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Madame Blavatsky: "One of the World's Great Jokers"¹
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It seems that about every ten years another author must sally forth with a biography of Madame Blavatsky. No one appears to profit much from this except the book trade and the generally uninformed who may be mildly stimulated by the repetition of strange stories and who, if inclined to curiosity, may be made a little more inquisitive about all of it. For the student of psychical research, however, the career of Madame Blavatsky deserves something more than a periodic re-hashing of half-told tales spiced only with the addition of new error.

Certainly the case is not without importance even now, for, coming so soon after the formation of the Society for Psychical Research, its culmination marked an important point of development in the methodology of modern psychical research. As Mrs. Sidgwick put it, "... I think it had a great effect on our understanding of the difficulty of our work and of the care required not to arrive at conclusions prematurely."²

The publisher's recommendation on this latest biography [by Symonds] specifies that the book "throws new light on this astonishing woman. " But it is difficult to see in what respect this promise has been fulfilled by the author, who was also biographer, literary executor, and friend of the notorious Aleister Crowley: poet, *fantaisiste*, and self-styled "Black Magician." He describes his present subject as "the founder of modern occultism, the Messenger of the White Brotherhood" (p. 253). This ought to please theosophists, but, from what insight the author has

¹ This quotation is taken from *Madame Blavatsky, Medium and Magician*, by John Symonds, Odhams Press Ltd., London, 1959, 254 pp., 21s, upon which this critical review is based. All quotations, unless otherwise specified, are from this book, since published in an American edition, *The Lady With the Magic Eyes*, Thomas Yoseloff, New York, 1960, 254 pp., 55.00.-Ed.

² Jubilee Address, *Proc. S.P.R.*, Vol. XLI, 1932-1933, p. 9.

given into his own motives-as in the incident of the theosophical hostess whose library he was using and from which he confessedly did not want to be parted-one is tempted to suspect that Mr. Symonds here, as elsewhere in his book, expresses not conviction but merely indicates a reluctance to hurt "feelings" by appearing too "sceptical of anything...about the Master Koot Hoomi, and the Great White Brotherhood of Adepts" (p. 13).

He begins his survey with a period in Madame Blavatsky's life that may be new to anyone who supposes that she swept onto the scene as "the Messenger of the White Brotherhood" in full bloom. The better part of three chapters is given to recitation of the marvels of the Eddy brothers and the Holmeses, spirit-mediums (straight out of Col. Olcott's *Old Diary Leaves*³, upon which this biographer relies heavily). At this stage, before the founding of the Theosophical Society and the subsequent departure for India, H.P.B. (as she preferred) figured privately and publicly as a chief witness for these mediums whose physical phenomena brought condemnation in the spiritualist press. While Col. Olcott took charge of the defense in both of these debacles, publishing a book in defense of the Eddys and organizing a "committee" to "investigate" the Holmes controversy, it is noteworthy that when H.P.B.'s own phenomena⁴ came under attack in 1884, he neither published a book nor headed a committee for her defense. In fact, keeping more or less silent, he then actually threw his weight as president of her Society against any legal or public determination. Why? Mr. Symonds doesn't help us to an answer.

The biographer describes H.P.B. as "a medium," a "very powerful one" (p. 29) "of unrivalled ability" (p. 64); but it does not appear that she professed to put sitters in contact with departed relatives. On the contrary, from the time of her arrival in America she seems to have put off any such requests, and only privately (as with Olcott, after their initial meeting at a Vermont

³ In six volumes, Theosophical Publishing House, Madras, 1941.

⁴ In her day, much was heard of *Mahatmic* miracles and *Mahatma Koot Hoomi's* marvels. But upon getting the results of Dr. Richard

séance) introduced her friends to a fantastic "spirit" (latterly dubbed, in theosophical terminology, an "elemental") called John King, the Buccaneer. Mr. Symonds fails to tell us whether or how this evolved into Koot Hoomi a bit later. But, from the start (and in her case the record of these phenomena under one guise or another goes back to a childhood of tantrums, hallucinations, and hysteria), John King and the procession which followed were accompanied by a variety of mysterious physical disturbances, the "astral bells" being one of the more common, whether heard in the New York "Lamasery," at A. P. Sinnett's in Simla, or in a London drawing room.

Here, Symonds, ignoring the explanations of Dr. Hodgson and Madame Coulomb, credits Solovyoff with a dramatic exposure: "Astral bells had sounded ... something dropped onto the floor. Solov'yov hurriedly bent down to pick it up and found in his hands a pretty little silver thing, of fine work and strange form-the magic bell!" (p. 219). Dr. Hodgson expressed the suspicion that Madame Blavatsky might have produced these sounds by means of a "machine concealed about her person ... a small musical-box"-or "two."⁵ On the same page he states that her erstwhile confidante, Madame Coulomb, told him when he saw her in India in 1885, "that they were actually so produced, by the use of a small musical-box, constructed on the same principle as the machine employed in connection with the trick known under the name, 'Is your watch a repeater?'" What is more, to prove it, she showed him garments bearing "stains resembling iron-mould..." But the original claim was that this phenomenon was worked by, pulling "a string" to "a bell" suspended in a "vacuum" between brick walls behind the "Shrine" in

Hodgson's investigations in India, H.P.B. privately confessed responsibility, as we now see: "I am dubbed the greatest imposter of the age, and a Russian spy into the bargain...O cursed phenomena, which I only produced to please private friends and instruct those around me" (p. 222).

⁵ "Report of the Committee Appointed to Investigate Phenomena Connected with the Theosophical Society," *Proc. S.P.R.*, Vol. III, 1885, p. 263.

Madame Blavatsky's quartet!' at Adyar, Madras.⁶ That had been Madame Coulomb's explanation until the appearance of a pamphlet in which one of her missionary-sponsors reported: "A correspondent writes to the *Madras Mail*, that page 62 of the July number of *Knowledge* contains the following-'Madame Blavatsky's trick of causing a bell to sound in the air may be bought at Hamley's the Noah's Ark, Holborn; Bland's, New Oxford Street; or at any good shop where conjuring apparatus is sold, under the title, "Is your watch a repeater?"'

"A musical box can also be employed."⁷

Information only recently obtained reveals that, contrary to general presumption, Madame Blavatsky did not refuse to perform phenomena for members of the S.P.R. Committee investigating the theosophical wonders. In October, 1955, the writer addressed a petition to the Council of the Society for Psychical Research, requesting that he might be granted permission to obtain, with all costs chargeable to himself, photographic facsimiles of as many unpublished documents from that investigation as might still have been retained by the Society. A preliminary search revealed nothing; but in August, 1960, as the result of a renewal of this petition and search, there was brought to light "a large packet" containing what probably constitutes the last original source of information on this case. Among the documents photographed for the writer on 90 feet of 35 mm. neg. microfilm, by permission of the Council and at his specific instruction, are several of unique importance; and, of the number heretofore unsuspected by historians, one is a rejected draft (in printer's proof) of the Committee's preliminary and provisional report of 1884.

In this version, unlike that released later the same year, F. W. H. Myers and Edmund Gurney (joint secretaries of the Society and members of the Committee) are listed among the witnesses to theosophical phenomena, since on two occasions (July 5th and 26th, 1884), once in

⁶ Madame 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 Marvelous Theosophical Phenomena" (published for the proprietors of the *Madras Christian College Magazine*),

company with Sir William F. Barrett (an initiator of the Society), they themselves had heard the "astral bell" in H.P.B.'s presence. While not ruling out the possibility of unexplained trickery, Gurney reported: "It was noticeably a *free* sound, such as could not be produced by any object whose vibrations were in any way damped or checked. I should say, for instance, that it would be difficult, if not impossible, for such a sound to be produced by any mechanical arrangement concealed in a dress or up a sleeve."

And Myers added, "I have experimented with the conjuror's trick called 'Is your watch a repeater?' and have of course heard repeating watches, in and out of waistcoat or other pockets. I think that in all cases there is something of deadened quality when the origin of the sound is concealed about the person. I was alive to this point, and I could not discern any deadening in the clear tingling sound of the bell."⁸

In reply to those who think all the answers are in hand, it is discrepancies like these which much incline one to agree with Mr. Frank Podmore's not unweighty contribution to this problem. It was his view that not all the phenomena of either D. D. Home nor Madame Blavatsky could be adequately explained by any simple theory of conspiracy, conjuring, or physical fraud, but that both of these unique mediums possessed, as he termed it, "some power" capable of causing persons to "see visions and dream dreams."⁹

Mr. Podmore specifically cites the positive testimony of Solovyoff who, despite his final adverse stand, was unable to shake off an impression made upon him by an "astral visitation" from the Mahatma Morya.

W. Moore, Madras, Nov., 1884 p. 71.

⁷ J. Murdoch, *Theosophy Unveiled*, Madras, Jan., 1885, p. 31.

⁸ "First Report of the Committee of the Society for Psychical Research Appointed to Investigate the Evidence for Marvelous Phenomena Offered by certain Members of the Theosophical Society," Appendix XX, (unissued), 1884, quoted by special permission of the Society for Psychical Research.

⁹ Frank Podmore, *Modern Spiritualism*, Vol. II, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1912, p. 268.

For his part, Symonds is so impressed by this reported incident that he thinks it "suggests that the Mahatmas do really live and have their being, can read the thoughts of men, walk through locked hotel doors, travel enormous distances in a flash..." And *he* "should have thought this conclusive, and would have capitulated to Madame Blavatsky at once..." (p. 195). Apparently Mr. Symonds' imagination lacks the vitality and range of that of the late Mr. Podmore. At any rate, when it comes to the negative testimony, he accuses Solovyoff of "prejudice," asserting that the "two things in his favor" were simply his skill as a master of the pen, and the bias of "the ordinary reader" against even the possibility of psychic phenomena. He evidently thinks his readers can dismiss the negative testimony of Solovyoff (in *A Modern Priestess of Isis*, published on behalf of the S.P.R.) because it is now said, "There is only his word for it" (p. 220). But this will not do, for the biographer has simply shut his eyes to the important problem of the numerous contemporaneous letters addressed to Solovyoff by H.P.B. and in print adduced as evidence by her erstwhile correspondent and prospective *chela*.

Mr. Symonds' whimsical assessments are in the forefront when he comes to deal with the S.P.R. Committee's investigation of the Blavatsky phenomena. He offers the view that H.P.B. hoped to "magnetize" the "psychists" (p. 181). Be that as it may, one would expect from someone today "well-known... as a writer on occult subjects" (as the publisher puts it) a better understanding of the methods of the S.P.R. He writes that the "aim of the Society for Psychical Research was to sift genuine ghosts and previsions from the chaff of coincidence and hallucination" (p. 176). This, of course, makes one think that the founders of modern parapsychology were not at all on the lookout for *fraud*; whereas they were for a fact as keenly aware of that danger as any. But the "aim" is more seriously misconstrued, for even today the purpose must be to *first* determine *if* there are such things as "genuine ghosts" before pretending

to sift them from chaff. And here again we come upon the undocumented allegation that "Myers was also a member of the Theosophical Society..." (p. 176). But, after personal inquiry, Mr. W. H. Salter concluded that the same claim put forward by another Blavatsky biographer, Bechofer-Roberts, was false.¹⁰

Mr. Symonds writes, "Madame Blavatsky could have thrown the Report into the fire and turned a defiant back on such a stupid and superficial Report, but its summary of herself did not, in its perverse way, underestimate her stature. 'For our own part,' wrote Richard Hodgson, 'we regard her neither as the mouthpiece of hidden seers, nor as a mere vulgar adventuress; we think that she has achieved a title to permanent remembrance as one of the most accomplished, ingenious, and interesting impostors of [*sic*] history' " (p. 222). By this, Mr. Symonds prompts the natural question, how "stupid and superficial" in turn may be his own understanding of the S.P.R. Committee, its methods, investigation, and Report? For one very simple thing, he has gotten the number and names of the Committee members wrong: they numbered seven not five, for unaccountably he has omitted the *Chairman*, Professor Sidgwick, as well as Mrs. Sidgwick (p. 181). One might think he had read the Committee Report, but his solitary quotation therefrom (see above) was certainly not written by Richard Hodgson, and is not from Hodgson's "Account" but from the *Statement and Conclusions of the Committee*.¹¹

And Mr. Symonds appears ignorant of the fact (set forward on the first page of the Report) that the theosophists did not have to wait "with grave misgivings" from April to December (as he alleges, p. 221) for these conclusions, because the Committee's conclusions had been read by Prof. Sidgwick at a public meeting *in June*.

"Is the Report fair?" asks Symonds. "Theosophists say no, blame Hodgson's

¹⁰ Correspondence, *Journal S.P.R.*, Vol. XXVII, p. 167.

¹¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 207.

inexperience" (p. 223). But how experienced were the witnesses for the "defense"? He tells us nothing of their blunders and lapses. Compared to Hodgson, how competent, how accurate have been his critics on the theosophical side? What comprehension of the rules of psychical research have they shown, superior or equal to that of Hodgson even at his beginning? Where can his critics point to a record matching that lifelong record of Dr. Hodgson which proved for all time his innate right to the title of *expert*? The writer tells us nothing of that brilliant record. Mr. Symonds' own understanding of the methodology is amply exposed in his primary reliance on the objection by Dr. A. B. Kuhn (a theosophical apologist) that when he gave his report, Hodgson "had not witnessed any phenomena nor examined any" (p. 223). This is false, for Hodgson was a firsthand witness, though his critics nowhere acknowledge it;¹² and so far as phenomena can be "examined" without being witnessed by the examiner, he did so examine—even to the extent of analyzing physical objects said to be psychically produced or modified.¹³

It seems to be held improper that "He questioned witnesses to several of the wonders a full year after the latter had taken place" ("only several years afterward," according to the book-jacket statement). That may be unfortunate, but how else was Hodgson to gain required information? The theosophists had obviously failed to register proper testimony at the time and on the spot. Was this Hodgson's fault? After this kind of criticism—in lieu of any objection that the Report misstated even a single fact—it is surprising to find that Mr. Symonds elevates the testimony of Madame Blavatsky's cousin, Count Witte, as coming from an "unimpeachable" source. So far as it related to H.P.B., this testimony (in his *Memoirs*) was what Witte could recollect from unaided memory fifty or sixty years after the events concerned, most of the information having only reached him by hearsay in the first instance!

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 262.

Although admitting that Madame Coulomb's "words breathe the harsh spirit of truth" (p. 199), Mr. Symonds repeats the objection that Hodgson "accepted the words of the Coulombs, whose conduct had already put them under suspicion" (p. 223). This ignores the investigator's explicit declaration that "of course, I have not, in coming to this conclusion, trusted to any unverified statements of the Coulombs..."¹⁴ And here, as in the case of Solovyoff, Symonds again ignores a mass of documentary evidence (the Blavatsky-Coulomb letters, many of which bore frank reference to fraud and conspiracy), in this instance adduced by the Coulombs in support of their "words." Nowhere does he permit his readers to know that a selection of these was sent by Hodgson to England and was judged by "the best experts in handwriting" to have been "undoubtedly written by Madame Blavatsky..."¹⁵ The biographer's inconsistency is no better illustrated than here, for while offering no criticism against these documents being genuine, he fails to see that, as Myers so sagaciously put it for the Committee, "The field covered by the Blavatsky-Coulomb letters was surely wide enough..."¹⁶ -wide enough, we may say, to found the basis of their Report and verdict.

It seems to be Mr. Symonds' view that "her answer to Hodgson and the Society for Psychological Research" was H.P.B.'s writing of her magnum opus, *The Secret Doctrine* j that it was "her vindication, a work which no impostor could write" (p. 238). While it must be admitted that anything of this magnitude (some 1,600 pages given to a "Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy") would not be what one would expect of a "Russian spy," Symonds, for some strange reason, here feels free to ignore the report of Mr. William Emmette Coleman: "*The Secret Doctrine*, published in 1888, is of a piece with *Isis*. It is permeated with plagiarisms, and

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 377, negative evidence re "Professor Smith's Letter Sewn with Silk," an example of Hodgson's testimony not yet approached in print by his critics.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 210.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

¹⁶ "Report of the General Meeting," *Journal S.P.R.*, Vol. I, 1884-85, p. 457.

is in all its parts a rehash of other books... wholesale plagiarisms...copied from nineteenth-century books, and in the usual blundering manner of Madame Blavatsky."¹⁷

How far Mr. Symonds may be trusted in his details-and he seems not to understand that *details* are always of major interest when dealing with testimony to "miracles" -is open to question. On checking against source references, one finds numerous errors in his book. For example, the author makes use of Dr. E. R. Corson's *Some Unpublished Letters of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky*, describing an occurrence when, on a visit to their home at Ithaca, New York, H.P.B. decided to "try her magic arts on the Corsons a little." Mr. Symonds tells of the mysterious production of a "photograph" of the Professor's deceased daughter. It was, he says, most "astonishing" that "the photograph was printed" on a certain kind of paper (p. 82). But despite this repeated use of the special term, "photograph," Dr. Corson himself refers to it as nothing more than a "portrait" or "picture" (evidently produced by the same process used in other instances of Mahatmic "precipitation").¹⁸

Again, apparently only to add "color" to his book, Symonds, in describing H.P.B.'s appearance "from her photograph, which she had taken in Ithaca" (but which he does not reproduce), refers to "the fifteen or so rings on her fingers" (p. 80). This is evidently the basis for his repeated reference to her "hands... sparkling with diamonds, rubies and emeralds" (p. 172), "many large jewelled rings" (p. 170), "hands... loaded with diamonds, rubies and emeralds" (p. 184). But the photograph cited (and used by Corson as a frontispiece to his book) shows altogether no more than two or three inconspicuous rings on both hands!

The Symonds biography is of little use to the serious student of psychical research who is looking for the closest approach to the known facts in this case. Its saving merit perhaps is that

¹⁷ "The Sources of Madame Blavatsky's Writings," Appendix C in V. S. Solovyoff's *A Modern Priestess of Isis* (Abridged and translated for the S.P.R. by Walter Leaf), London and New York, Longmans, Green and Co., 1895, pp. 358,359.

the author does not put it forward as an irretrievable judgment. He leaves the final verdict to his readers, which is fair enough when one considers that in this instance there have been too many biographies and judgments of a "final" order already. Dr. Hodgson in 1885 had not much doubt that "her real object has been the furtherance of Russian interests."¹⁹ But, in the light of additional evidence and subsequent events, that opinion simply looks silly. Mr. Symonds only contributes the quaint notion that Madame Blavatsky "strikes me again as one of the world's great jokers..." (p. 242). But this cannot be, for there is *too much* that cannot be dismissed as tomfoolery. He also alludes to her "hashish-enchanted imagination" and her belief that "she alone, out of the millions of the human race, had been selected by the Masters to reveal forgotten wisdom" (p. 91). This seems to describe an inspired zealot, whatever the origin of the "inspiration"; and we know that Messrs. Gurney, Myers, and Podmore even then did not accept Dr. Hodgson's spy theory, for in 1886, in his Introduction to their book, *Phantasms of the Living*, Myers treated the case as "the rise of one religion... of which Madame Blavatsky was the prophetess..."

We now know that her "miracles," examined by Hodgson, were no part of a late or passing role, but the focus of a lifelong obsession; and if we are to explain it at all in commonplace terms it would have to be in those of paranoia (perhaps taking its rise at the age of four when, as Sinnett, her first biographer, tells us, a peasant lad in attendance was apparently frightened to his death by being set upon by her faithful *roussalka* or goblin—a tragedy for which she even then boldly claimed credit). But H.P.B.'s psychological make-up should be not the first but the last thing to consider, and Mr. Symonds, like Dr. Hodgson before him, has done well to rank this a very minor problem compared with the question of physical evidence respecting her

¹⁸ See the account of Hodgson's explanations, *Proc. S.P.R.*, Vol. III, 1885, pp.273, 372.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 317.

claims to psychic power. But even here Symonds does not furnish the facts upon which a reader may draw any fair verdict (nor does his book's omission of an Index and Bibliography help the serious reader any). To the general reader or new student of psychical research, his volume offers a fascinating first introduction to one of history's most colorful, controversial figures, and it provides something of a look at both sides of the evidence in parapsychology's most celebrated case.

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