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PROSPECTUS

Obituary: The “Hodgson Report” on Madame Blavatsky

by Adlai E. Waterman

The case of Madame Blavatsky is the most celebrated in the annals of Psychical Research. It is also unique in the history of Occultism, for it is the only recorded instance of an initiated thaumaturgist or self-professed “practical occultist” exhibiting wonders before members of a committee of recognized parapsychologists.

H.P. Blavatsky, born Helena de Hahn in 1831, daughter of a Germanic cavalry officer and granddaughter of a Russian princess, began life as a child-medium (automatist). After years spent in world-travel, pursuing the mysteries of Asiatic Magic and the secrets of practical Occultism, she helped found the Theosophical Society in 1875 at New York City. From her pen afterwards came Isis Unveiled and The Secret Doctrine: the Synthesis of Science, Religion and Philosophy, fountainhead of modern Occultism and inspiration of the world-wide Theosophical Movement. Before her death in 1891, she had come to be recognized as one of the most dynamic women and controversial figures of her time. Despite the numerous biographies, scores of books, and hundreds of articles “explaining” Madame Blavatsky, her life remains a baffling enigma for the public of the 20th Century.

Previously regarded in Europe and Russia as a “medium” for mental and physical supernormal (psychic) phenomena, Madame Blavatsky, both in America and later in India, was surrounded by mysterious wonders. Strange voices and apparitions attended her coming and going; at her command objects were “duplicated” or “materialized”, appearing or disappearing inexplicably. At Theosophical Society Headquarters, established at Adyar, India, a Shrine or

cabinet was set up as a point for exchange of communications with her mysterious “Teachers” or “Brothers” (said to be residing in the distant Himalayas and elsewhere), and letters of inquiry locked in the cabinet vanished instantaneously, or were replaced by notes of reply, or were taken out inscribed in a Mahatmic hand. Unlike the séance phenomena of spirit mediums, the feats acknowledged by Madame Blavatsky—when not attributed to her unseen “Brothers”—, were performed in full light, without cabinet or “circle” or usual paraphernalia, and came in direct response to her purpose and will.

In April, 1884, leaders of the recently formed Society for Psychical Research—plagued then, as now, by “the demand of critics that evidence [for psychical phenomena] should be got which can be repeated at will”—became interested in the claims of Madame Blavatsky and her “chelas” who “professed to have a large amount of contemporary evidence for the production of telepathic phenomena at will...” A Committee to investigate these claims was appointed by the S.P.R. Council—which itself included more than one Fellow of the Theosophical Society. Perhaps no more illustrious committee has yet appeared in the annals of Psychical Research, including, as this eventually did, three past or future Presidents of the S.P.R. (Professor and Mrs. Sidgwick, and F.W.H. Myers), as well as the Society’s then Hon. Secretaries (one being E. Gurney), and thusly comprising the pioneer founders of modern Parapsychology. In November 1884, the Committee’s provisional and preliminary (unpublished) Report noted, with some reservation, that there did indeed exist a prime facie case for the truth of at least some of the claims made for these phenomena. But, the following year, in its final verdict, the Committee branded Madame Blavatsky “one of the most accomplished, ingenious and interesting imposters in history.”

This was the first big “expose” in modern parapsychology: the first and only time an official Committee of the S.P.R. sat in judgment and publicly condemned a subject of official inquiry; and the course of that “exposure” is still to be seen in the reports of the course of that “exposure” established a methodology the effects of which can still be seen in the reports of current psychological research. But did it prove that Madame Blavatsky was a fraud? So keen a skeptic as Frank Podmore—himself a member of this Committee—seems not to have been altogether convinced, for in 1902, when classing Madame Blavatsky with D.D. Home, greatest of the spirit-mediums, he wondered whether these two unique psi-subjects may not have possessed “some power” capable of making persons “see visions and dream dreams.”

Was then the Committee’s verdict justified by the evidence? Mr. Waterman’s re-examination of the record furnishes the reader with a new look at the matter and, by meticulous recital of evidence, book and page, shows that, quite obviously, it was not. In arriving at this conclusion, helped by evidence hitherto overlooked or grossly ignored, the author draws mainly upon the testimony of witnesses hostile to Madame Blavatsky, especially the reports of Dr. Richard Hodgson, the Committee’s chief investigator, whose accounts of inquiries in India was adopted into their final Report. Mr. Waterman’s analysis shows that, oddly enough, both Dr. Hodgson and the Committee based their charges and conclusions on testimony and evidence provided by a certain Mons. and Mme. Coulomb, ex-associates of Madame Blavatsky, who, defecting, professed to be her former confederates in the manufacture of spurious wonders. Thus, writes Adlai Waterman, “In drawing up its enumerated ‘conclusions’—‘unanimously arrived at’—, the S.P.R. Committee accepted as proven only two positive accusations against Mme. Blavatsky. Essential to both of these decisions were claims and evidence brought forward by Mons. and Mme. Coulomb.” At the center of the problem stand the “informers,” the Coulombs:

“It is safe to calculate that for every ten thousand persons who have heard and believe that Richard Hodgson ‘exposed’ H.P. Blavatsky as a fraud and imposter, not more than one has read his ‘expose’; and that for every thousand of his readers, hardly one has ever seen Emma Coulomb’s pamphlet. And yet, by logic and every rule of commonsense, the latter document takes precedence over all others in standing at the very heart of the controversy raised by the Coulombs, comprising as it does the firsthand unadulterated testimony of the chief accusers, together with documentary ‘proofs’ adduced for their claims. Yet, strange to say, practically no attention was paid to this priceless pamphlet—least of all by indignant Theosophists who put no stock in what Mme. Coulomb might have to say! ...Particularly noteworthy is the fact that Dr. Hodgson himself seems to have had very great reluctance to make, by quotation, any use of Mme. Coulomb’s printed (prior) explanations. The reason for this odd behavior on his part, with respect to the testimony of his chief witness, becomes readily apparent once we examine the major charges brought against Madame Blavatsky by Dr. Hodgson and now, for the first time, compare his allegations detail-by-detail against original, earlier-published claims of Madame Coulomb herself.”

This comparison proves to be devastating. It leads the author to observe that the Coulombs’ testimony, upon which Dr. Hodgson relied so heavily, “amounted to nothing except a farrago of nonsense, self-contradictory and contradicted.” And, when finding instance after instance in which Hodgson had to suppress great portions of this damning testimony or else see his own inferences and charges collapse, the author is forced to the momentous conclusion that Dr. Hodgson—generally recognized as perhaps the greatest Psychological Researcher of the Golden Age of Psychological Research in England—suppressed and omitted vital facts from his consideration and report on theosophical phenomena “as if he were not a scientific investigator

making an impartial inquiry but only a common prosecutor obligated to 'building a case' at all costs."

In the implications of this and related findings, Mr. Waterman has here produced a study of great importance to Parapsychology, and one which should be of interest to all those who follow Psychical Research, Spiritualism, Theosophy, Occultism, or the psychology of fraud and controversy.

Some idea of the scope of this succinct survey may be seen in example Section headings: The Investigation by the Society for Psychical Research; The "Blavatsky-Coulomb Correspondence"; The Mahatma Letters; The Letter "Traps"; The Occult Room Bookcase Phenomenon; The "Astral Bell" Phenomenon; The Doll, "Christofolo," and Apparitions of Mahatmas; The Shrine and Surroundings (including, The Shrine: Its Design and Construction; Location of the Shrine; Curtain and Wall-Cloth; Inspecting the Wall; March to October, 1883; The Almirah; The "Boarding" or Door; Relative Positions of Door and Shrine; The "Recess" and the "Bricked Frame"; The "Sideboard"; "Traces of the Hole in the Wall").