

CHARACTER SKETCH OF MADAME BLAVATSKY

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She was, even in her youth—to judge from her early portraits—a plump person, and later in life became very corpulent. It seems to have been a family peculiarity. In her case the tendency was aggravated by the manner of life she led, taking next to no physical exercise whatever, and eating much unless seriously out of health. Even then she partook largely of fatty meats and used to pour melted butter by the quantity over her fried eggs at breakfast. Wines and spirits she never touched, her beverages being tea and coffee, preferably the latter. Her appetite, while I knew her, was extremely capricious, and she was most rebellious to all fixed hours for meals, hence a terror to all cooks and the despair of her colleague.

I remember an instance at Philadelphia, which shows this peculiarity in a special degree. She had one maid-of-all-work and on this particular day a leg of mutton was boiling for dinner. Suddenly HPB¹ remembered to write a note to a lady friend who lived at the other end of the city, an hour's journey each way, as there were no trams or other public conveyances going direct from the one house to the other. She called in trumpet tones for the maid, and ordered her to set off instantly with the note and bring the answer. The poor girl told her that the dinner would be spoiled, and she could not possibly get back until an hour beyond the usual time. HPB would not listen and told her to be gone at once.

Three-quarters of an hour later HPB began complaining that the stupid idiot of a girl had not returned; she was hungry and wanted her dinner, and sent all Philadelphia servants to the devil *en masse*. In another quarter of an hour she had grown desperate, and so we went down to the kitchen for a look. Of course, the pots of meat and vegetables were set back on the range, the fire was banked, and the prospect of dinner was extremely small. HPB's wrath was vehement, and so there was nothing for us but to turn to and cook for ourselves. When the maid returned she was scolded so roundly that she burst into tears and gave warning!

¹ The initials of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky.

At New York, if any nice visitor chanced to be there, either the dinner would have to wait indefinitely, or he or she or they—for it made no difference—would be asked to come in and dine, and the portions provided for us two had to be divided and sub-divided for perhaps four people. At Bombay it was worse: one day the dinner would be put off two hours and another HPB would demand to be served an hour before the time; and then frighten the wretched Goanese servants into fits, because the vegetables were half-boiled and the meat half-cooked. So when we removed to Adyar, I determined to put a stop to this bother and built a kitchen on the terrace near HPB's bed-room, gave her a set of servants to herself, and let her eat or go without as she pleased.

I found on visiting her in London after her removal there, that the same old system was in vogue, HPB's appetite having become more capricious than ever because of the progress of disease, although every possible delicacy was provided by her friends to tempt her. Poor thing! It was not her fault, although her ill health had been largely caused by her almost life-long neglect of the rules of digestion. She was never an ascetic, not even a vegetarian while I knew her, a flesh diet seeming to be indispensable for her health and comfort as it is to so many others in our Society, including myself. I know many who have tried their best to get on with vegetable diet, and some—myself for example—who have followed up the experiment for several years together, yet have been forced finally to revert to their old diet against their will. Some, on the contrary, like Mrs. Besant and other prominent Theosophists I could name, have found themselves much healthier, stronger, and better on non-flesh food, and gradually acquire a positive loathing for meat in any of its forms. All which verifies the old proverb, "What is one man's meat is another man's poison." I think that neither blame is warranted in one case nor praise in the other, because of the regimen one chooses by preference. It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a man, but what lies in his heart. A wise old saying, worth remembering by the self-righteous.

HPB was, all the world knows, an inveterate smoker. She consumed an immense number of cigarettes daily, for the rolling of which she possessed the greatest deftness. She could even roll them with her left hand while she was writing "copy" with her right. Her devoted London physician, Dr. Mennell, has the most unique present she could have given any person: a box, with his monogram neatly carved on the lid, which contains several hundred cigarettes that she rolled for him with her

own hands. She sent it to him just before her death, and the Doctor has it laid by as a souvenir of, doubtless, his most interesting and illustrious patient.

While she was writing *Isis Unveiled* at New York, she would not leave her apartment for six months at a stretch. From early morning until very late at night she would sit at her table working. It was not an uncommon thing for her to be seventeen hours out of the twenty-four at her writing. Her only exercise was to go to the dining room or bathroom and back again to her table. As she was then a large eater, the fat accumulated in great masses on her body: her chin doubled and trebled; a watery fat formed in her limbs and hung in masses over her ankles; her arms developed great bags of adipose, which she often showed visitors and laughed at as a great joke—a bitter one as it proved in after years.

When *Isis* was finished and we began to see ahead the certainty of our departure, she went one day with my sister and got herself weighed: she turned the scales at 245 pounds, and then announced that she meant to reduce herself to the proper weight for traveling, which she fixed at 156 pounds. Her method was simple: every day, ten minutes after each meal, she had a wineglass of plain water brought her. She would hold one palm over it, look at it mesmerically, and then drink it off. I forget just how many weeks she continued this treatment, but finally she asked my sister to go again with her to be weighed. They brought and showed me the certificate of the shopkeeper who owned the scales, to the effect that “The weight of Madame Blavatsky this day is 156 pounds!” So she continued until long after we reached India, when the obesity reappeared and persisted, aggravated with dropsy, until her death.

There was one aspect of her character, which amazed strangers and made her very attractive to those who loved her. I mean a sort of childish delight that she exhibited when certain things pleased her very much. She was sent once into transports of joy on receipt of a box of caviar, sweet cakes, and other delicacies from Russia, while we were at New York. She was for having us all taste them, and when I protested that the fish-roe had the flavor of salted shoe leather, she was almost ready to annihilate me. A crumb of black bread that chanced to be in a home newspaper she had had sent her, suggested the entire home life at Odessa. She described to me her beloved aunt Nadjeda, sitting late at night in her room, reading the papers while nibbling one of these very crusts; and then the different rooms in

the house, the occupants, their habits and doings. She actually wrapped the crumb in a bit of the newspaper and laid it under her pillow to dream upon.

In my Diary of 1878, I find an entry for Sunday, July 14, 1878, about a seaside trip we took with Wimbridge. It says:

A superb day, bright sun, cool, pleasant air, everything charming. We three took a carriage, drove to the beach and all bathed. HPB presented a most amusing appearance; paddling about in the surf, with her bare legs, and showing an almost infantile glee to be in such a "splendid magnetism."

At Madras she received the present of several toys in scroll-saw fretwork, from her aunt. Some of comical design she brought out to show all visitors until the novelty had worn off. One, a wall-pocket in ebony and calamander wood, hangs in her old bedroom at Adyar where I am now writing.

On her table in New York stood an iron savings-box, modeled like a Gothic tomb or temple—one cannot say which—which was to her the source of constant delight. It had a slit in the dome inside, and an innocent-looking round tabletop on a pillar. This was connected with a crank on the outside, and if a coin were placed on it and the crank turned, the coin would presently be swept off through a slot and fall inside, from whence it could only be removed by unscrewing a certain small plate at the bottom. We made this our collection box for the Arya Samaj, and HPB—but I shall let the reporter of the *New York Star* speak for himself on this point. In that paper for December 8, 1878, it is written:

Madame Blavatsky, or, as she prefers to be called, HPB (she having sent the title of "Madame" to look for that of "Countess," which she threw away before) was enraptured with the idea. "I will fill my little temple with dollars," she cried, "and I shall not be ashamed to take it to India." The temple she referred to is a small, but intricate structure, with an entrance, but no exit, for money contributed to the Arya Samaj. It is solidly constructed of cast-iron, and is surmounted by a small "Dev." HPB kindly explained to the reporter that "Dev" was a Sanskrit word, differently interpreted as god, or devil, or genie by different nations of the East. The casual visitor to the Lamasery is frequently invited to place a small coin on the top of the temple, and to turn a crank. The result is invariably the great glee of the Theosophist, the discomfiture of the casual visitor, and the enrichment of the Arya Samaj, for the coin disappears in the process.

The same writer, I find, says something nice about the mural picture in dried leaves, of a tropical jungle, that was made in our dining room. We thought of making a lottery among our friends of the furniture of the Lamasery, and this was to be one of the prizes. The *Star* reporter says:

Perhaps one of the most remarkable things in all the collection of unique prizes is one, which has no claim to be considered magical. It is a mural ornament, so elaborately beautiful and yet so simple, that it seems strange that it is not fashionable. On one of the walls of the dining room of the now famous flat is the representation of a tropical scene, in which appear an elephant, a tiger, a huge serpent, a fallen tree, monkeys, birds and butterflies, and two or three sheets of water. It is neither painted nor drawn, but the design was first cut out in paper and then autumn leaves of various hues were pasted on, while the water was represented by small pieces of broken mirror. The effect is remarkably beautiful, but the winner of the prize will probably need magical art to remove it in good condition, for it has been in its place so long that the leaves are dry and brittle.

The jocund side of HPB's character was one of her greatest charms. She liked to say witty things herself and to hear others say them. As above remarked, her *salon* was never dull save, of course, to those who had no knowledge of Eastern literature and understood nothing of Eastern philosophy, and to them time might have dragged heavily when HPB and Wilder, or Dr. Weisse, or some other *savant* were discussing these deeper depths and loftier heights of thought by hours together. Yet even then she spoke so unconventionally, and formulated her views with so much *verve* and startling paradox, that even if the listener could not follow the thread of her thought, he must admire it; as one may the Crystal Palace pyrotechnics, although he does not know the chemical processes employed to manufacture the pieces.

She caught up and made her own any quaint phrase or word as, for instance, "flapdoodle," "whistle-breeches," and several others which have come to be regarded as her own invention. In our playtimes, *i.e.*, after finishing our night work, or when visitors came or, rarely, when she wanted to have a little rest, she would tell me tales of magic, mystery, and adventure, and in return, get me to whistle, or sing comic songs, or tell droll stories. One of the latter became, by two years' increment added on to the original, a sort of mock Odyssey of the Moloney family, whose innumerable descents into matter, returns to the state of cosmic force, intermarriages, changes of creed, skin, and capabilities, made up an extravaganza of which HPB

seemed never to have enough. She would set me going in presence of third parties, much to my disgust sometimes, and enjoy their surprise at this rough and ready improvisation. It was all recited in an Irish brogue, and was a mere fanfaronade of every kind of nonsense; dealing extravagantly with the problems of macrocosmic and microcosmic evolution: the gist of the whole thing being that the Moloneys were related by marriage to the Molecules, and that the two together generated the supreme potency of Irish force, which controlled the vicissitudes of all worlds, suns, and galaxies. It was, as compared with the trifling story from which it developed, like the giant Banyan tree as compared with its tiny seed-germ. She got at last to call me Moloney, both in speaking and writing, and I retaliated by calling her Mulligan. Both nicknames were caught up by our friends, and my old boxes of archives contain many letters to her and myself, under those Hibernian pseudonyms.

She was a splendid pianist, playing with a touch and expression that were simply superb. Her hands were models—ideal and actual—for a sculptor and never seen to such advantage as when flying over the keyboard to find its magical melodies. She was a pupil of Moscheles,² and when in London as a young girl, with her father, played at a charity concert with Madame Clara Schumann³ and Madame Arabella Goddard in a piece of Schumann's for three pianos.⁴ During the time of our relationship she played scarcely at all. Once a cottage piano was bought and she played on it for a few weeks, but then it remained closed ever after until sold, and served as a double bookshelf. There were times when she was occupied by one of the Mahâtmas, when her playing was indescribably grand. She would sit in the dusk sometimes, with nobody else in the room beside myself, and strike from the sweet-toned instrument improvisations that might well make one fancy he was listening to the Gandhâvas, or heavenly choristers. It was the harmony of heaven.

She had a bad eye for colors and proportions in her normal state, and very little of that fine aesthetic taste which makes a woman dress herself becomingly. I have gone to the theatre with her when I expected the house to rise at us. She, a stout and remarkable looking woman, wearing a perky hat with plumes, a *grand toilette* satin dress with much trimming, a long, heavy gold chain about her neck, attached to a

² Czech pianist, one of the outstanding virtuosos of his era.

³ German pianist and composer. The wife of composer Robert Schumann.

⁴ Some weeks after the above was published I learned from a member of her family that shortly before coming to America, HPB had made some concert tours in Italy and Russia under the pseudonym of "Madame Laura."

blue enameled watch, with a monogram on the back in cheap diamonds, and on her lovely hands a dozen or fifteen rings, large and small. People might laugh at her aside, but if they caught her stern eye and looked into her massive Calmuck face, their laugh soon died away and a sense of awe and wonder possessed them.

She was at times generous to the extreme, lavishly so; at others the very opposite. When she had money she seemed to regard it as something to be got rid of soon. She told me that she spent within two years a legacy of 85,000 rubles (about 170,000 rupees) left her by her grandmother, in desultory wandering over the world. A good part of the time she had with her a huge Newfoundland dog, which she led by a heavy golden chain!

She was a most downright, plainspoken person, when not exchanging pleasantries with a new acquaintance, at which times she was *grande dame* to her fingertips. No matter how untidy she might be in appearance, she bore the ineffaceable stamp of high birth; and if she chose, could be as dignified as a French duchess. But in her ordinary, everyday life, she was as sharp as a knife in her sarcasm and like an exploding bomb in her moments of anger. For her, the one unpardonable sin was hypocrisy and society airs. Then she was merciless and the sources of various languages were exhausted to cover the victim with contumely. She frequently saw as in a mirror, clairvoyantly, the secret sins of men and women whom she encountered; and if they happened to be particularly prone to speak of Theosophy with disdain or of herself with contempt, she would pour the vials of wrathful candor upon their heads. The "ower guid" folk were her abhorrence, but for a poor, ignorant but frank person, whether reputable or the opposite, she had always a kind word and often a gift.

Unconventionality was with her almost a cult, and nothing pleased her more than to do and say things to shock the prudish. For example, I find an entry in my diary to the effect that on a certain evening she put on her night dress, went to bed, and received a mixed company of ladies and gentlemen. This was after the fashion of royal and noble dames of pre-revolutionary days in Europe. Her palpable sexlessness of feeling carried all this off without challenge. No woman visitor would ever see in her a possible rival, no man imagine that he could cajole her into committing indiscretions. She swore like the army in Flanders but meant no harm, and if her uncommon predilection in this respect had not been so much noticed and denounced by the sticklers for propriety — themselves, as she clairvoyantly saw, sometimes smug

sinner behind closed doors—she would doubtless have given it up. It is in human nature, and was in her nature, superlatively, to keep doing forbidden things just out of a spirit of revolt.

I knew a lady once whose child caught from the farm servants the habit of saying wicked words. The mother, a most exemplary lady in every respect, was heartbroken about it. Whipping and other punishments only made matters worse, and no better result was obtained from the last expedient of *washing out the child's mouth with bar soap* after he had been heard swearing. At last some sensible friend advised the parents to try what would come of paying no attention whatever to the bad language. The plan was a complete success and within a few months the culprit swore no more. HPB felt herself in revolt to every conventional idea of society, being in beliefs, tastes, dress, ideals, and behavior a social helot; so she revenged herself by showing her own commanding talents and accomplishments, and causing society to fear her. Secretly smarting for her lack of physical beauty, she continually harped upon her "potato nose," as though she defied criticism. The world was to her an empty sham, its prizes but dross, her waking life a lugubrious existence, her real life that of the night when, leaving the body, she would go and sit at the feet of her Masters.

So she felt little else than scorn and profound contempt for the blind bigots and narrow-thinking men of science, who had not even a stray glimpse of the truth, yet who would judge her with unrighteous judgment and conspire to silence her by a conspiracy of calumny. For clergymen as a body she felt hatred, because, being themselves absolutely ignorant of the truths of the spirit, they assumed the right to lead the spiritually blind, to keep the lay conscience under control, to enjoy revenues they had not earned, and to damn the heretic, who was often the sage, the *illuminatus*, the adept. We had one scrapbook into which we used to paste paragraphs from the newspapers telling of the crimes of clergymen and priests who had been brought to justice, and before we left for India there was a large collection of them.

HPB made numberless friends, but often lost them again and saw them turned into personal enemies. No one could be more fascinating than she when she chose, and she chose it when she wanted to draw persons to her public work. She would be caressing in tone and manner, and make the person feel that she regarded him as her best, if not her only friend. She would even write in the same tone, and I think I could name a number of women who hold her letters saying that they are to be her

successors in the T.S., and twice as many men whom she declared her “only *real* friends and accepted chélas.” I have a number of such certificates and used to think them treasures until, after comparing notes with third parties, I found that they had been similarly encouraged. I then saw that all her eulogies were valueless. With ordinary persons like myself and her other intimate associates, I should not say she was either loyal or staunch. We were to her, I believe, nothing more than pawns in a game of chess, for whom she had no heart-deep love. She repeated to me the secrets of people of both sexes—even the most compromising ones—that had been confided to her, and she treated mine, such as they are, I am convinced, in the same fashion. But she was loyal to the last degree to her aunt, her other relatives, and to the Masters; for whose work she would have sacrificed not only one, but twenty lives, and calmly seen the whole human race consumed with fire, if needs be.

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