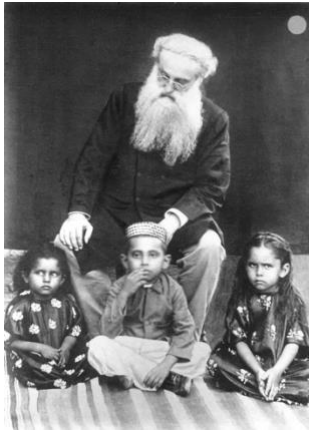


Colonel Olcott's Last Days

Pedro Oliveira



Col. Olcott with downtrodden children in India

The last year of Col. Olcott's life saw the Theosophical Society engulfed by a serious crisis. On 16 May 1906 he had presided over the Advisory Board meeting in London which considered charges brought against C. W. Leadbeater regarding advice he had given to boys about to reach puberty.¹ At the end of a very turbulent meeting, Col. Olcott decided to accept the resignation of Mr Leadbeater. This, however, did not put an end to the crisis and open letters, both against and in favour of Mr Leadbeater, were doing the rounds in the theosophical world.

Soon after the London meeting, the President-Founder went to Paris, where he attended the First International Congress of the Society, which was a great success. He was not at all well at that time, suffering from gout in his right hand. From Europe he went to America, having visited England and Belgium on the way. In Boston he found his books in the Public Library, including a copy of his Inaugural Address. He lectured in Holyoke on the "Dangers of Psychism". The controversy surrounding the Leadbeater case was still raging and causing him much stress.

In New York he issued an "Executive Notice" cancelling the diploma of Mr C. Jinarajadasa because of his defence of Mr Leadbeater. On his way to Genoa, he had a serious accident on board in which he fell injuring his right knee and getting severe bruises. He had to be carried ashore and taken to the hospital. On his way back to Adyar he stopped at Colombo where many of his friends came to see him.

At the 1906 International Convention at Adyar Annie Besant gave a series of lectures on "The Wisdom of the Upanishads". Although Col. Olcott was too weak he was carried from his bedroom to the headquarters Hall and attended the opening of the Convention. Mrs Besant read his Presidential Address. By that time, Mrs Besant was very well known as a truly dedicated Theosophist and outstanding orator, and already perceived by many as the natural successor to the President-Founder.

From their statements of that period, it is clear that both Col. Olcott and Mrs Besant strongly disagreed with the advice given by Mr Leadbeater to some of the boys under his care, although they never doubted his integrity as a person. A dilemma occupied Col. Olcott's mind: Mrs Besant seemed to be his natural successor but there was opposition to her from several quarters in view

of her previous association with Mr Leadbeater. At this point a series of extraordinary events, documented in his Diaries, helped to clear the doubts in the President-Founder's mind.

In the entry of his Diary for 4th January 1907, he says: "Health still improving. Drive. Dr. says I must be in bed two months yet. Am much troubled in mind about my successor. There seems some fault to find about everyone – some drawback. Annie seems about the only one, but am afraid of her E.S. work. The Masters must settle it." It is important to consider here that Col. Olcott had disagreed with HPB herself about the formation of the Esoteric Section and only changed his mind when he received a letter from the Master, which materialized phenomenically in his cabin on his way to London in 1888.²

In the entry for the next day, 5th January, he recorded: "Was troubled about my successor and had thought to take a vote of the Sections about A.B. At 8.30 p.m. both Mahatma M. and K.H. came, and told me to appoint Annie Besant as she was the best fitted for the office. Ria [Marie Russak] and Mina [Col. Olcott's nurse] were present. ... So the matter is settled. Shall inform Sections."

Later on, when it was brought to his attention that under the Rules of the TS he could not *appoint* a successor but only nominate one, he corrected his earlier letter to the Sections of the Society, and nominated Annie Besant as a candidate to the Presidency of the Society. She would later on be elected President by an overwhelming majority.

On the 11th January Colonel Olcott's Diary records: "Health not so good. The Mahatmas M. and K.H. visited Col. Olcott and told him he must write C.W.L. and tell him that he made too much haste in deciding the case in London. He said it should not have been made public." Col. Olcott not only did write to Mr Leadbeater but also wrote an article for *The Theosophist* (February 1907) which contains aspects of his interview with the Mahatmas.

There were strong reactions in some quarters regarding the events at Adyar, which were labeled by some as 'Adyar manifestations'. There were also suggestions that the visitations by the Mahatmas were a product of Miss Marie Russak's 'psychic' nature. But a question comes to mind at this point. Col. Olcott had been visited by the two Mahatmas before. He had been chosen by them together with HPB to form the Theosophical Society. Would they withdraw their guidance at a time the Society was in deep turmoil and the President-Founder was about to die? Let us revisit two occasions in which, according to him, the Mahatmas paid him a visit.

During the New York days, when he and HPB lived in the 'Lamasery', the headquarters of the TS at that time, he described a remarkable visit:

I was quietly reading, with all my attention centered on my book. Nothing in the evening's incidents had prepared me for seeing an adept in his astral body; I had not wished for it, tried to conjure it up in my fancy, nor in the least expected it. All at once, as I read with my shoulder a little turned from the door, there came a gleam of something white in the right-hand corner of my eye; I turned my head, dropped my book in astonishment, and saw towering above me in his great

stature an Oriental clad in white garments, and wearing a head-cloth or turban of amber-striped fabric, hand-embroidered in yellow floss-silk. Long raven hair hung from under his turban to the shoulders; his black beard, parted vertically on the chin in the Rajput fashion, was twisted up at the ends and carried over the ears; his eyes were alive with soul-fire; eyes which were at once benignant and piercing in glance; the eyes of a mentor and a judge, but softened by the love of a father who gazes on a son needing counsel and guidance.³

In November 1883, Col. Olcott was visiting Lahore, then located in India. The following is his description of his unexpected visitor:

I was sleeping in my tent, the night of the 19th, when I rushed back towards external consciousness on feeling a hand laid on me. The camp being on the open plain, and beyond the protection of the Lahore Police, my first animal instinct was to protect myself from a possible religious fanatical assassin, so I clutched the stranger by the upper arms, and asked him in Hindustani who he was and what he wanted. It was all done in an instant, and I held the man tight, as one would who might be attacked the next moment and have to defend his life. But the next instant a kind, sweet voice said: "Do you not know me? Do you not remember me?" It was the voice of the Master K.H. A swift revulsion of feeling came over me, I relaxed my hold on his arms, joined my palms in reverential salutation, and wanted to jump out of bed to show him respect. But his hand and voice stayed me, and after a few sentences had been exchanged, he took my left hand in his, gathered the fingers of his right into the palm, and stood quiet beside my cot, from which I could see his divinely benignant face by the light of the lamp that burned on a packing-case at his back.⁴

The Masters had indicated in their letters that Col. Olcott was not free from limitations and that he had made mistakes. But the following passage from a letter by Mahatma K.H. illustrates well their attitude towards him:

Colonel Olcott is doubtless "out of time with the feelings of English people" of both classes; but nevertheless more in time *with us* than either. Him we can trust under all circumstances, and his faithful service is pledged to us come well, come ill. My dear Brother, my voice is the echo of impartial justice. Where can we find an equal devotion? He is one who never questions, but obeys; who may make innumerable mistakes out of excessive zeal but never is unwilling to repair his fault even at the cost of the greatest self-humiliation; who esteems the sacrifice of comfort and even life something to be cheerfully risked whenever necessary; who will eat any food, or even go without; sleep on any bed, work in any place, fraternise with any outcast, endure any privation for the cause. . . .⁵

The above quotes clearly indicate that the Masters who had inspired the foundation of the Theosophical Society would not withdraw their guidance from the President-Founder at an hour of deep crisis and danger for the Society's continued existence. But perhaps the defining element in all these dramatic developments was Col. Olcott's profound and unselfish dedication to what the Society stood for. His words at his Inaugural Address, on 17th November 1875, speak for themselves:

For, if I understand the spirit of this Society, it consecrates itself to the intrepid and conscientious study of truth, and binds itself, individually as collectively, to suffer *nothing* to stand in the way. As for me – poor, weak man, honoured far beyond my deserts in my election to this place of honor and of danger – I can only say that, come well, come ill, my heart, my soul, my mind, and my strength are pledged to this cause, and I shall stand fast while I have a breath of life in me, though all others shall retire and leave me to stand alone.

He did not stand alone. Other dedicated members continued his work and made the Theosophical Society a force for good in the world. Through its agency dozens of thousands of people in several continents came into contact with Theosophy, the Wisdom Religion, the ‘cornerstone of the future religions of humanity.’ But Col. Olcott would have another special visit before shedding the mortal coil that clothed an invincible Soul, the Soul of a great and devoted servant of humanity. The entry for 3rd February 1907 in his Diary, recorded by Miss Marie Russak, says:

The Masters all four came this a.m., and told Col. his work was over. They thanked him for his loyalty and work in Their interests. He was overcome with joyful emotion, jumped from his bed and prostrated himself at Their feet. He took A.B. and myself in his arms, blessed us, and begged us to carry on his work.

Col. Henry Steel Olcott passed away at 7 a.m. on 17th February 1907. His body was carried to the Convention Hall at 1.30 p.m., where a beautiful service was held at 3.30 p.m. The cremation was held at 4 p.m. On the following day, at 6.30 a.m., Col. Olcott’s ashes were carried to the sea, and thrown upon the waves.

¹ The brief overview of the crisis given here is based on Josephine Ransom’s *A Short History of the Theosophical Society*, Theosophical Publishing House, Madras, 1938.

² See *Letters from the Masters of the Wisdom*, First Series, edited by C. Jinarajadasa, letter 19.

³ Olcott, Henry S., *Old Diary Leaves*, First Series, TPH, Madras, 1974, p. 379.

⁴ *op. cit.*, Third Series, pp. 37-8

⁵ *The Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett in chronological sequence*, edited by Vicente Hao Chin, Jr, The Theosophical Publishing House, Metro Manila, 1993, p. 17.