

The Founding of the Theosophical Society

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Writing in 1877, Madame H. P. Blavatsky first publicly disclosed something of her personal acquaintance with those Eastern Adept-Teachers, Brothers of the White Lodge, who since have become better known as the Mahatmas or Masters of Wisdom. In *Isis Unveiled*, her first book, she declared that the "practical blending of the visible with the invisible world" had found a "refuge" in "the chief lamaseries of Mongolia and Thibet," and that there "the primitive science of *magic*" was "practiced to the utmost limits of intercourse allowed between man and 'spirit.'" She urged the "*pretended authorities of the West*" to "*go to the Brahmans and Lamaists of the far Orient, and respectfully ask them to impart the alphabet of true science.*" This, she affirmed on the second page of her book, she herself had done: "It was while most anxious to solve these perplexing problems that we came into contact with certain men, endowed with such mysterious powers and such profound knowledge that we may truly designate them as the sages of the Orient. To their instructions we lent a ready ear."

It was five years later, in 1882, that one of these Great Sages, the Rajput Adept, Mahatma Morya, acknowledged responsibility for the initiative behind the confluence of circumstances that had made possible the founding of The Theosophical Society. "One or two of us," the Mahatma wrote, "hoped that the world had so far advanced intellectually, if not intuitionally, that the Occult doctrine might gain an intellectual acceptance, and the impulse given for a new cycle of occult research. Others --- wiser as it would now seem --- held differently, but consent was given for the trial. It was stipulated, however, that the experiment should be made independently of our personal management; that there should be no abnormal interference by ourselves. So casting about, we found in America the man to stand as leader -- a man of great moral courage, unselfish, and having other good qualities. He was far from being the best, but . . . he was the best one available. With him we associated a woman of most exceptional and wonderful endowments. Combined with them she has strong personal defects, but just as she was, there was no second to her living fit for this work. We sent her to America, brought them together --- and the trial began. From the first both she and he were given to clearly understand that the issue lay entirely with themselves. And both offered themselves for the trial for certain remuneration in the far distant future --- as K. H. would say - soldier volunteers for a Forlorn Hope." (1)

During the American Civil War, Colonel H. S. Olcott had distinguished himself as a Special Commissioner for the War Department --- and later, for the Navy --- as one assigned to discover and expose fraud in connection with government supply contracts. In April 1865, together with two other U. S. Army colonels, he was empowered to gather all possible information on the conspiracy behind the assassination of President Lincoln. Six years prior to that historic martyrdom which was marked by the last shot in America's most sanguinary tragedy, Henry Steel Olcott, as a youthful investigative reporter, had --- at some peril to his life, being a Yankee Abolitionist --- witnessed the hanging of John Brown at Charleston, Virginia, a notorious prelude to the terrible toll to follow. It was also as an investigator-reporter that the Colonel came to the Eddy family homestead in Chittenden, Vermont, in 1874, to examine the spiritualist phenomena of the "materializing" mediums, the Eddy brothers, William and Horatio. There, on October 14th of the same year, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky met Colonel Olcott on the same day she arrived to join the throng of curious visitors. And so the two, who were to share the chief responsibility for the future Theosophical Movement, were thus "brought . . . together --- and the trial began."

In *The Golden Book of The Theosophical Society: A Brief History of the Society's Growth from 1875-1925*, C. Jinarajadasa, The Vice-President --- and, later, President --- of the Theosophical Society, describes the "Scrap Books of H.P.B." (H. P. Blavatsky) begun in America, and even then, fifty years ago,

“very old and . . . nearly fallen to pieces.” Beneath his photograph of the early inscription in her handwriting, he quotes the faded ink: “Orders received from India direct to establish a philosophico-religious Society and choose a name for it --- also to choose Olcott. July 1875.” (2)

It was not until the following September, historian Jinarajadasa recounts, “that the orders which H.P.B. received as to organizing a Society seemed capable of fulfilment.” On the 7th of that month, there met in her rooms at 46 Irving Place, New York City, a gathering of independent scholars, researchers, and students who had been meeting there occasionally for some months, discussing occult and spiritualist phenomena and philosophies.

In his six-volume work, “The True Story of the Theosophical Society,” *Old Diary Leaves*, Col. Olcott, in absence of any official record, quotes from a contemporary published account of this meeting: “. . . on the evening of the 7th inst. in the parlors of Madame Blavatsky . . . a company of seventeen ladies and gentlemen had assembled to meet Mr. George Henry Felt, whose discovery of the geometrical figures of the Egyptian Cabala may be regarded as among the most surprising feats of the human intellect. The company included several persons of great learning and some of wide personal influence. The Managing Editors of two religious papers; the co-editors of two literary magazines; an Oxford LL.D.; a venerable Jewish Scholar and traveller of repute; an editorial writer of one of New York’s morning dailies; the President of the New York Society of Spiritualists; Mr. C. C. Massey, an English visitor; Mrs. Emma Hardinge Britten and Dr. Britten; two New York lawyers besides Colonel Olcott; a partner in a Philadelphia publishing house; a well-known physician; and, most notable of all, Madame Blavatsky herself, comprised Mr. Felt’s audience. . . .” (3)

Mr. Felt, an engineer and architect and, recalls the Colonel, “a remarkably clever draughtsman,” exhibited “a number of exquisite drawings” to illustrate his lecture. “The Lost Canon of Proportion of the Egyptians,” embodying “his theology that the canon of architecture and proportion, employed by the Egyptians, as well as by the great architects of Greece, was actually preserved in the temple hieroglyphics of the Land of Khemi.” The lecturer told how, during Egyptology studies undertaken in the course of his search for “the true canon of Nature’s architecture” --- to quote Col. Olcott’s account --- he “had discovered that the old Egyptian priests were adepts in magical science, had the power to evoke and employ the spirits of the elements, and had left the formularies on record; he had deciphered and put them to the test, and succeeded in evoking the elementals. He was willing to aid some persons of the right sort to test the system for themselves, and would exhibit the nature-spirits to us all in the course of a series of lectures. . . .” (4)

Mr. Felt’s presentation was well-received and, during the animated discussions that followed, continues H.S.O., “the idea occurred to me that it would be a good thing to form a society to pursue and promote such occult research” (As former President Jinarajadasa notes, though Col. Olcott first put forward this idea, “evidently he knew nothing of the orders which H.P.B. had received months before.”) So H.S.O. at once set down his thought in a written note which he had William Quan Judge --- a young attorney, and now well-known for his work in the later Theosophical Movement --- pass over to Madame Blavatsky who “read it and nodded her assent.” At that point, continues the contemporary account, “Colonel Olcott rose, and after sketching the present condition of the spiritualistic movement; the attitude of its antagonists, the materialists; the irrepressible conflict between science and the religious sectaries; the philosophical character of the ancient theosophies and their sufficiency to reconcile all existing antagonisms; and the apparently sublime achievement of Mr. Felt, in extracting the key to the architecture of Nature, from the scanty fragments of ancient lore left us by the devastating hands of Moslem and Christian fanatics of the early centuries, he proposed to form a nucleus around which might gather all the enlightened and brave souls who are willing to work together for the collection and diffusion of knowledge. His plan was to organize a society of Occultists and begin at once to collect a library; and to diffuse information concerning those secret laws of Nature which were so familiar to the Chaldeans and Egyptians; but totally unknown to our modern world of science.” (5) This suggestion was warmly approved, those present agreeing to participate in the formation of the proposed Society; and the gathering adjourned to reconvene the following evening.

The author of *Old Diary Leaves* refers to the “official report of the meeting of September 8th, signed by myself, as Chairman, and W. Q. Judge, as Secretary”; and he proceeds to quote “from our Minute Book”: “In consequence of a proposal of Col. Henry S. Olcott, that a Society be formed for the study and elucidation of Occultism, the Cabala, etc., the ladies and gentlemen then and there present, resolved

themselves into a meeting, and, upon motion of Mr. William Q. Judge, it was

“ ‘*Resolved*, That Col. H. S. Olcott take the chair. Upon motion it was also

“ ‘*Resolved*, That Mr. W. Q. Judge act as Secretary. The Chair then called for the names of the persons present, who would agree to found and belong to a Society such as had been mentioned. The following persons handed in their names to the Secretary:

“ ‘Col. Olcott, Mme. H. P. Blavatsky, Chas. Sotheran, Dr. Chas. E. Simmons, H. D. Monachesi, C. C. Massey of London, W. L. Alden, G. H. Felt, D. E. de Lara, Dr. W. Britten, Mrs. E. H. Britten, Henry J. Newton, John Storer Cobb, J. Hyslop, W. Q. Judge, H. M. Stevens (all present save one).

“ ‘Upon motion of Herbert D. Monachesi, it was

“ ‘*Resolved*, That a committee of three be appointed by the Chair to draft a constitution and by-laws, and to report the same at the next meeting. Upon motion, it was

“ ‘*Resolved*, That the Chair be added to the Committee.

“ ‘The Chair then appointed Messrs. H. J. Newton, H. M. Stevens, and C. Sotheran to such Committee.

“ ‘Upon motion, it was

“ ‘*Resolved*, That we now adjourn until Monday, September 13th, at the same place, at 8 P.M.’ ” (6)

Of the sixteen named as expressing willingness to become founders of the proposed Society, two or three, in addition to Col. Olcott, Madame Blavatsky and Mr. Judge, have left an enduring mark in the annals of occult research. Mrs. Emma Hardinge Britten, then a prominent Spiritualist and trance-lecturer, is remembered for her histories of the early days of American Spiritualism. Mr. C. C. Massey, an indefatigable investigator of psychic wonders, later became one of the leading figures in the British Society for Psychical Research, established in 1882; and in 1880 he published, as *Transcendental Physics*, his translation of Professor J. F. C. Zollner’s landmark work in Psychical Research, a report of the German Professor’s experiments with the famous American medium, Henry Slade (made following the latter’s exhibition of phenomena before Alexander N. Aksakov, Professor Boutlerof, and others at St. Petersburg in Russia, for which tests Slade had been selected by H.S.O. and H.P.B. after examining mediums in America). The co-founder, “J. Hyslop,” though not otherwise identified, is thought by some to have been James H. Hyslop, who, during his lifetime, rose to prominence as the leader of official Psychical Research in America, and was chief founder and head of the independent American S.P.R. In 1875 he was still a college student. For biographical sketches of other “founders” and of the founding officers of The Theosophical Society, the interested reader may turn to Josephine Ransom’s *A Short History of the Theosophical Society*. (7)

At the meeting of September 13th, the earlier signatories were joined by others whose names were added to the roster of “founders,” the most prominent of the newcomers being the Rev. J. H. Wiggin who, as one historian has related, “would shortly resign his Unitarian pulpit to become ghost-writer number one on the staff of Mary Baker Eddy.”

The most important business of this meeting is shown in the Minute Book: “*Resolved*, That the name of the Society be ‘The Theosophical Society.’ ” This name had been reported by the Committee of the 8th as its choice, whether or not, as Col. Olcott recalled, “in turning over the leaves of the Dictionary,” one of the four-man Committee “came across the word ‘Theosophy,’ whereupon, after discussion, we unanimously agreed that that was the best of all” Perhaps sight of the word in the dictionary had brought to mind memory of what Madame Blavatsky herself had written some months previously in what she later called “My first *Occult Shot*,” an article entitled “A Few Questions to ‘Hiraf,’ ” that had been published in the *Spiritual Scientist*, Boston, July 1875. Here she had described Angelic Wisdom as “Theosophic,” and had referred to “the modern Theosophists, at whose head was Paracelsus.” (8)

The meeting of the 13th having “adjourned subject to the call of the Chair,” the first official use of the Society’s name was when Col. Olcott, signing himself “*President, pro. tem.*,” issued on post cards a notice, under title “THE THEOSOPHICAL SOCIETY,” convening a “preliminary meeting” at the Britten family residence, “No. 206 West 38th St., on Saturday, October 16, 1875, at 8 p.m., to organize and elect officers.”

The election of officers, with other business, was, however, held over until the “next preliminary meeting . . . held at the same place on the 30th October,” when the “By-Laws were read, discussed and finally adopted, but with the proviso that the Preamble should be revised by H.S. Olcott, C. Sotheran and J. S. Cobb and then published as the Preamble of the Society.” Officers were now elected, Col. Olcott as

President; G. H. Felt and Dr. Seth Pancoast, a learned Kabbalist, as *Vice-Presidents*; Madame Blavatsky, *Corresponding Secretary*; and William Q. Judge was chosen as *Counsel* to the Society (though later he was elevated to the Council and eventually rose to be Vice-President). "Mott Memorial Hall, 64 Madison Avenue (a few doors only from our recently purchased New York headquarters), was selected as the Society's meeting-place." (9)

From the Founding-President's narrative, we learn that, "The meeting then adjourned over to the 17th November, 1875, when the perfected Preamble would be reported, the President Elect deliver his Inaugural Address, and the Society be thus fully constituted.

"On the evening designated, the Society met in its own hired room; the minutes of the previous meeting were read and approved; the President's Inaugural Address was delivered and ordered printed; upon Mr. Newton's motion, thanks were voted to the President; and the Society, now constitutionally organized, adjourned over to the 15th December." (10)

Inspired seership is the best description one can give to the appreciation of this culminating event, and to the foresight of its then-future place in history, which the newly-installed President expressed in the opening sentence of his first official address: "In future times, when the impartial historian shall write an account of the progress of religious ideas in the present century, the formation of the Theosophical Society, whose first meeting under its formal declaration of principles, we are now attending, will not pass unnoticed. This much is certain." Nowhere in the whole range of record reception to this historic beginning, can we find another declaration so positive in judgment, so prophetic in concept, as this initial evaluation by the chief organizer of the Theosophical Movement. "What is it, then," he asked himself aloud, "which makes me say what in deepest seriousness and a full knowledge of its truth, I have said? . . . It is the fact that in my soul I feel that behind us, behind our little band, behind our feeble new-born organization, there gathers a MIGHTY FORCE, that nothing can withstand --- the power of truth!"

It is on this same "power of truth" that we today --- still only a "little band," relative to humanity's growth in teeming millions --- must stand fast; for in this realization we too can gain something of that inner conviction which foreshadowed Col. Olcott's own indomitable, lifelong devotion to the Cause of the Masters of Wisdom, which is the Cause of Humanity itself. Thus he could promise, and live in its keeping: "As for me --- poor, weak man, honored far beyond my deserts in my election to this place of honor and of danger --- I can only say that, come well come ill, my heart, my soul, my mind, and my strength are pledged to this cause, and I shall stand fast while I have a breath of life in me, though all other retire and leave me to stand alone."

The pure and inextinguishable flame of devotion that burns before it all the obstacles of ignorance, superstition, and prejudice which would block the path, need not necessarily be fed with the very fuel of truth itself. It is enough that we draw our strength from the dedication to search, to find, and to know truth. The lust for gain of the man in search of earthly gold, who has it not, can be ever as fervent as the devotion of another to the treasure he has found. How much more so is the irresistible yearning for that Spiritual Gold! So those of open mind, still in search of philosophical precepts to inspire their comprehension of life and to guide their living, need not be believers in theosophy, to share with us this devotion to the cause of truth. As Colonel Olcott first made clear, The Theosophical Society was founded --- and is still --- "a non-committal society of investigation," Our "work," as he rightly indicated, simply "is to aid in freeing the public mind of theological superstition and a tame subservience to the arrogance of science" --- a science that even now, a hundred years later, has yet to fully recognize the role and worth of the Inner Man in nature's plan of things. His words of November 17, 1875, are as true today as they were when first uttered: "under our by-laws we have not . . . dogmas to impart"; and, instead of being "all believers in theosophy . . . we are, with . . . exceptions, simply investigators. . . ." If, in a sense, since the pioneer work of Madame Blavatsky, it is no longer true that "we have no ready-made material for belief at our hand," as when H.S.O. foresaw the need to "create it for ourselves," it is certain, nevertheless, that all theosophists "are students, not teachers," for there is only one teacher in the final measure, and that is nature, and what we learn in anyway, if it be true, can only be nature's truths which each of us then must weigh in the balances of our own understanding and comprehend according to our individual abilities, creating each his or her own belief. Obviously, this means for us a task of trial-and-error, limited by our varying weaknesses --- but the blind acceptance of dogma, though it can appeal to the lazy thinker, is no promising alternative. This is why The Theosophical Society perpetuates absolute

freedom of thought within its membership, and why we have no truck with dogma or collectivist thinking.

* * * *

“Thus,” continues the Founding-President’s narrative, “the Theosophical Society first conceived of on the 8th September and constitutionally perfected on the 17th November, 1875, after a gestatory period of seventy days, came into being and started on its marvelous career of altruistic endeavour *per augusta ad augusta*. Inadvertantly, in our first published document, the *Preamble and By-Laws of The Theosophical Society*, the 30th October was given as the date of the organization, whereas, as seen above, it should properly have been November 17, 1875.” [\(11\)](#)

It may be noted that while Col. Olcott, writing twenty years later, speaks of the *Preamble and By-Laws of The Theosophical Society* as “our first published document,” and though he shows that the order for its printing was adopted at the Meeting of October 16, 1875, the fact remains that the By-Laws were not “finally adopted” until October 30, at which latter date the Preamble had yet to “be revised. . . .” On these facts, therefore, one cannot properly discount the possibility that *both* that publication and the booklet containing the President’s *Inaugural Address* --- excerpts from which appear here in its *Centenary Edition* --- were issued *simultaneously*, both equally meriting the appellation “our first publication,” *first* of that long and distinguished list of *several thousand* titles which have appeared under the imprint of The Theosophical Society and its Publishing House during the century that has followed.

It would be interesting to know how many copies of the original booklet containing President Olcott’s *Inaugural Address* were printed. It certainly could not have been many, for by 1906, its author himself was unable to obtain an original to replace his own, then long since lost or given away. During his tour of America that year, H.S.O. learned with delight that the Boston Public Library had on file an original of the booklet; and in September, 1906, he had a typewritten copy of the text made from it, his original script of the address also having long since passed out of his hands. Three months later, mortally disabled by a fall suffered on board ship during his return to India and to the Society’s Headquarters at Adyar, near Madras, Colonel Henry Steel Olcott made his last address to fellow theosophists when, at the Convention of 1906, two months before the death of his body, he read once again and for the last time the address he had delivered thirty-one years earlier on that historic evening in Mott Memorial Hall in New York City. [\(12\)](#)

On July 2, 1947, an original copy of this address was discovered in a Los Angeles bookstore by the theosophical historian, Walter A. Carrithers, Jr., who had been drawn to the city from his home in Fresno, California, by the opportunity to meet with a number of theosophists of various affiliations who had responded to the appearance, in March of the same year, of his own booklet, *The Truth About Madame Blavatsky*, published in refutation of Gertrude Marvin Williams’ book, *Priestess of the Occult: Madame Blavatsky*. Coincidentally with his visit, Dawson’s bookstore was disposing by public sale of theosophical and spiritualist books remaining from the estate of Professor Hiram Corson, to whom this booklet was a gift from its author, Colonel Olcott. Together with a jumble of discontinuous periodicals and other miscellanea, it was found lying, *unpriced*, on a table; and, when queried, the clerk answered, “You can have it for a quarter.” Thus, by a “fortuitous concurrence of events,” was rescued --- possibly from oblivion --- the only original copy of the *Inaugural Address of the President* of The Theosophical Society known to bear its author’s *autograph* and the one copy, of all those printed, which also has obtained a unique *historicity* of its own.

This booklet, on its title page, is inscribed by its author’s pen, “*To Prof. Hiram Corson, with the friendly regards of H.S. Olcott.*” Professor Corson then occupied the Chair of Anglo-Saxon and English Literature at Cornell University (remaining in that post and becoming Professor Emeritus in 1903). And it was to the Corson family home at Ithaca, New York, that Madame Blavatsky came on a visit of some four weeks, arriving two or three days after the preliminary meeting of September 13, 1875, at which the forming Theosophical Society was named. It was then, while at Ithaca with the Corsons, that H.P.B. began the two-year task of writing her great first work, *Isis Unveiled*. Finally, it was Professor Corson’s receipt and reading of this gift booklet from Col. Olcott that precipitated what his son, Dr. Eugene Rollin Corson, in his book, *Some Unpublished Letters of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky*, describes as an “estrangement, temporary at least” between the Corsons and the Society’s chief co-Founders. On September 20, 1875, Madame Blavatsky wrote from Ithaca to St. Petersburg, to the leading Russian

investigator of psychic phenomena, the distinguished Alexander N. Aksakov. "Olcott is now organizing the Theosophical Society in New York," she reported, adding that she herself was "writing a big book, which I will call . . . *Skeleton Key to Mysterious Gates*." (13) One sees here the initial conception of its finished subtitle: *A Master Key to the Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Science and Theology*. Colonel Olcott has recorded that, "One day in the Summer of 1875, H.P.B. showed me some sheets of manuscript that she had written and said: 'I wrote this last night "by order," but what the deuce it is to be I don't know. Perhaps it is for a newspaper article, perhaps for a book, perhaps for nothing; anyhow, I did as I was ordered.' And she put it away in a drawer, and nothing more was said about it for some time." (14) She may have taken this manuscript with her to Ithaca, for there, soon after her arrival, she took up her pen to begin writing in earnest her first masterpiece, which was to remain for more than a decade her greatest work.

The Corson domicile, "known as the Richardson cottage, on Heustis Street," relates Dr. Corson, stood on the east hill, several hundred feet above the valley floor, beside "the University's array of noble buildings," overlooking "the gorges, with their steep banks, with the foaming waters tumbling over the rocks on their way to the lake" Cayuga, while the trees were ablaze in autumn tints and the hills and lake "bathed in the haze of the Indian summer. . . ."

The splendors of the landscape viewed from window or porch held no attraction for Madame Blavatsky, writes Dr. Corson, for they could not divert "the current of her thinking" as she "started writing *Isis Unveiled*, writing about twenty-five closely written foolscap pages a day. She had no books to consult; my father's very extensive library was almost wholly on English literature, Early English, Anglo-Saxon, English poetry, and classic literature, and she rarely consulted him about anything." She simply "spent her time at her desk, writing, writing, writing most of the day and way into the night. . . ." Her extraordinary preoccupation made the Professor exclaim: "Never have I seen such an intense creature, intense in her purpose, intense in her endeavor; nothing around her mattered, though the heavens fall she would keep on her way." (15)

What was it that inspired this adamant zeal? Toward the beginning of 1875, Professor Corson had chanced to read one of her letters sent to a New York newspaper defending the reality of the Eddy brothers' phenomena against misrepresentations of unfair critics. He had written her, and their exchange of correspondence had led to his invitation that she pay the family a visit when she could. In the second of her responding letters, on February 16 --- nine months before the birth of The Theosophical Society --- she had confessed to him what inspired her activities: "I am here in this country sent by my Lodge on behalf of Truth in modern spiritualism, and it is my most sacred duty to unveil what is, and expose what is not. Perhaps did I arrive here one hundred years too soon Nevertheless, I am ever ready for the great battle, and perfectly prepared to bear any consequence that fall to my lot.

". . . . When I became a spiritualist, it was not through the agency of the ever-lying, cheating mediums, miserable instruments of the undeveloped spirits of the lower Sphere, the ancient Hades. My belief is based on something older than the Rochester knockings, and springs out from the same source of information that was used by Raymond Lully, Picus della Mirandola, Cornelius Agrippa, Robert Fludd, Henry More, et cetera, etc., all of whom have ever been searching for a system that should disclose to them the 'deepest depths' of the Divine nature, and show them the real tie that binds all things together. I found at last, and many years ago, the cravings of my mind satisfied by this theosophy taught by the angels. . . for the aid of the human destiny." (16)

Dr. Corson records that the death of his only sister in July 1874 had been, to his father, a "very great" blow. "In the religion of the Churches he found no comfort, and he turned to spiritualism for some sign and assurance of the continued existence of his child. In the end he believed that this sign had come to him. . . . It was all a great comfort to him which grew. . . and culminated in the publication of his *Spirit Messages*," posthumously in 1911. (17)

It is more than probable that Professor Corson hoped to gain through H.P.B.'s mastery of occult powers some direct verification of his daughter's after-death state. But that was the kind of "communication" she invariably discouraged in her own person. Instead, she would prove the supernormal powers of the *living*, so that in this proof could be discerned the existence of *extraphysical* faculties which, since obviously transcending the confines and limitations of the physical body, must be taken logically as *persisting* beyond the dissolution of the body itself. But, as Dr. Corson relates, "H.P.B.'s phenomena

with a few exceptions were not a feature of her visit. She showed the raps as produced by her will-power, sometimes through a stack of hands, and again on different parts of the room. My father was familiar with this phenomenon in the seance room through the ordinary medium, but was much more impressed when produced by conscious will-power. On another occasion he had asked if she could place me and tell what I was doing, then a student of medicine in Philadelphia, and she gave him an accurate account of where I was and what was taking place. It happened to be that I was visiting my preceptor on Green Street. . . . On another occasion she caused a heavy table to rise up in the air without touching it, and she repeatedly said that this was due to her will-power, and was not to be classed with the ordinary mediumistic phenomena.” (18)

It was after Madame Blavatsky’s departure from Ithaca that there fell upon Professor Corson, the Spiritualist, the full weight of what his son calls The Theosophical Society’s “pronounced antagonism to spiritualism as it was at that time constituted in this country and in England.” The Professor received by mail his printed copy of Colonel Olcott’s *Inaugural Address*. As Dr. Corson observes, “Olcott stressed this opposition in his inaugural address, and there was at once a great reaction, an uproar from the entire body of spiritualists, and from the Press generally a biting ridicule. . . . Now this was not all Olcott, of course; H.P.B. had much to do with it. Both in her spoken words and in her writings she continually stressed the point of the danger of the ordinary seance except under the most rigid conditions of the medium and the surroundings. We must admit that the modern critical attitude and methods of psychical research are along the same lines of her caution and warnings.” (19)

But it was not merely that this Address should express the unwelcome truth about “imposture, tricky mediums, lying spirits, and revolting theories” or recognize that “many immoral people have fastened upon the cause. . . .” It also contained the provocative assertion that “Occultists. . . recognize in most of the physical phenomena called spiritual the agency of elementary spirits who often falsely personate persons not communicating with the circles, answer the thoughts which lie visible to them. . . and echo and respond to every fanciful vagary which agitates the questioner’s mind.”

This was a startling explanation to be given to the public fifty years before the foremost European authorities in Psychical Research, Professor Enrico Morselli, Dr. Gustave Geley, and the Baron Dr. von Schrenck Notzing, through their pioneering, unprejudiced experiments in the psycho-kinetic and teleplasmic phenomena of the seance room, were to discover independently much of the same truth, each discarding the “spirit” theory though without fully comprehending the totality of the informing mechanism of these psychic *simulations*. Dr. Nandor Fodor in his standard work, *Encyclopaedia of Psychic Science* (1933, with Preface by Sir Oliver Lodge, O.M.), translates from the latter’s *Physikalische Phenomene des Mediumismus* as concluding: “The telekinetic and teleplasmic phenomena are only different degrees of the same animistic process, they depend in the end upon physical manifestations in the subconscious sphere of the medium. The *soi-distant* occult intelligences which manifest and materialise themselves in the seance, never display any higher spiritual faculty than is owned by the medium and the sitters; they are wholly of oneiric type, dream personifications that correspond to detached memories, to beliefs, to all the miscellaneous things that lie dormant in the minds of the participants. It is not on a foundation of extra-corporeal beings one will find the secret of the psychodynamical phenomena of these subjects, but rather through consideration of hitherto unknown transformations of the bio-physical forces of the medium’s organism.”

“The bio-physical forces of the medium’s organism” are simply the “astral body” of the Occultists’ teachings, whether or not assisted by “elementary spirits” as part of its *components*. Seeking to refine the common term, “elementary,” Madame Blavatsky in 1877 noted that it had been used by Eliphas Levi, the French Kabalist, “to cover” *both* “human spirits” that had “lost every connection with a purer immortal world” (“the disembodied *souls* of the depraved” who had “sometime prior to death separated themselves from their divine spirits”) *and* the “nature-spirits” (“evolved in the four kingdoms of earth, air, fire, and water and called by the Kabalists gnomes, sylphs, salamanders, and undines”). Reserving for the former the “special term” *elementary*, H.P.B. was the first to call the latter *elementals* (with a result that the term now has entered accepted usage. See Merriam-Webster’s *Third New International Dictionary*, page 734: “*Elemental*. . . Spirit, spectre, wraith”). She described the elementals as “centers of force,” responsive to the human will, changeable and plastic in appearance, taking on varying forms modeled by human imagination, conscious or unconscious.

These “elementals” --- or what earlier, in Col. Olcott’s *Inaugural Address*, had been called “the

elementary spirits" --- were regarded by Occultists, H.P.B. noted, as the "sole agents in all the meaningless physical phenomena at seances." Such phenomena, she added, "will be produced unless they be dominated by wills more powerful than their own. Such a will may be that of a living adept, or as there are none such at Western spiritualist *seances*, these ready agents are at the disposal of every strong, vicious, earth-bound, human elementary who has been attracted to the place. By such they can be used in connection with the astral emanations of the circle and medium, as stuff out of which to make materialized spirits." These "spirits, spectres, wraiths," she called "portrait-statues" of the dead or *living*; and maintained that these "pictures in the Astral Light" were palpably objectified through the *Linga Sharira*, the Astral Body, of the medium who "assimilat(es), unconsciously to himself, the pictures of the dead relatives and friends from the aura of the sitters." Thus, "The unintellectual 'elementals' are drawn in unconsciously . . . as component parts of the grosser astral body. . . ." (20)

But in 1875, as Dr. Corson observes, "The idea of the elementals, of gnomes and spirits and cobalds --- the fairies of the mines and woods --- was not only not accepted by the great majority of people, but was unacceptable. These half-human or non-human spirits were considered simply as the hallucinations of a disordered mind, even if described in the ancient tongues or medieval Latin. Official science, and even psychical research societies, were still more defiant of this form of demonology." (21)

It was more than the good Professor could take! As his son recalls, "In the reaction following Olcott's address he sided with the body of spiritualists and hastily accused H.P.B., even of imposture. He so wrote to the *Banner of Light* a sharp attack on the Theosophical Society. So much for running counter to one's religious beliefs!" Further on Dr. Corson adds, "My father was quite too hasty in his revulsion of feeling; he later realized it and was quite willing to admit it. His sorrow and his state of mind at the time may well explain the error he had fallen into." Madame Blavatsky, in her correspondence with Professor Corson had "repeatedly emphasized the fact, that while she was a spiritualist, it was not in the modern sense but in that of the occultist." "My father," concludes Dr. Corson, "should have kept this ever in mind." He did, however, continue to buy H.P.B.'s books and he "followed the future history of the Theosophical Society with great interest." (22)

The adverse reaction of this scholarly and sympathetic friend, who had been favored with weeks of personal association with Madame Blavatsky herself, was but one jiggle in the massive after-shock that greeted Colonel Olcott's *Inaugural Address*.

"Though my Inaugural Address was applauded by my audience, and Mr. Newton, the orthodox Spiritualist, joined with Mr. Thomas Freethinker, and the Rev. Mr. Westbrook, to get a vote that it be printed and stereotyped --- a good proof that they did not think its views and tone unreasonable --- yet it reads a bit foolish after seventeen years of hard experience. A good deal of its forecast of results has been verified, much of it falsified." (23) For one thing, it did not take long for the few stalwarts among the Society's founders to discover that the path ahead for them was uphill, steep, and thorny. Of the thirteen founding officers, none but three have left their stamp in history, while several soon changed to enemies or critics. Indeed, there is much truth in our first President's recollection that "the stable founding" came only later as "a result of hard work and self-sacrifice, of years, and during a part of that time H.P.B. and I worked quote alone in the trenches, laying the strong foundation. Our colleagues either went out entirely, or became listless, or were prevented by force of circumstances from devoting their time and efforts to the work." (24)

Initially, disaffection in the ranks arose when Vice-President Felt failed to fulfill his promise to show a view of the elementals! "What we had counted on," writes H.S.O., as the Society's "sound experimental basis, *viz.*, Felt's demonstrations of the existence of Elemental races, proved a complete and mortifying disappointment. Whatever he may have done by himself in that direction, he showed us nothing, not even the tip-end of the tail of the tiniest Nature-spirit. He left us to be mocked by the Spiritualist and every other class of skeptic. . . . For my part, I believe he had done what he claimed, and that, if he had but systematically followed up his beginnings, his name would have been among the most renowned of our epoch. Having so often seen H.P.B. employ the Elementals to do her phenomena, Signor B. do the same on several occasions, and my mysterious strangers show me them in my own rooms, what was easier than for me to believe that Felt could do likewise; especially when H.P.B. assured me that he could? So with the temerity of a born pioneer and the zeal of a congenital optimist and enthusiast, I gave rein to my imagination and depicted, in my Address, what was likely to result if Felt's promise was made good. Luckily for me, I put in the 'if'; and it might have been better if it had been printed thus --- IF. On

the plea of his pecuniary necessities, he got out of Treasurer Newton \$100 to defray the costs of the promised experiments, but brought us no Elementals.” (25)

What of this imbroglio? Can it be that the Colonel and his fellow theosophists were victimized by the empty claims of a charlatan? Or was it simply that wiser heads than Olcott knew “our epoch” *was not yet ready* “to obtain knowledge of the existence. . . of a world of spirits, by the help of physical processes” --- “by simple chemical appliances” brought “into play” on an indiscriminate scale by anyone and everyone not even “a theurgist, a mesmerist, or a spiritualist. . . .”? Madame Blavatsky, the Initiate of Adepts, had “assured” the Colonel that Felt “could” --- but not that he would. Indeed, on one occasion, when Felt was lecturing before The Theosophical Society, as he himself relates, “at which all degrees of members were present, lights were seen . . . passing to and from one of my drawings, although they stood in the glare of several gaslights, a dark cloud was seen to settle upon it by others. . . . “Certain members . . . were impressed with a feeling of dread, as though something was about to happen; most . . . were rendered uncomfortable or uneasy; some became hypercritical and abusive; several . . . left the room; and Madame Blavatsky, who had seen unpleasant effects follow somewhat similar phenomena in the East, requested me to turn the drawings and change the subject.” (26)

As Col. Olcott’s *Inaugural Address* allows, the goal of these experiments, claims, and anticipations was to “exhibit” before the Society “the working of wonderful effects” formerly accomplished only by the initiated adepts of theurgy; to do this when, it was acknowledged, “even exoteric theurgy is dangerous,” and when “scarcely one” of the participating “members as yet suspects that the obtaining of occult knowledge requires any more sacrifice than any other branch of knowledge.” Moreover, it was proposed that this be done merely “by simple chemical appliances” --- *without* such “sacrifice” as formerly required for the “obtaining of occult knowledge”!

Elsewhere, H.S.O. admits that Madame Blavatsky herself, “upon whose help everybody --- so we thought --- not unreasonably counted, refused to do the slightest phenomenon at our meetings.” (27) And for good reason, too! Once promised to performing wonders on this stage, and subsequently inundated by a flood of inevitable challenges and a swelling clamor for more and ever more convincing demonstrations, tests and experiments of a supernormal kind, all of her time and energy would have been swept away forever in an avalanche of public excitement, controversy, and hysteria. It would have driven her to a premature death, leaving behind no *Isis Unveiled*, no *Secret Doctrine*, no opportunity for the world today to begin to *understand* even the significance of the paranormal wonders she did demonstrate. By hindsight, it is easy to see that a future projected upon the prospects of the Felt experiments was foredoomed to be “falsified.” It was not his name but that of Madame Blavatsky which was to be enshrined “among the most renowned of our epoch.” This was because the Adept-Brothers had a better purpose in view than to make The Theosophical Society a private or public parade-ground for *elementals!* Seemingly, without himself knowing it, Colonel Olcott’s first Presidential address recognized the very facts which would stultify his hopes. Our Founder-President was right, indeed, when he said, “If we would compare our organization with its archetype, where can we find it? It cannot be called theurgic. . .” and such it was not to become. When presented still later with the lingering “idea” that theosophists should “promote the formation of a kind of club or ‘school of magic,’ ” the Kashmiri Adept, Mahatma K.H., writing to Allan O. Hume (afterwards the founding “Father” of the Indian National Congress) *protested*: “But a ‘hot-bed of magick’ we never dreamt of. Such an organization . . . is unthinkable among Europeans; and it has become next to impossible even in India. . . .” --- the state of mankind being what it is in the great Kali Yuga, our age of moral darkness. (28)

Anyone in search of a sight of “elementals” need not have waited to sit before Mr. Felt’s promised “column of saturated vapour” --- he had only to join the throngs crowding the seance-rooms; for there, even as H.S.O. himself declared, these “beings” were “revered and babbled to as the returning shades. . . .” For proof of the *will* of a “living adept,” dominating and guiding the actions and appearances of these plastic “centers of force,” Colonel Olcott and his worthy associates had the supernormal phenomena of H.P.B. and her Adept Brothers on which to ponder. And in the surviving record of these Adeptic phenomena --- a record which, in its course of time, variety, completeness, and verification, is unmatched in the history of Occultism --- we today have a third legacy beside her written works and The Theosophical Society, (29) a three-fold heritage left to us and to generations to come by the greatest wonder-working public Teacher of the last 2,000 years. (30)

Certainly, from the vantage point that sees the present only as a prelude of cause to a future of effect, the

Masters of Wisdom in 1875 were not about to encourage --- or even permit --- the widespread excitement of the masses or the indiscriminate exploitation by scientists resulting from a premature rent in the Veil of Isis. Someday, we may be sure, humanity-at-large will realize Colonel Olcott's innocent dream of the universal diffusion of this knowledge and its mastery of Nature's hidden forces. But in the natural advancement of human evolution, universal and conscious contact with these "subtle powers of Nature" will come only when the *moral* character of mankind will have risen to that level of purity where no stain of evil any longer exists to project its dangerous reflection for the elemental powers to absorb, magnify, and cast back for our own destruction. The tales of Atlantis are true enough even if they be taken only as moral fables, for a race that tampers with these dynamic potentialities of Nature, while still unworthy, invites its own damnation and endangers the Earth itself.

Is it not enough that in our own epoch the world has now to pass through the *trial* prepared for it by those who, simply by physical means, unveiled certain "secrets of Nature" in their release of atomic energy, permitting the manufacture of nuclear bombs? With this *moral* test and the horror of its dangers at hand, who among us can regret that Colonel Olcott's *Inaugural Address* has not been *wholly* verified by the march of time? Indeed, one might not be far wrong in thinking that the Felt "episode" was the first real *test* for the infant Society, and that if Felt's intended goal had been realized in all its fullness, not only would The Theosophical Society have gone down, it would have taken with it "our epoch" itself in the course of a universal disaster. At the fulcrum of *power*, where the potentialities for good are greatest, malignant opposition and the possibilities of evil through misapplication always are at peak, too.

The dreadful shapes that can be seen to flit through the mushroom-shaped columns of vapour which have arisen to cast their dark shadows across our epoch, are but dangerous to *physical man*. Those which no mere physical apparatus can evoke can be seen and mastered without danger to the *soul of man* only when illuminated by the Divine Light of the Spirit. The Theosophical Society will find its justification in the imperishable annals of human advancement only so long as it continues to perpetuate the legacy of ancient living wisdom which embodies this among other truths equally vital to humanity's salvation.

Endnotes

- (1) [*The Mahatma Letters to A.P. Sinnett*](#), etc. (Third, revised Edition, Theosophical Publishing House, Adyar; 1962), pp. 259-60.
- (2) (T.P.H. Adyar), p. 19.
- (3) *Old Diary Leaves* (T.P.H.), vol. I, pp. 118-19.
- (4) *Ibid.*, pp. 115-17.
- (5) *Ibid.*, pp. 119-20.
- (6) *Ibid.*, pp. 121-22.
- (7) (T.P.H., Adyar; 1938), pp. 110-115.
- (8) *H.P. Blavatsky: Collected Writings* (Theosophical Publishing House, Wheaton, Illinois; 1966), vol. I, pp. 106, 110.
- (9) *Old Diary Leaves*, vol. I, pp. 132-35.
- (10) *Ibid.*, p. 136.
- (11) *Ibid.*, p. 136.
- (12) *Hammer on the Mountain: Life of Henry Steel Olcott*, by Howard Murphet (Theosophical Publishing House, Wheaton, Ill.; 1972), pp. 298-99.
- (13) *A Modern Priestess of Isis*, by V. Solovyoff (English edition), pp. 254-57.
- (14) *Old Diary Leaves*, vol. I, pp. 202-03.
- (15) [*Some Unpublished Letters of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky*](#), pp. 25-28.
- (16) *Ibid.*, pp. 127-28.
- (17) *Ibid.*, p. 45.
- (18) *Ibid.*, p. 35.
- (19) *Ibid.*, pp. 49-50.
- (20) *Vide: H.P. Blavatsky: Collected Writings*, vol. I, pp. 268; 285-86; [*Isis Unveiled*](#), vol. I, pp. xxix, xxx

(1st edition); *Incidents in the Life of Madame Blavatsky*, by A.P. Sinnett (2nd Edition; T.P.H.), p. 175.

(21) [*Some Unpublished Letter of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky*](#), p. 51.

(22) *Ibid.*, pp. 51-53.

(23) *Old Diary Leaves*, vol. I, pp. 137-38.

(24) *Ibid.*, p. 122.

(25) *Ibid.*, pp. 138-39.

(26) *Ibid.*, p. 131.

(27) *Ibid.*, p. 140.

(28) [*The Mahatma Letters to A.P. Sinnett*](#), p. 207.

(29) *The Official Objects* of The Theosophical Society are:

1. To form a nucleus of the Universal Brotherhood of Humanity, without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste, or color.

2. To encourage the study of Comparative Religion, Philosophy, and Science.

3. To investigate unexplained laws of Nature and the powers latent in Man.

The Theosophical Society itself, founded upon the inspiration for which Madame Blavatsky was the primary channel, fulfills the first of these three Objects. Her written works and the teachings she promulgated answer to the second Object. And the purposeful demonstrations of the mastery of occult, paranormal powers exhibited by H. P. B. and her Adept Brothers, correspond to the third Object.

(30) *Vide*:

When Daylight Comes: A Biography of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, by Howard Murphet (Theosophical Publishing House; Wheaton, Ill.; 1975).

The Hall of Magic Mirrors, by Victor A. Endersby (Napa, California; 1969), showing that certain specimens of the Mahatma Letters --- said by skeptics to have been written by H.P.B. herself in a "feigned hand" --- could not have been written by her at all, according to the opinion, after calligraphic examination in 1963, of America's foremost criminologist, the late Professor Paul L. Kirk of the University of California at Berkeley.

[*Obituary: The "Hodgson Report" on Madame Blavatsky: 1885-1960*](#), by Adlai E. Waterman; Preface by N. Sri Ram, *President*, The Theosophical Society (T.P.H., Adyar; 1963), limited to a defense of the paranormal phenomena of Madame Blavatsky, a book of which no critic has exposed so much as a single error in reporting since its publication 12 years ago; and the first such defense to be reviewed and defended (by its author, a Member of the British Society for Psychical Research) in the *Journal* of the S.P.R., the same Society whose Committee of 1885 published the "Hodgson Report" to support the now-discredited opinion that Madame Blavatsky was an imposter.