

## At Cairo and Madras

Isabel Cooper-Oakley



**Isabel Cooper-Oakley in 1893**  
(Theosophy.Wiki)

(Originally published in *Lucifer*, June 1891, a magazine started by Madame Blavatsky in London in 1887. Isabel Cooper-Oakley was a member of the Theosophical Society since 1884. She travelled to India with Madame Blavatsky (HPB), to whom she was very devoted, on that year. She was also a member of the Inner Group in London, which was set up by HPB in 1890. Mrs Cooper-Oakley's books include *The Comte de Saint-Germain: The Secret of Kings; Masonry and Medieval Mysticism: Traces of a Hidden Tradition; Mystical Traditions; Studies in the "Secret Doctrine"*; and *Theosophical Gleanings*, with Annie Besant, amongst many others. Source. Theosophy.Wiki)

IMPOSSIBLE is it for me, in the short space allotted, to give any details of the many deeply interesting times I have spent with our beloved Teacher and leader: I will therefore confine myself to the memorable winter of 1884-85, when the much-talked-of Coulomb affair took place. It was, without doubt, a momentous crisis in the history of the Theosophical movement of this century; and being thus important, details given by an eye-witness may be of interest.

H.P.B. had been staying during the summer with Miss Arundale in Elgin Crescent, but left her house to join Mr. Oakley and myself, and remained with us until we started for India with her. The house party consisted of H.P.B., my sister, Dr. Keightley, Mr. Oakley and myself. It was early in November, 1884, that we left Liverpool for Port Said *en route* for Madras. It had been arranged

that we were to go first to Cairo in order to get some definite information about the antecedents of the Coulobms, who were well known there, as the news of their treachery had already reached us some months before, news which H. P. B. had taken very calmly. We reached Port Said on the 17th of November, 1884, and there remained some few days for Mr. Leadbeater<sup>1</sup> to join us; on his arrival we took the mail boat down the Suez Canal to Ismailia, and then went by train to Cairo. Very deeply impressed on my memory is every incident connected with that memorable voyage. H.P.B. was a most interesting fellow-traveller, her varied information about every part of Egypt was both extensive and extraordinary. Would that I had space to go into the details of that time in Cairo, the drives through the quaint and picturesque bazaars, and her descriptions of the people and their ways. Especially interesting was one long afternoon spent at the Boulak Museum on the borders of the Nile, where H.P.B. astonished Maspero, the well-known Egyptologist, with her knowledge, and as we went through the museum she pointed out to him the grades of the Initiate kings, and how they were to be known from the esoteric side. But I must not linger over these memories of her.

To run briefly over events, H.P.B. and Colonel Olcott came to London from New York in 1878, and after a brief stay in England proceeded to Bombay where, at Girgaum, they opened the first Theosophical Headquarters in India and started the *Theosophist*. Soon after landing in Bombay Madame Coulomb, who had once nursed H.P.B. in Cairo, appeared at Headquarters and appealed for assistance. It marks one of the strongest traits in our Teacher's character that she never forgot a kindness, however trivial and however unworthy the person who did it. So when Coulomb, with her husband, came half-starved and penniless to H.P.B., they were taken into shelter. Madame Coulomb was made housekeeper and Alexis Coulomb general manager, as there was a lack of competent help for household work. M. Coulomb was by trade a carpenter and mechanic.

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<sup>1</sup> Note by CWL World: C. W. Leadbeater had received a letter from Mahatma K.H. through the occult agency of Madame Blavatsky just before she departed London, early November 1884. The letter said: 'Since your intuition led you in the right direction and made you understand that it was *my desire* you should go to Adyar *immediately*, I may say more. The sooner you go the better. Do not lose one day more than you can help. Sail on the 5th, if possible. Join Upasika [HPB] at Alexandria. Let no one know that you are going, and may the blessing of our Lord and my poor blessing shield you from every evil in your new life. Greeting to you, *my new chela*. K. H.' (See [http://www.cwlworld.info/On\\_KH\\_second\\_letter\\_to\\_CWL.pdf](http://www.cwlworld.info/On_KH_second_letter_to_CWL.pdf))

In 1883 Colonel Olcott and H.P.B. made arrangements to visit Europe, and the Society's general affairs were turned over to a "Board of Control", the Coulombs having charge of the house and remaining especially upstairs, where H.P.B. used to live. No sooner had H. P. B. sailed than the Coulombs shut themselves away in the upper part of the house, which had a separate staircase, and then Alexis Coulomb had over six months in which to do all his carpentering work, to make various trap doors and sliding panels for use in his conspiracy. They then proceeded to the missionaries in Madras, and offered to show them that tricks had been done, and they were paid by the missionaries for their pretended disclosures. Their plans were a little hurried at the end, owing to the unexpected arrival of Mr. William Q. Judge from New York, and the decision of the Board of Control to discharge Coulomb. The rough and unfinished condition of the trap doors is accounted for by their hurried departure. The Rev. Mr. Patterson himself informed Mr. Judge of the payment that had been made to the Coulombs.

Thus far their history; now to return to our journey. On leaving Cairo, H.P.B. and I went straight to Suez. Mr. Oakley remained at Cairo to get the documents from the police about the Coulombs; Mr. Leadbeater joined us at Suez. After waiting two days for the steamer we started for Madras. I am not often thoroughly ashamed of my country men and women; but I confess I had reason to be so during that fortnight; the first pamphlets written by the missionaries were being circulated on board ship, and every insulting remark that could be made about H.P.B. was heard. That voyage was very unpleasant, but some few kindly incidents relieved the general monotony of incivility to our dear friend. Col. Olcott and some members met us at Colombo, and we stayed there nearly two days, paying some deeply interesting visits to the old Buddhist Temples, and one especially charming visit to Sumangala, the High Priest, who evidently had a very high respect for H.P.B. We then proceeded to Madras. Never shall I forget the quaint picturesqueness of arrival there. A deputation, accompanied by a brass band, came off in to meet us; but the sound of the music was somewhat marred by the that the drop between the waves is so great that sometimes our band was on the top of a high roller, and sometimes almost engulfed between waves. On landing at the pier head there were hundreds to meet H.P.B., and we were literally towed by enthusiastic members down the truck, wildly decorated with paper roses, etc., and then surrounded of smiling dark faces. She was driven off to Pacheappah's hall, garlands of pink roses festooned round us, and were sprinkled somewhat copiously with rose water. Then H.P.B. and I were conducted by a Rajah to his carriage and driven off to Adyar. Here the warmest welcome awaited her. Members were

assembling from all parts of India for the approaching Convention; we went into the large hall and at once began discussing the all-absorbing Coulomb case. Col. Olcott then informed us that the Society for Psychical Research was sending out a member to investigate the matter, and accordingly a few days after, the notorious Mr. Hodgson arrived fresh from Cambridge. And now a word on this young man. Mr. Hodgson was an Australian by birth, and came to England to make his way in the world, and being an enterprising young man he was willing to do anything with that end in view. I am quite confident that if an older man had come, one with more experience and a maturer judgment, the Coulomb affair would have been presented to the world in a very different way. It takes a cool head and a just nature to side with the minority, and when Mr. Hodgson arrived in India, he found the whole Anglo-Indian Community in arms against Madame Blavatsky on two principal points—(1) that she was a Russian spy, (2) that she sided with the Hindoos against Anglo-Indians, if she thought that the former were unjustly treated, and above all had the courage to say so. Now, the position of a young man who wanted at once to do the right thing and to be popular with the majority, was necessarily very difficult; and a continuous round of dinner parties did not tend to clear his views, for he had incessantly poured into his ears a stream of calumny against her. The general community hated her for the reasons I have given; and the Missionaries hated her because she was unorthodox and a Theosophist. Mr. Hodgson's investigations were not conducted with an unbiassed mind, and from hearing everyone say Madame Blavatsky was an impostor he began to believe it: after a few interviews with Madame Coulomb and the Missionaries we saw that his views were turning against the minority. Now his report was not by any means accurate, for he omitted some very valuable evidence of phenomena given to him by Mr. Oakley and myself. Mr. Hodgson was treated with the greatest courtesy and friendliness by H.P.B. and Col. Olcott, and every opportunity was afforded him for investigating every hole and corner at Adyar; and yet he preferred, and gave more credence to, the testimony of a discharged servant, whose bad character was by that time universally known, than to that of H.P.B. and her friends, who had no monetary interest in giving their evidence. The trap doors and sliding panels had all been made by Coulomb, in H.P.B.'s absence, and his wife sold the character of the mistress who had saved her from starvation to the Missionaries and forged the letters she showed to them. Any person with of ordinary intellect and common sense could see that the trap doors and sliding panels were quite new, so new as to be immovable, *the grooves being quite fresh and unmarked by any usage whatever*, as Mr. Oakley and I found when we tried to move the largest sliding

door. If we could not do so with our combined efforts, surely it is ridiculous to think Madame Blavatsky could have used them for conjuring tricks; the arrangements were so bad that any trick would have been inevitably discovered. However Mr. Hodgson was so bent on being a “success” that these simple common-sense facts were disregarded by him. Immediately after the convention was over he left Headquarters, and went to live in Madras, until his investigations were ended. How often did H.P.B. ask him to let her see the letters she was supposed to have written, but neither she, nor any of her intimate friends, were ever allowed to see them. No one who was not on the spot at the time could imagine the scandalous injustice with which she was treated. The effect of all this worry was that she became seriously ill. Col. Olcott had started for Burmah, Mr. Oakley and I were comparatively alone with her. Very anxious were the hours and days of nursing that I went through those three weeks, as she grew worse and worse and was finally given up in a state of coma by the doctors. It proves how wonderful was the protective influence of H.P.B., ill or well; for though I was completely isolated with her near the roof of the house, an open staircase leading up, hardly a soul within call, yet night after night have I wandered up and down the flat roof, to get a breath of fresh air between 3 and 4 a.m., and wondered as I watched the daylight break over the Bay of Bengal, why I felt so fearless even with her lying apparently at the point of death; I never could imagine a sense of fear coming near H.P.B. Finally came the anxious night when the doctors gave her up, and said that nothing could be done, it was impossible. She was then in a state of coma and had been so for some hours. The doctors said that she would pass away in that condition, and knew, humanly speaking, that night’s watch must be the last. I cannot here go into what happened, an experience I can never forget ; but towards 8 a.m. H.P.B. suddenly opened her eyes and asked for her breakfast, the first time she had spoken naturally for two days. I went to meet the doctor, whose amazement at the change was very great. H.P.B. said, “Ah! doctor, you do not believe in our great Masters”. From that time she steadily improved. The doctor insisted on her being sent to Europe as soon possible ; I was unable to go with her, my health having broken down with the strain, and I could not stand without crutches. Space fails me, and the rest must wait; but this I must say, in all the years I have known our Teacher and friend I have never known her utter one ungenerous word of her greatest enemy; she was the practical personification of charity and forgiveness and was always ready to give another chance of doing better to any who had failed her. It is said that “familiarity breeds contempt”, but it is a striking fact that the more closely and intimately we were united to H.P.B. in everyday life, the more did

we learn to respect, nay to reverence her. A wonderful and mysterious line of demarcation always surrounded her, severing her inner spiritual life from her outer, and apparently ordinary one. Her every moment was devoted to the work she had been sent to do; nothing was too small or minute for her most careful attention. She passed away like a sentinel at his post, in the armchair in which she taught and wrote —the best and truest of Teachers, the most faithful and untiring of Messengers.

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