



The Trouble with J. P. Morgan's Millions

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'ABDU'L-BAHÁ'S AUTOMOBILE stopped in front of 33 East 36th Street on Monday afternoon, November 18, 1912. He stepped out onto the damp sidewalk in the chilly winter air, climbed five shallow steps, and swept through green copper gates and up a second flight of steps past two Assyrian lionesses named Prudence and Felicity, who stood guard in pink Tennessee marble on either side of the carved portico of this Beaux-Arts villa in midtown Manhattan.

The architect of the place, Charles McKim of the firm McKim, Mead & White, had suffered a nervous breakdown over this building—or, at least, over having to accommodate the exacting standards and frequent changes demanded by his client. On other projects McKim might have done as he pleased, but one simply didn't say no to J. Pierpont Morgan.

Volcanic. Imperious. Dominant. The qualities of the man blaze from the famous portrait that Edward Steichen took of him in 1903. Morgan's ferocious eyes burn from behind his massive nose, which had been deformed and turned purple by a chronic skin disease. His left hand grasps a dagger—or so it appears from the way the light glints off the arm of his chair.

Morgan's powerful physical presence reflected his ubiquitous command over the national economy. Like millions of other Americans, 'Abdu'l-Bahá had never been far from Morgan's mighty reach. He had sailed to New York on a Morgan ship; walked the evening streets under the glow of Morgan light bulbs; slept in Morgan-owned Pullman cars speeding along Morgan-operated railroads and across bridges made from Morgan steel; had stories printed about him in the Morgan-financed *New York Times*; sent telegram messages from Western Union stations manned by Morgan employees, over telegraph wires fashioned from Morgan copper; and he had joined New Yorkers as they watched the new Woolworth Building rise on Broadway in 1912 to become the tallest building in the world, constructed by a Morgan civil engineering firm.

The titan of Wall Street had invited 'Abdu'l-Bahá to visit him this Monday afternoon, here, at his private library. 'Abdu'l-Bahá walked through the main doors into the marble rotunda with an inlaid marble floor. Its domed ceiling featured an oculus, around which Henry Siddons Mowbray had painted mural portraits of Homer,

Petrarch, and Dante. To the left the bright red damask walls of Morgan's plush study beckoned, where Morgan usually received, and intimidated, his guests. But today some urgent business matter had arisen unexpectedly, and Morgan, 'Abdu'l-Bahá found out, wouldn't be able to come.

Instead, he turned right into the library, a three-story room with floor-to-ceiling bookcases made from walnut, accessed from rows of balconies. A large Persian rug stretched across the floor and, above the fireplace, an old Renaissance tapestry hung, dominating the wide western wall. Its title: "The Triumph of Avarice."

Seven years later Alfred Lunt, a New England lawyer, wrote to ask 'Abdu'l-Bahá to explain his outlook on modern economic life. "The essence of the Bahai economic teachings is this," 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote back, "that immense riches far beyond what is necessary should not be accumulated."

Then 'Abdu'l-Bahá discussed Morgan. "For instance, the well-known Morgan who owned a sum of 300 million . . . was day and night restless and agitated . . . He invited me to his library and to his home that I may visit the former and have a dinner at his house. I went to the library in order to look at the oriental books but did not go to his house and did not accept his [dinner] invitation. In short, he eagerly desired that I should visit him in the library but meanwhile important financial problems arose which prevented him from being present. . . . Now had he not such an excessive amount of wealth, he might have been able to present himself."

Behind Morgan's *sturm und drang*, however, a quiet and shy man resided, one with uncompromising integrity of character. "One nod of the massive head was security for fifty million," writes Edmund Morris, Theodore Roosevelt's biographer. In an era when America had no central bank, J. P. Morgan more than once found himself on the hook to rescue the national economy, forced to make almost instant decisions that could make or break millions of lives. During the Panic of 1907, when investors made a run on the Knickerbocker Trust, one of New York's most reliable old money banks, Morgan decided to let it collapse. "I can't go on being everybody's goat," he said.

"This wealth was for him a vicissitude," 'Abdu'l-Bahá said of him, "and not the cause of comfort."

The staff laid out the books for 'Abdu'l-Bahá on the viewing tables. Then he wrote and signed a short note in Morgan's guestbook, a prayer asking for blessings upon the tycoon, and left. In addition to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, his translator, and the Persian Consul of New York who had accompanied them that afternoon, a reporter from the *Associated Press* had also been present. He found it worthy of a catchy headline, and drafted a wire dispatch, which AP sent out over those same Morgan copper wires the next morning.

“Persian Highbrow Dubs Morgan ‘Some Philanthropist,’” the headline went. “J. P. Morgan,” the reporter wrote, “was written down yesterday as one who had done ‘considerable philanthropy’ when his library in East 36th street was visited by Abdul Baha.”

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FOOTNOTE/ENDNOTE:

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