

“I used to wonder at and pity the people who sell their souls to the devil, but now I only pity them. They do it to have somebody on their side,” p. 110 Yeats Auto-B

DR. RICHARD HODGSON

Richard Hodgson, Jr.—destined to be called “one of the greatest, if not the greatest, psychical researcher” among the founders of modern Parapsychology—was born September 24th, 1855, at Melbourne, Australia. Educated in the public schools of the city, he later matriculated at the University of Melbourne, in 1871, becoming a B.A. in 1874, LL.B. in 1875, M.A. in 1876, and LL.D. in 1878, in which year, having completed his law studies at Melbourne, he went to England to enter the University of Cambridge as a scholar of St. John’s College. “There he read for the Moral Sciences Tripos, in which he took honors in 1881, and, on completing his Cambridge course, spent six months in Jena, Germany, attending the University there. Soon after his return to England he lectured for six months in different towns in the north of England in connection with University Extension. His subjects were scientific and literary, The Development of Poetry since 1789, and The Mind and the Senses.”¹

Drifting from an early adherence to the doctrines of the Methodist Church, on through the materialistic philosophy of Herbert Spencer—of whom he once counted himself a “disciple,”—Hodgson’s interest focused on Psychical Research. And when the Society for Psychical Research was founded in 1882, Hodgson’s name appeared on the first roster, under the founding Presidency of Henry Sidgwick, Professor of Moral Philosophy at Cambridge, with whom Hodgson had formed a fast and eventually lifetime friendship.

¹ The Life of Richard Hodgson, by Alex Baird, Psychic Press Ltd., London, 1949, pp 1-2.

In April 1884, Hodgson distinguished himself by being the first investigator to “expose” a case brought before the Society—in this instance by simulation of alleged clairvoyant feats performed by a mesmerized, illiterate youth.² On the second day of the month following, the Council of the Society, impressed by the evidences for Theosophical apparitions (paralleling somewhat similar cases which in the West were being made a particular subject for study by the Society’s leaders)³, selected a most distinguished Committee “to take the evidence which Colonel Olcott, Mr. Mohini, and Mr. Sinnett... kindly volunteered to give, as regards these Oriental apparitions...”⁴ The original Committee members were F.W.H. Myers, Frank Podmore, Edmund Gurney, H.J. Stack, and the President, Professor Sidgwick.

In Report of the General Meeting of the Society for June 30th, it was announced that shorthand notes of the Theosophical testimonies having been taken, the evidence was to be printed “shortly.”⁵ However, some unexpected change in plans—never satisfactorily explained—appears to have intervened, for the testimonies were never published in full, and their issuance even in part was delayed until the following November when, (with some additional material and partial analysis) there was provided for the private information of the members of the S.P.R. a pamphlet entitled, “First Report of the Committee of the Society for Psychological Research, appointed to Investigate the Evidence for Marvellous Phenomena offered by Certain Members of the Theosophical Society.” (Actually this title was a misnomer as the secretary of the Committee, Mr. Stack, had months previously, on May 28th, delivered the first “Report of the Committee,”

² Journal, S.P.R., vol. I, pp. 84-86.

³ Phantasms of the Living, by Edmund Gurney, M.A., Frederic W.H. Myers, M.A., and Frank Podmore, M.A., 2 vols., London: Rooms of the Society for Psychological Research, 14, Dean’s Yard, S.W., Trubner and Co., Ludgate Hill, E.C., 1886.

⁴ S.P.R., Journal, vol. I, p. 50.

⁵ Ibid., p. 93.

entitled On Contemporary Evidence as to ‘Phantasms of the Living in India,’⁶ at the eighth General Meeting of the Society, at Garden Mansion, St. James Park.)

While recognizing that “On the whole... (though with some serious reserves), it seems undeniable that there is a prime facie case, for some part at least of the claim made, which, at the point which the investigations of the Society for Psychical Research have now reached, cannot, with consistency, be ignored” the Committee declared the necessity of having “the reports of some competent inquirer, who, while free from any prepossession against the wisdom or the peculiar psychical developments of the East, is, nevertheless, prepared to conduct his Indian investigations with a sole regard to the definite evidential proof.” Consequently, it was announced that at Professor Sidgwick’s personal expense, “a colleague, whom we regard as thoroughly competent to conduct the required investigation, Mr. Hodgson, B.A., Scholar of St. John’s College, Cambridge,”—who, together with Mrs. Sidgwick (having submitted the report of his first “exposure”) had been co-opted as additional members of the Committee—was elected for the job. Arriving at Theosophical Headquarters during the annual Convention, Hodgson lived for several days as the special guest of the Founders, was given free run of the premises, and mingled engagingly with the officials and members.⁷

It has been generally supposed that Hodgson was, at the first, prejudiced against the authenticity of the Theosophical phenomena. But from the testimony of an independent observer at the time, who recalls Hodgson’s “High spirits” and enthusiasm for The Occult World, it would appear that he was—almost unseemly—optimistic about his chances of proving the case for

⁶ Ibid., p. 72.

⁷ See esp. The Golden Book of the Theosophical Society, ed. By C. Jinarajadasa, M.A., (St. John’s College, Cambridge), The Theosophical Publishing House, Adyar, Madras India, 1925, p. 83, Fig. 100. Richard Hodgson is seated directly on the left of Madame Blavatsky in the photograph.

Madame Blavatsky and assuming, as it were, the role of a Columbus of the occult.⁸ What his later deterrent proved to be, one can only surmise—perhaps, like his Cambridge peers, who founded their conviction of Madame Blavatsky’s “guilt” on their examination of specimens of the “Blavatsky-Coulomb Correspondence,” he too may have believed he could not be deceived by forgery; or, perhaps, he was shocked and angered by the paucity of phenomena Madame Blavatsky condescended to perform for him.⁹ In any case, there is now every evidential reason for substantiating Mahatma K.H.’s observation that it was “...the personal disappointment [Hodgson] felt, which made him turn in a fury against the alleged authors of the ‘gigantic swindle.’”¹⁰

Many of the innumerable prevarications and perversions of fact produced by this “fury” in Hodgson’s famous “Account of Personal Investigations in India, and Discussion of the Authorship of the ‘Koot Hoomi’ Letters”¹¹ have been carefully traced and identified by various reviewers.¹² Of especially pertinent interest, as bearing upon the occult powers of Damodar is the “Moradabad Case.” Recounted by Mrs. Beatrice Hastings (New Universe, vol. I, No. 2, December, 1937, pp. 6-19) it was, as follows:

⁸ Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research, July 1912, p. 443.

⁹ Ibid, p. 262, where it seems the only phenomenon Mme. Blavatsky afforded him was a rap or two on his skull. The “so-called ‘shocks’”, as he referred to them do not seem to have done him any good as he was left perplexed as to whether they were on her part “movements of impatience” or deceitful “finger-cracks”.

¹⁰ The Mahatma Letters to A.P. Sinnett, Compiled by A.T. Barker, T. Fisher Unwin Ltd., London, March 1926, p. 362.

¹¹ S.P.R. Proceedings, vol. iii, “Report of the Committee Appointed to Investigate Phenomena Connected with the Theosophical Society.” Section 2, pp. 207-380.

¹² A.P. Sinnett, The “Occult World Phenomena”, and the Society for Psychical Research, (G. Redway, London, 1886); A. Besant, H.P. Blavatsky and the Masters of the Wisdom, (Theosophical Publishing House, California, 1918); W. Kingsland, A Critical Analysis of the 1885 Report of the Society for Psychical Research, Appendix to The Real H.P. Blavatsky, (J.M. Watkins, London, 1928); B. Hastings, Defence of Madame Blavatsky, (The Hastings Press, Worthing, Sussex, 1937); W.A. Carrithers, Jr., The Truth About Madame Blavatsky: An Open Letter to the Author of ‘Priestess of the Occult’ Regarding the Charges Against H.P. Blavatsky, (Theosophical University Press, Covina, 1947); K.F. Vania, Madame H.P. Blavatsky, Her Occult Phenomena and the Society for Psychical Research (Sat Publishing Co., Bombay, 1951.)

**** SUGGESTION: REPRODUCE CASE HERE****

Equally apparent as malicious enthusiasm was Hodgson's singular desire to implicate Damodar as a confederate of Madame Coulomb in what he imagined—or pretended to imagine—were fraudulent performances of Shrine phenomena at Adyar. Not only falsely alleging that the discovery of the trick shrine apparatus had been an “‘exposure’ by the Coulombs”, Hodgson averred that Damodar was a party to these supposed chicaneries and—in a wild moment of imprudent zeal, uniquely emphasizing his certainty by dual exclamation points—ridiculed as incredible the idea that “Mr. Damodar, highly developed Chela of Mahatma Koot Hoomi, remained entirely ignorant!!” Of M. Coulomb's “hole in the wall immediately behind the Shrine.”¹³

But alas for all these ingenious and complacent charges, Mme. Coulomb—who, if we are to believe Hodgson, was the best authority on the matter—candidly relates that, far from knowing Damodar to be such a conspirator, she and her husband were fearful lest Damodar expose the “trap-doors” should they be revealed to him; and her husband adds that “it was only on the morning of the 16th May that I confessed to Mr. Damodar the existence of the trap-doors (as can be seen by his affidavit), and this confidentially”—¹⁴ And, Mme. Coulomb sadly remarks, “As a reward for the confidential communication made by my husband to Mr. Damodar on the morning of the 16th, we received the following notice...:

¹³ S.P.R. Proceedings, vol. iii, p. 341.

¹⁴ E. Coulomb, Some Account of My Intercourse with Madame Blavatsky From 1872 to 1884; with a number of additional letters and a full explanation of the most marvellous Theosophical Phenomena, (E. Stock, London, 1885), p. 92.

NOTICE

To Madame E. Coulomb, Adyar, Madras.

Madame,

I beg to send you this notice as a Vakil of the High Court of Judicature at Madras.

It has been represented to me, on behalf of the committee appointed by the General Council of the Theosophical Society for the purpose of taking legal and other proceedings, with certain charges brought against you, that you have been informing various people, that the Theosophical Society is working for and has the intention of bringing about the overthrow of the British Government, that it is established, or is being used for, political agitation, and that fraudulent means had been adopted for the purpose of producing phenomena, and thereby imposing upon the public, and that you have further made several other statements, equally defamatory in their character, and fully calculated to injure the reputation of the Society and the members thereof, intending thereby to harm, or knowing or having reason to believe, that such imputations will harm the reputation of the Society and its members.

I beg to inform you, therefore, that you have committed an offence punishable under Section 500 of the Indian Penal Code.

I am instructed by my clients to call upon you to give satisfactory explanation of your conduct with respect to the allegations aforesaid within 24 hours from the receipt of this notice.

In conclusion, I beg to inform you that, in case you fail to do so, such proceedings, both criminal and civil, will be taken against you as may be considered proper under the circumstances.

I beg to remain, your obedient servant,

(Signed.) T. SUBBA ROW, BA.A., B.L.

Vakil, High Court, Madras.

Registered for acknowledgement,

Triplicane, Madras, 16th May, 1884.

Triplicane, Madras, this 16th day of May, 1884.”¹⁵

Consequently, after some further action by Damodar, on the day following, the Coulobms received notice to leave the premises and from Madame Blavatsky orders were received by telegraph, “to give up the keys” authorizing Dr. Franz Hartman a home “ ‘exclusive’ possession of her rooms” which housed M. Coulomb’s trick machinery. “accordingly,” Mme. Coulomb states, “in the afternoon my husband went up to deliver charge of Madame’s apartment to Mr. Damodar...” And so resulted the “exposure.”¹⁶

Not only did Hodgson—the master illusionist—falsely and brazenly misrepresent before the world the real course of events, the relation of the witnesses, and especially the testimony of Mme. Coulomb herself, but he completely suppressed these explanations and citations given by his own chief witness—explanations that proved his allegations against Damodar K. Mavalankar to be fundamentally and particularly false and extraordinarily deceitful! This is alone enough to ruin him! As a result of these monumental dissimulations, the Society for Psychical Research, for seventy years, has remained ignorant of the truth that, on incontestable evidence and by testimony they are in no position to impeach, evidence and testimony readily available to them, not only was Damodar K. Mavalankar not a party to the Coulomb conspiracies, but when they were revealed to him privately he was evidently so shocked and angered that he himself, on the very same day and apparently without advice or hesitation whatsoever, directly precipitated the

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 109-110.

¹⁶ Ibid., p 111.

exposure of the conspiracy, the revelation of its machinery, and the expulsion of the two conspirators!

Having by such means “exploded” Madame Blavatsky and her fellow Theosophists, R. Hodgson now rode the crestwave of his newly-found fame and authority, to even greater triumphs, Hodgson proceeded to “expose” in turn the greatest of Spiritualism’s contemporary “physical mediums,” including William Eglinton (who had participated in the “Vega case”), Henry Slade (who, years before, had been sent by Madame Blavatsky and Col. Olcott to Russia as subject for the investigations of the famous Psychical Researcher, Aksakov), and Eusapia Paladino (now generally considered to be the most remarkable subject ever to submit to the restrictions of laboratory investigation, and who, after “convincing” leaders of the S.P.R. of the authenticity of her supernormal powers, lived to see Hodgson’s “exposure” superceded by a remarkably evidential series of sittings conducted at the instance of the S.P.R. Council, in 19808, at Naples.)¹⁷ Not only in the case of Paladino, but in other instances, authorities in his own field did not regard Hodgson’s conclusions as final. Remarkably enough, so skeptical authorities as Frank Podmore and an Editor for the American Society for Psychical Research doubted that his “proofs” against Madame Blavatsky were enough to substantiate his charges or sufficient to cover his theories.¹⁸ Very few of his admirers remained to retain his verdict on Paladino as either

¹⁷ For the “Vega case” see: (A.O. Hume), Hints on Esoteric Theosophy, “Postscript to Second Edition,” pp. 153-179, reprinted 1909, The Theosophical Publishing Co., Adyar; and Letters from the Masters of the Wisdom (second Series), pp. 98-100. (The Theosophical Press, Chicago, 1926.) On Henry Slade, see The Complete Works for H.P. Blavatsky (1874-1879,) Index, Rider & Co., London, 1933; and J.C.F. Zollner, Professor of Physical Astronomy at the University of Leipsic, Transcendental Physics, translated from the German, with a Preface and Appendices, by C.C. Massey, (Harrison, London, 1880.) On Paladino, see H. Carrington, Eusapia Palladino and Her Phenomena, (B.W. Dodge & Co., New York, 1909.)

¹⁸ F. Podmore, Modern Spiritualism, vol. ii, pp. 268-269, (Methuen & Co., London, 1902.) The Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research, February, 1940, pp. 60-64, “Survey and Comment.”

comprehensive or final; and, in at least one case, none of his English colleagues, afforded an opportunity to try his charges, accepted one of his portentous “exposures.”¹⁹

Nevertheless, in the domain of Psychological Research today, Hodgson remains “the great researcher” even as Myers, the former student of Madame Blavatsky, remains “the great theoretician,” Podmore and Mrs. Sidgwick “the great analysts,” and Sir William Barrett “the great organizer.”²⁰ No better compliment can be cited than that of Dr. Walter Franklin

Prince, the famous American Psychological Researcher, and one-time President of the Society for Psychological Research,” ...if any man was fitted by mental constitution and by equipment to build a road clear across the bog, assuming that the whole region of psychological research is a bog, Dr. Richard Hodgson, the academic product of two great universities, lecturer in one of them, seemed to be the man. Of keen and logical intellect, author of historic exposures of fraud, co-author of the finest demonstration of the possibilities of mal-observation and memory aberration in existence, unusually versed in the methodology of fraud and deception, he was regarded as the arch-skeptic, and his appointment to the head of the Psychological Research in this country was hailed by its opponents with approval.²¹ Strangely enough this tribute appears in a book devoted to an examination of the irrational vagaries of skepticism, “Being a Survey of Negative

¹⁹ F. Podmore, The Newer Spiritualism, pp. 157-158 (Henry Holt & Co., New York, 1911.)

²⁰ For a curious endeavor to discredit the assertion that Myers was a Member of the Theosophical Society, see S.P.R. Journal, vol. xxvii, p. 167. On the authority of “persons who had been closely associated with F.W.H. Myers during Madame Blavatsky’s lifetime,” Mr. W.H. Salter, Member of Council, and later President of the S.P.R., asserted that Myers “had not at any time been a member of the Theosophical Society,” information “fully confirmed” by “further inquiries.” That Myers so effectually kept to himself his previous affiliation—during those later years when he referred derisively to the “‘domestic muffs’ of Mm. Blavatsky’s far-famed cenacle”—was to be hardly unexpected. That Myers was, not only a serious student of Theosophical philosophy (as is proved by his “Note” on the philosophical explanation of the modus operandi of occult phenomena, given in the “First Report” of the S.P.R. Committee, and by his letter of July 1883, titled “Some Inquiries Suggested by Mr. Sinnett’s Esoteric Buddhism,”—see H.P. Blavatsky: Collected Writings, 1886, Ed. By Boris de Zirkoff, [The Philosophical Research Society, Los Angeles, 1950] pp. 129-142--), but that he was actually an “F.T.S.” is shown by [illegible text] etc.

²¹ Dr. J.H. Cousins (The Theosophist, October, 1925) asserts that Sir William Barrett, F.R.S., initiator of the British and American Societies for Psychological Research and a President of the former organization, once privately characterized Hodgson’s Report as “a blot on the Proceedings of the Society for Psychological Research.”

²² Walter Franklin Prince, Ph.D., The Enchanted Boundary, p. 5, (Boston Society for Psychic Research, 1930.)

Reactions to Claims of Psychic Phenomena 1820-1930.” But then, one supposes, Dr. Prince never bothered himself to look between the covers of Hodgson’s Baedeker to the bog, Mme. Coulomb’s volume!

His accomplishments having been rewarded by election to the S.P.R. Council, Hodgson was invited by the American Society to serve as its Secretary, on the instigation of Mr. R. Pearsall Smith, one of its leading founders, who had been strongly impressed by the investigator’s “brilliant work in exposing Madame Blavatsky.”²³ On arriving in 1887, Hodgson went for a sitting to the now-famous Boston medium, Mrs. Lenore Piper; and—becoming convinced this woman was bringing him into communication with the “spirits of the departed”—he proceeded to dedicate the remaining years of his life to an establishment of the claims he made for her. Under Hodgson’s supervision, Mrs. Piper became the subject of several voluminous reports to the Society, over a period of almost twenty years, convincing (among others) Professor and Mrs. Sidgwick, Podmore, Myers, Sir Oliver Lodge, Professor James Myslop (later founder of the present American Society for Psychical Research), and Walter Leaf, translator for the S.P.R. of V. S. Solovyoff’s infamous “revelations.”²⁴

Sir Ernest Bennett, M.A., late Fellow of Hartford College, Oxford, and Councillor of the S.P.R., affirmed that “Richard Hodgson’s chief contribution to the Psychical Research was undoubtedly his long and accurate investigation of the phenomena produced for many years through the mediumship of Mrs. Piper, of Boston, Mass....it is certainly true that the

²³ A. Baird, The Life of Richard Hodgson, p. 33.

²⁴ For the exposure of Solovyoff’s allegations, see Beatrice Hastings, “Solovyoff’s Fraud: Being a critical analysis of the book ‘A Modern Priestess of Isis’ translated [on behalf of the Society for Psychical Research] from the Russian of Vsevolod S. Solovyoff by Walter Leaf, The Canadian Theosophists, pp. 154-391, 1943.

investigation of Mrs. Piper's mediumship, free as she was from the faintest suspicion of personal fraud, represents one of the most solid achievements of the S.P.R. since its inception."²⁵

However this may be, it was not until after Hodgson's sudden death by heart failure that it became somewhat generally known that during his "scientific experiments" with Mrs. Piper, Hodgson became a "medium" himself. Having never married, he began to receive "communications" from his deceased childhood sweetheart, reserved a household chair in her name, and set aside a special room, which he allowed no one to enter, "in case they should upset the 'conditions' or in some way disturb the 'magnetic atmosphere,'" of this "shrine."²⁶ Believing himself to be the medium for "divine instructors," he there received the "philosophy," and one may well suppose, the consolation to assuage his "disappointment" of earlier years.²⁷

Whatever final decision history may make on this strange anomaly of a medium investigating his "gods"—in the name of Science—Hodgson's unique esteem remains unchallenged, at least among his fraternal posterity. [edited text missing] After his death, in December, 1905, he was posthumously honored by being the first Psychical Researcher in history to have a University endowment fund established in his name, the "Hodgson Fellowship in Psychical Research," at Harvard. One may contrast the regards thus paid to him with the considered opinion of the present critic who in 1947, after referring to the investigator's remarkable mal-observations and marvelous lapses of memory—errantly set up as proofs against Mme. Blavatsky—, alluded to his many important contradictions of evidence and fact

²⁵ A. Baird, The Life of R. Hodgson, pp. xvi-xvii.

²⁶ Hereward Carrington, Associate, S.P.R., formerly Councilor, A.S.P.R., the Story of Psychic Science (Washburn, New York, 1931), p 166.

²⁷ In his Report of 1885, p. 248, Hodgson was pleased to exclaim "[!]" incredulously at mention of "Black Magic." Theosophical students of the doctrine of moral responsibility and inexorable karma will, for their part, doubtless receive with equal incredibility the "philosophy" of black magic dished out for the devotees of the "piper circle." As an example, at the sitting of June 19, 1895, the medium's "control," delineating the future state of the human soul after death, declared, "It is only the body that sins and not the soul." And, in answer to the question, "Does the soul

condemned his “profound and gross incompetence.” Ten additional years of study, discovery, and research have [text missing] and “lapses of memory” are found to be less evidential of mental instability. By their [text illegible] Coherence and magnitude are now seen to indicate less of a mental than of a moral mentality.

carry with it into its new life all its passions and animal appetites?” the “spirit” replied, “Oh no indeed, not at all.” (S.P.R. Proceedings, vol. xiv, 9. 36) So much for the “shrine” at which the “nemesis” of the Mahatmas worshipped!