.

In Chicago, Louise inquired further, asking ‘Abdu’l-Bahá if this was what he intended. “I wish the white and colored people to marry,” he said. Louise explained that, as a woman, she could do nothing about it.

Then ‘Abdu’l-Bahá questioned her. “Do you love him?” he asked. “Would you marry him if he asked you?” Louise: “Yes.” “Then if he loves you he will marry you,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá replied.

That same morning ‘Abdu’l-Bahá called Louis to his suite in the Plaza Hotel. “Marriage is not an ordinance and need not be obeyed,” he said, “but it would give me much pleasure if you and Miss Mathew were to marry.”

In many states Louis Gregory could be lynched for even looking at a white woman, let alone marrying one. Interracial marriage is not recognized in twenty-five out of the forty-eight states; in many it is illegal. In fact, in a few months, Seaborn Roddenbery, the Democratic congressman from Georgia, will introduce an amendment to the Constitution that will seek to outlaw interracial marriage everywhere in America. The proposed amendment will read:

“That intermarriage between negroes or persons of color and Caucasians or any other character of persons within the United States or any territory under their jurisdiction, is forever prohibited; and the term ‘negro or person of color,’ as here employed, shall be held to mean any and all persons of African descent or having any trace of African or negro blood.”

Louis froze; his hands went stone cold. He turned and left the suite. He walked into the elevator and out to the grand lobby, oblivious to the marble pillars and green velvet chairs. Out onto the Chicago streets he strode, where he wandered aimlessly for two hours before regaining his composure.

Today in the boathouse ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is announcing that the wedding will take place in September.

“If you have any influence to get the races to intermarry,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had told Louis in Alexandria, “it will be very valuable.” Little did he suspect that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was talking about *him*.

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FOOTNOTE / ENDNOTE:

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