

When C. W. Leadbeater Met Madame Blavatsky: First Impressions



Madame Blavatsky in London, 1884, and C. W. Leadbeater at Adyar, in 1885

The votaries of the “received tradition” about C. W. Leadbeater have ceaselessly claimed that Madame Blavatsky had a poor opinion about the young curate who joined the Theosophical Society in 1883, through the agency of Alfred Percy Sinnett, and became a member of its London Lodge. This website has presented evidence, widely available since that time, that Madame Blavatsky had a crucial role in his travelling to Adyar, at his Master’s bidding; that in her correspondence with Sinnett she defended him; that in a letter to him, in 1886, she twice referred to him as a chela of the Master; and through small gestures, like postcards, she expressed her support for him, the last one written in 1891, the year she died. Not surprisingly, when we read his testimonies reproduced below, we can measure his profound sense of reverence and gratitude towards her. As CWL wrote, “she could see through people”, himself included.

(From *How Theosophy Came to Me* by C. W. Leadbeater, Theosophical Publishing House, Adyar, Madras, 1930.)

I Meet Our Founder (Chapter III)

She sat listening to the wrangling on the platform for a few minutes, and then began to exhibit distinct signs of impatience. As there seemed to be no improvement in sight, she then jumped up from her seat, shouted in a tone of military command the one word “Mohini!” and then walked straight out of the door into the passage. The stately and dignified Mohini came rushing down that long room at his highest speed, and as soon as he reached the passage threw himself incontinently flat on his face on the floor at the feet of the lady in black. Many people arose in confusion, not knowing what was happening; but a moment later Mr. Sinnett himself also came running to the door, went out and exchanged a few words, and then, re-entering the room, he stood up on the end of our bench and spoke in a ringing voice the fateful words: “Let me introduce to the London Lodge as a whole—Madame Blavatsky!”

The scene was indescribable; the members, wildly delighted and yet half-awed at the same time, clustered round our great Founder, some kissing her hand, several kneeling before her, and two or three weeping hysterically. After a few minutes, however, she shook them off impatiently, and was led up to the platform by Colonel Olcott, and after answering a few questions she demanded from him an explanation of the unsatisfactory character of the meeting upon which she had descended so abruptly. The Colonel and Mr. Sinnett explained

as well as they could; but she summarily ordered them to close the meeting, and called upon the officials to meet her at once in conference. The members departed in a condition of wild excitement and the officials waited upon Madame Blavatsky in one of the adjacent living rooms.

Now, as I had been invited to spend the night at Mr. Sinnett's, I, though a new and insignificant member, had to stay behind along with the greater people; and so it happened that I was a witness of the very remarkable scene which followed. Madame Blavatsky demanded a full account of the condition of the Lodge, and of the differences between Mr. Sinnett and Dr. Kingsford; and having received it, she proceeded to rate both of them exactly as if they had been a pair of naughty schoolboys, and finally actually made them both shake hands before us all as a token that their differences were amicably settled! Nevertheless, she ordered that Dr. Kingsford should form a Lodge of her own, in which doctrines could be discussed exclusively from her point of view. This order was carried out in a few days, the new branch taking the title of the Hermetic Lodge. So far as I remember, I do not think that it ever had more than a very small number of members, and I fancy that it soon faded into extinction.

Madame Blavatsky and Colonel Olcott both accompanied our party to Mr. Sinnett's house, and stayed there until a late hour, Madame Blavatsky expressing vigorous condemnation of the inefficiency of the officials in not managing the meeting better. I was of course presented to her, and Mr. Sinnett took occasion to tell her of my letter to the spiritualistic journal *Light* on the subject of the spirit Ernest's disavowal of our Masters. When she heard that little story she looked at me very searchingly and remarked:

"I don't think much of the clergy, for I find most of them hypocritical, bigoted and stupid; but that was a brave action, and I thank you for it. You have made a good beginning; perhaps you may do something yet."

You may be very sure that after that I missed no opportunity of attending any meeting at which she was present; and though I was far too shy to push myself forward and ask questions, I nevertheless listened eagerly to every word that fell from her lips, and I think that in that way I learnt a very great deal.

I wish I could convey to my readers some adequate conception of what she was to me and to all of us who were so highly favoured as to come into close touch with her—of the truly tremendous impression that she made upon us, of the deep affection and the intense enthusiasm which she evoked.

Only a few of us who knew her in her physical body are now left, and I think it is at once our duty and our privilege to try to pass on to our younger brethren at least a few ideas round which they can build their mental image of our great Founder, since their karma was not such as to permit them to see her in the flesh.

Madame Blavatsky (Chapter IV)

Let me try for a moment to look at her as an outsider might have looked, if that be possible for me. Frankly, I do not think I can do that, because I love her with the deepest love, I reverence her more than anyone else, except her great Masters and mine. So perhaps I cannot look at her dispassionately from outside, but at least I am trying to do so. I have seen many strangers approach her. I will try to tell you what I have seen reflected in their faces and their minds. The first thing that strikes them all, the first thing that always struck me, was the

tremendous power that she radiated. The moment one came into Madame Blavatsky's presence, one felt that here was someone who counted—someone who could do things, emphatically one of the great ones of the world; and I think that none of us ever lost that feeling.

There were assuredly many people who disagreed with various things that she said; there were others of us who followed her enthusiastically. She was so strong a person that I have never seen anyone among the thousands who met her who was indifferent to her. Some of them absolutely hated her, but more were immensely impressed by her. Many were almost awed by her; but those who knew her best loved her with a never-failing emotion, and love her still. I have recently seen some of those who knew her well, and it does seem that in every one of them the memory of her is just as green as it is in my own heart, and we have never ceased to love her. The impression that she made was indescribable. I can well understand that some people were afraid of her. She looked straight through one; she obviously saw everything there was in one—and there are men who do not like that. I have heard her make sometimes very disconcerting revelations about those to whom she spoke.

I say that that overwhelming sense of power was the first thing that was borne in upon one; and then it is difficult to say what came next, but there was a sense of dauntless courage about her which was very refreshing, outspokenness to the verge of—one could not quite say rudeness, but she spoke out exactly what she thought and exactly what she felt; there, again, there are people who do not like that, who find it rather a shock to meet naked truth; but that was what she gave them. Prodigious force was the first impression, and perhaps courage, outspokenness, and straightforwardness were the second.

I suppose most of us have heard that she was often accused of deception by those who disliked or feared her. Enemies thought her guilty of fraud, of forgery, of all kinds of extraordinary things. Those who repeat such slanders in the present day are all people who have never seen her, and I venture to say that if any of those who talk about her now could have been in her presence for an hour they would have realized the futility of their aspersions. I can understand that certain other things might have been said against her—for example, that she rode a little roughshod over people's prejudices sometimes; perhaps it is a good thing for people to have their prejudices exposed occasionally; but to accuse her of forgery or deception was utter folly to any of us who knew her. It was even said that she was a Russian spy. (There was a great scare at the time that Russia had designs on India.) If there ever was on this earth a person who was absolutely unsuited for the work of a spy, that person was Madame Blavatsky. She could not have kept up the necessary deception for ten minutes; she would have given it all away by her almost savage outspokenness. The very idea of deception of any sort in connection with Madame Blavatsky is unthinkable to anyone who knew her, who had lived in the same house with her, and knew how she spoke straight out exactly what she thought and felt. Her absolute genuineness was one of the most prominent features of her marvellously complex character.

I think the next thing which must have impressed the outsider was the brilliance of her intellect. She was without exception the finest conversationalist that I have ever met—and I have seen many. She had the most wonderful gift for repartee; she had it almost to excess, perhaps. She was full, too, of knowledge on all sorts of out-of-the-way subjects; I mean subjects more or less connected with our line of thought—but then it is difficult to realize how very wide is the range of thought which we include under the head of Theosophy. It involves knowing something at any rate along quite a large number of totally different lines.

Madame Blavatsky had that knowledge. Whatever might turn up in the course of conversation, Madame Blavatsky always had something to say about it, and it was always something distinctly out of the common.

Whatever else she may have been, she was never commonplace. She always had something new, striking, interesting, unusual to tell us. She had travelled widely, chiefly in little-known parts of the world, and she remembered everything, apparently, even the slightest incident that ever occurred to her. She was full of all kinds of sparkling anecdotes, a wonderful raconteuse, one who could tell her story well and make her point effective. She was a remarkable person in that respect, as in so many others.

Soon, with a little more intimate talk, one encountered the great central pivot of her life—her intense devotion to her Master. She spoke of Him with a reverence that was beautiful—all the more beautiful from the fact that one could not describe Madame Blavatsky as exactly of a reverent nature. On the contrary, she always saw the humorous side of anything and everything. Apart from this one great central fact, she would sometimes make a joke about things that some of us would have considered sacred; but that was because her utter straightforwardness made her detest anything in the nature of a sham or pretence, and there is a great deal of what passes for reverence which is really only empty-mindedness, though well akin perhaps to respectability.

What she called bourgeois respectability was rather in the nature of a red rag to Madame Blavatsky, because often there is so much hypocrisy in the keeping up of outer appearances while inside there are thoughts and feelings which are not respectable at all. In such cases she tore away the veil and exposed the things underneath, which did not please the unfortunate victim; because of that characteristic one would not have called her a reverential person. But the moment she spoke of her Master her voice fell into a tone of loving awe, and one could see that her feeling towards Him was the very life of her. Her utter trust in Him, and her love and reverence for Him, by contrast with the fact that she was not ordinarily reverent, were very beautiful to see.

I think those were the most prominent facts that a stranger would have seen in her. Our younger members, when they grow up and have read her books and realized a little of what we owe her, may quote her and say what a wonderful person she was; and then, quite possibly, they may meet people who will tell them that she was exposed, and was found to have acted fraudulently. Let them ask such slanderers:

“Did you know her?”

“O no”, they will reply, “of course I did not.”

You who have read this can rejoin:

“I have read an account written by one who did know her, who knew her exceedingly well; and he said that all such stories were absolutely and utterly untrue—that it was quite impossible that she could have performed any of those fraudulent actions; she could not have deceived people in the way that was stated.”

I could give you many instances in which she was accused of deception, and I can tell you exactly what it was that really happened, and can assure you that there was no fraud whatever in the matter. That much I do know for myself. You may hear much of a certain report made by a Commissioner of the Society for Psychical Research, who went out to India to investigate her case. If anyone quotes that to you, you can tell them that I, who am still living, was in Adyar when that young man (a very conceited young man he was, I am sorry to say), came out to make his report, and I can tell you certain things about that report which

show how unreliable it was, though I am sure that he was honest in his intention. I am told that many years later he acknowledged to our present President that if he had known as much about psychic matters in 1884 as he knew at the time of speaking, his report would have been very different.

He decided against H. P. B. in regard to the letters which came from the Masters, saying that she had written them herself. I have myself received such letters when she was thousands of miles away. I have seen them come in her presence, and I have seen them come when she was far away, and I know by irrefutable evidence that she did not write those letters. I tell you this because I think it is valuable for you to be able to say that you have seen or known of someone who is willing to bear personal testimony that there was no fraud about such things. The testimony of one eye-witness outweighs the prejudice of many people who, not being present, hear these things only at third or thirteenth hand.

Remember that, humanly speaking, without Madame Blavatsky there would have been no Theosophical Society, there would have been no presentation of all this glorious teaching to the people of the West. Perhaps there I am saying a little more than I should, because the Great Ones who stand behind made simultaneous efforts through two channels, Madame Blavatsky being one, and Dr. Anna Kingsford the other. I knew both of them. I can only say that while Dr. Kingsford's presentation was wonderful and interesting, it has not made much impression, has not taken hold of the world to any appreciable extent; whereas the existence of the Theosophical Society shows what Madame Blavatsky's presentation did.

Even the Theosophical Society shows only a small part of her work; for, for every member of this Society there may well be ten, twelve, or twenty non-members who have read the books and acquired much Theosophical knowledge. So her teaching has spread out of all proportion to the size of her Society. That is what Madame Blavatsky has done for us, and for the world, and for that we owe her our love and our gratitude. She told us always:

“These are the facts; but do not believe them because I say so. Use your own reason and common-sense; give life to the teaching, and prove it for yourselves. Don't carp or grumble or criticize; work.”

We who accepted her challenge, we who followed her advice, soon found that her statements were justified, that her teachings were true. So to you, her followers of the present day, I would say: “Go you, and do likewise.”

See to it, all of you, that we never forget her—that on White Lotus Day every year, as she desired, we commemorate the occasion. She did not ask that anyone should speak of her, though our love and reverence lead us always to do that. She did not even ask that her own books should be read; but she did ask that something should be read from the *Bhagavad-Gita* and from *The Light of Asia*, and that is always done in every Theosophical Lodge unto this day, and I hope that it always will be, and that we shall never allow the memory of our Founder to pass from our minds. I should like you to realize the fact, and to keep it ever in your minds, that all that we have and all that we have learnt, through whatever form it may now be coming to us, we really owe to Madame Blavatsky.