RAMULU'S POPULAR PENNY SERIES—56

DR. ANNIE BESANT

THE SPIRITUAL PILGRIM

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1. Early Life

THE family of Woods of which **Dr. (Mrs.) Annie Besant** was a member seems to have been originally farmers of Devonshire. As years advanced, they gave up tilling the land and entered into commerce, where they flourished appreciably. One Mathew Wood became Lord Mayor of London. Another close relative made reputation as a successful barrister and finally became Lord Chancellor of England. Others had been only less successful but Annie's father and her uncles did not make their way in the world as prominently as their elders did.

William Page Wood, the father of Annie was half Irish by birth. He was all along brought up and educated in Ireland. He studied for medicine and in due course took his doctor's degree. Instead of setting up practice as a doctor, he entered a commercial concern in London, which seemed to be prospective. He was but a failure there, as he had not that enterprising quality of the business people. He was only a scholar, well versed in Mathematics and Philosophy, and was a master of many languages. His deep study of Philosophy had made him a sceptic and at times, he used to make playful mockery of the tenets of the Christian faith.

The Maurices, of which Annie's mother was a member, were not a wealthy family. They had spent what little

they had inherited in their younger days and had now settled themselves quietly in their London home. They were, however, proud of their ancient Irish descent and were keenly alive to their sensitiveness and devoutness.

Little Annie was born in London, in the early evening of 1st October, 1847. Her father died when she was hardly five years old. Mr. Wood believed that he was leaving his wife and two children, quite comfortably. While, on his death-bed, he expressed that his son Harry should receive the best possible education. Mrs. Wood felt that she had not sufficient means to educate her son in Harrow or Cambridge. She therefore went to Harrow with the idea of starting him in the commercial world, where she thought, she could command some influence. A poor lodging was set up for herself and her two children. She took charge of the schooling of another boy and with the money she got from his parents, tutored both of them for the school. Later on, she rented a suitable house, took a number of boarders from the local school with the permission of the headmaster and thereby found means to support herself and her children and to pay her son's fees at school and university.

Not long after, when Annie was about eight years old, she came into contact with a wealthy lady, Miss Marryat who was responsible for shaping her destiny to a very large extent This Marryat was a sister of Captain Marryat, the famous novelist. She was unmarried and had inherited large means. When she found herself alone in the world after her mother and brother, she was busy thinking of some philanthropic means by which she could make herself useful to the public at large She adopted a niece and tried to educate her thoroughly. When she met Annie Wood, it occurred to her that the latter would be a suitable companion to her niece. The early education of Miss Wood, therefore, came under the guidance of this Miss Marryat who, with zeal and enthu-

siasm took upon herself the duty of educating the two girls in the most up-to-date methods of education.

For nearly six years, Miss Wood spent the greater part of each year at Charmouth, calling at Harrow to see her mother only during holidays. Thanks to Marryat's genius for teaching and her interest in the girls, the young Miss Wood learnt everything in a most sound and thorough fashion. She acquired mastery of English, French and German. She developed her musical talents also, under the guidance of a tutor appointed by Miss Marryat.

Annie Wood's education under the guidance of Miss Marryat ceased in 1863, when she was sixteen years of age. She therefore returned to Harrow back to her mother who welcomed her with inordinate affection and love. She spent a happy life in the company of the Maurices. She devoted her leisure to study and reading. She took her religion a little less solemnly but certainly not less seriously. She studied the christian scriptures and the writings of Pusey, Liddon and Keble and found joy in the great conception of a Catholic church. Her religious fervour and enthusiasm grew stronger and stronger with the constant study of religious books. She fasted according to the ordinances of the church and practised weekly communication with God. Christ was to her the central figure of her devotions.

Towards the end of 1865, Annie's aunt, Mimmie Maurice had retired to her native district of Clapham along with her sisters. Annie Wood had come there on a short visit. At the request of the Maurices who evinced an interest in the local mission church, Miss Wood took upon herself the duty of decorating the church, and working ornaments for it. It was here that Miss Wood came into contact with one **Frank Besant** whom she married a year later. This Besant was an under-master from a London grammar school who had just taken orders and who was assisting the clergy in the Clapham

Mission church. He became attracted by the handsome, intelligent Miss Wood who, in turn, began to admire him. Frank Besant mistook her admiration as one of reciprocation of love and proposed that she should marry him. Miss Wood was taken aback at the unexpected proposal of the youth. She felt that her pride was outraged. She would have refused but he bound her to secrecy until he found an opportunity to open the topic to her mother. Out of sheer weakness and fear of inflicting pain, she drifted into an engagement with a man whom she never loved. She hated to become the wife of a priest, working in the church for ever. She therefore made an attempt to end the engagement but her mother interfered and would not allow her to dishonour herself by breaking her word. She told her that she would have more opportunities for doing good as a clergyman's wife than anything else. Miss Wood therefore decided to marry him, though much against her will, and the marriage took place at last in December 1867.

From the outset, both the husband and the wife were an ill-matched pair. They held conflicting ideas of their duties and responsibilities. Mr. Besant had a very high idea of a husband's authority and a wife's submission. He strongly believed that he was the master of the house and that Mrs. Besant should look to the details of home arrangements precisely and methodically. He was impulsive and easily angered and could be appeased only with great difficulty. But, on the other hand, Mrs. Besant was very indifferent to home details. Her girlhood was spent entirely in ignorance of all life's duties and burdens. Marriage was her first experience of the realities of suffering and conscious dependence knowing nothing of house-keeping. She did not care much for it. She rather spent her leisure in studying books than in training herself in household duties. It is no wonder then, that the disruption between the couple got deeper and deeper day by day.

Mr. Besant had obtained a mastership in a Cheltenham School. He therefore went with his wife to live there. Here she did not mingle herself freely with the local society that took interest in the talk of babies and housemaids, of which she had no interest. She gave her time to reading books on Theology, Politics and Science. She worked industriously and within a few months, produced a number of pamphlets dealing with the lives o, Christian Saints. Several short stories were writtenf some of which were printed by the *Family Herald*. She wrote a novel but this was not published as it was considered too political. Her attention thereafter was being drawn irresistibly towards political things instead of domestic affairs, with the result that her relations with her husband began to grow less and less agreeable.

In January 1869, a son was born to her and nineteen months later, a daughter. This was the period when her mental struggle began. Troubles had been brewing and she was meeting them bravely. On one side, the pains and problems of the poor with whom she came into contact by virtue of being the wife of a clergyman touched the soft corners of her heart. On the other side, the unsatisfactory finances of her mother gave her cause for anxiety. After struggling hard for years, her mother had found herself plunged heavily into debt and had been compelled to sell her home. Her own health was far from satisfactory. Her baby daughter was delicate, having been born prematurely. She along with herbrother caught whooping-cough which developed intobronchitis and congestion of the lungs. She gave Mrs. Besant considerable trouble. She lay upon the verge of death and yet could not die. The disease was a loving torture for her. On many occasions, her mother prayed for the child's death, that she might be taken rather than tortured. But the baby was destined to live for some more years. She recovered at last from the terrible disease, after suffering for nearly three years and two months.

The effect of the mental struggle during this period on Mrs. Besant was her transformation from a christian into an Atheist. The agony of her baby's struggle in the first nineteen months was a hell for her. The pain was so horrible, so keen in its torture and so crushing in weight that it seemed to shipwreck everything. It was the long months of suffering, with the purposeless torturing of her innocent baby, that dealt a blow in her belief in God as a Merciful Father of men. Her mother whom she adorned as an idol was defrauded by a lawyer she had trusted and was consequently thrown into penury and debt. Her own life was marred by sheer force of circumstances which led her into an intolerable sense of bondage under a partner whom she never liked. Her sinless and innocent baby was tortured for weeks and left frail and suffering. In the face of all these pains and sufferings, how could she believe in the presence of the All Mercitul ?

Mr. Besant could not readily agree to this attitude of his wife. Himself a confident believer and being a clergyman, he could not reconcile himself with her non-belief. This contributed to their already strained relationship. By this time, the family of Maurice was able to obtain from him the crown living of Sibsey in Lincolnshire. The couple had therefore to move on to this new village. The local society did not attract her. She remained there for a time. Her previous illness had left her weak and she had again succumbed. She recovered only in the autumn of 1872, when she went back to London to stay with her mother for a brief holiday.

During the holiday, she was striving to come to some decision regarding her disbelief in the Christian Faith. She called on Pusey, who had been for many years, a pillar of her faith and explained to him her difficulty. He would not accept the Deity of Jesus as a question for argument and urged her to have belief without demanding proof. Feeling that her mission had

been useless, she returned to Sibsey and explained her position as fully as possible to her husband. It was finally agreed that she should attend the ordinary Church Service, but not Holy Communion, as she had not yet begun to question the deeper problems of religion, such as the deity of Christ, the existence of God and the immortality of the Soul.

She soon came under the influence of Rev. Charles Voysey and Thomas Scott who were spending both time and fortuue in spreading Truth and Liberty by distributing pamphlets freely. The latter's house was a centre of liberal opinion. All men who sought freedom from the bondage of blind faith gathered. It was at the suggestion of Mr. Scott that Mrs. Besant wrote her first free-thought essays. The first essay was published in 1873 under the caption "On the Deity of Jesus of Nazareth."

When this was published, Mrs. Besant was living at Sibsey with her husband. The latter came to know shortly that his own wife was the author of the pamphlet, "On the Deity of Jesus of Nazareth." He considered that this publication was indiscreet on the part of his wife, though he agreed with the views expressed therein. Mr. Besant believed that whatever views she might entertain of the Christian Faith, she should at least be made to conform to outward ceremonies, in that he happened to be the local Vicar. He therefore warned her that she should resume attendance at communion, on her return to Sibsey. Having aimed at beliefs fundamentally opposed to christian tenets, she refused to conform to the decision of her husband. She therefore stayed away with her mother at London, despite the latter's pleading. Her legal separation with the guardianship of her daughter and a small allowance, was obtained by the brother towards the end of 1873. Mr. Besant's offer to her of a comfortable home on condition that she quitted the company of her heretical friends, was rejec-

ted, as she sought after freedom, unfettered by any such conditions.

After the legal separation, Mrs. Besant did not know what to do. She tried to make a living in a variety of ways. Some weeks of fancy needlework earned for her just four-and-sixpence. She then accepted an invitation to her grandmother's and aunt's home at Folkestone where she found employment for the winter as head cook, governess and nurse. On 10th May 1874, her mother died and the months that followed were most dreadful to her. She had poverty as well as sorrow to struggle against. She maintained with great difficulty her living. She did not fail to contribute a series of free-thought pamphlets to Mr. Scott. The income derived was hardly sufficient for the maintenance, inspite of the helping hand of Mr. and Mrs. Scott. The little jewellery she possessed were sold to provide food, which she herself often went without. She then only learnt to have sympathy for the poor. It was at this time that she happened to come in contact with Mr. Charles Bradlaugh, the proprietor and publisher of the weekly *The National Reformer*. One day in August 1874, she had been to the Hall of Science in Old Street, to receive her certificate as a new member of the National Secular Society. Mr. Bradlaugh was then delivering a lecture on free-thought organization which impressed her very much. She called on him a few days later in his London lodgings and was enlisted as a contributor to the *National Reformer* on a weekly salary of one guinea. He however warned her that she should not be surprised if she were to be hated by the English society shortly, due to her association with him. Bradlaugh's influence upon her was very great. He held out before her what all she could accomplish, if only she had patience, strength and certainty. He educated her in public attack and defence and taught her the importance of understanding all sides of a case.

Towards the end of August, she gave her maiden lecture before the public on "The Political Status of Women," which Bradlaugh thought it, as the best which he had listened to from a lady speaker. She delivered lectures on the platform one after another. During a bye-election in which Bradlaugh was concerned, she went to Northampton and worked for him. At the end of the year, Bradlaugh proceeded to America on some urgent errand. Mrs. Besant became ill once-more with bronchitis and congestion of lungs. She recovered not long after and she now resolved to engage herself wholly in propaganda work as a free-thinker and a Social Reformer, in spite of adverse criticism by the British society.

She went about the country, discoursing on religion and politics. She used her pen and tongue without any restraint, with the result she was denounced as an agitator and a firebrand. Her experiences included stone-throwing at Darwen, Lancashire, guarantees against damage to the Lecture Hall at Swansea and horrible yelling at the lecture at Hozland, set on cars by Christian Missionaries. She had already delivered a course of six lectures on the French Revolution which now appeared in the form of a work. She was appointed as the Vice-President of the National Secular Society to which Bradlaugh was the President. The sub-editorship of the weekly *National Reformer* passed into her hands in the year 1877.

The same year was remarkable in that it was a turning point in her life-story. It so happened that a pamphlet on population written by an American doctor on the necessity of voluntary limitation of the family was republished by the Publisher of the *National Reformer*. "Some copies were seized by the Police and the publisher prosecuted. He pleaded guilty after having made a contrary agreement with Bradlaugh and Mrs. Besant, who thereupon severed all connection with

him, hurriedly printed a number of copies of the pamphlet and themselves sold them to the police officers." The inevitable prosecution followed. Mrs. Besant refused to avail of the opportunity afforded to her by the Prosecution to withdraw, lest she should place her friend Mr. Bradlaugh in embarrassment. She resolved to share victory or defeat with him. She had no experience of legal procedure and it was not an easy task for Mr. Bradlaugh to tutor her as to what she should say and in particular as to what she should *not* say.

She argued her part in the case splendidly. Her opening speech for the defence contained full forty thousand words. Even Bradlaugh, with all his experience could not complete half that number. In spite of their arguments, the court held that they were guilty of publishing a book calculated to deprave public morals. An appeal was preferred, on which the verdict of the lower court was quashed by the higher court. As a result of the success the pamphlet had a vast advertisement. This pamphlet together with Mrs. Besant's similar work, *The Law of Population*, sold in hundreds of thousands and established them more firmly than ever in the public eye.

However, an unfortunate incident in her life followed shortly. The Rev. Frank Besant, at the instance of the clergy and churchmen of the diocese who unanimously opined that Mrs. Basant was not a fit guardian for her daughter Mabel, instituted a law suit for the custody of the child. There were petitions and counter-petitions. Mrs. Beasant protested vehemently and even expressed to the court that she would pay for the maintenance and education of the girl, in any other hands than those of her father. In spite of these protests, the decision went against her. The girl was taken away from Mrs. Besant, to her utter dismay and confusion. She felt the separation keenly—so keenly indeed that she was taken with fever. The soothing help of Mr. Brad-

laugh accelerated her recovery. She once again tried to get her husband into terms by law suits which eventually ended in favour of the latter. She later on obtained liberal access to her children, but when she faced with petty forms of insult from her husband, in the presence of the children, she relinquished her right to visit them, hoping that in womanhood, her daughter would return to her of her own accord.

The formation of the Malthusian League was the result of the Knowlton Pamphlet prosecution. Those holding liberal views and who sympathised with the accused in the aforesaid prosecution case became members of the League and Mrs. Besant, in due course, was elected its Secretary.

She had now resumed her ordinary labours of producing books and pamphlets and editing the *National Reformer*. Every week, she visited all the important towns in the British Isles giving lectures on free-thought and reforms. Not being satisfied with these, she desired to utilise her leisure towards intellectual recreation. She therefore translated into English a substantial work from the French. She wanted to improve her powers of concentration and her knowledge, in general. She therefore became a pupil of Dr. E. B. Aveling with a view to sit for the matriculation examination of the London University. This she did in June 1879. This doctor was a professor of Comparative Anatomy at the London Hospital. He became a new adherent of the National Secular Society of which Mrs. Besant was a member. In August 1879, he was dismissed from the Chair of Comparative Anatomy, for identifying himself with the National organisation mentioned above. He therefore took upon himself the organisation of the Science and Art Department at South Kensington. Two classes were primarily established under his direction and others were rapidly added. In order that she might be of some assistance to this new department, Mrs. Besant,

became qualified as a science teacher in eight subjects and helped in keeping the classes going until 1888. This enabled her to study for passing the B.Sc. and preliminary selection Examination at the London University.

In 1880, Mrs. Besant engaged herself actively in the election of Mr. Bradlaugh to the House of Commons by Northampton constituents. After twelve years work in the constituency, he had been elected as a member for Northampton in April 1880. When in the House of Commons, he claimed his optional right to affirm rather than take the oath, a dispute arose. Select Committees were appointed and the House voted on the matter. Bradlaugh refused to obey and take the oath, as he considered the procedure unconstitutional. He was lodged in the Clock Tower of the House as a prisoner and at last on July 2nd, was allowed to affirm. But his opponents immediately took the matter to the courts and in 1881, the seat was declared vacant. Mr. Gladstone, due to obstruction from the Tories, withdrew his Affirmation Bill on 2nd July 1881. Bradlaugh therefore resolved to present himself once again in the House, now that he had been re-elected. Mrs. Besant who had all along been editing, lecturing, pamphleting and organizing petitions followed Mr. Bradlaugh on 3rd August 1881 to the House of Commons, at the head of a crowd of working men from all parts of the country, bearing a monster petition. For a long while nothing was heard from within by the waiting crowd. It began to grow restive and to charge the steps leading to the lobby. Mrs. Besant sprang forward and, to the amazement of the Police, begged them for Bradlaugh's sake to be quiet and orderly. But for the personal influence of Mrs. Besant, something untoward might have surely happened that day, especially as Bradlaugh was expelled from the House late in the day, shamefully and ignominiously. Mrs. Besant did not stop there. She fought on vigorously for

her friend, being the chief spokesman and writer for the Free thought wing in the struggle until Bradlaugh was firmly seated in the House.

The next year *viz.* 1882 marked the epoch in the the life-story of Mrs. Besant. It was only during this year that she first came into contact with Theosophy. A statement of the principles of the Theosophical Society was conveyed to her as also a report of an address by Colonel Olcott. She was led to suppose that the society held to "some strange theory of apparitions of the dead, and to some existence outside the physical and apart from it." It was then referred to her decision by certain Free thinkers whether Thesophists might be admitted to the National Secular Society and whether there was any objection to Secularists joining the Theosophical society, she replied that "while Secularists would have no right to refuse to enrol Theosophists, if they desired it, among their members, there is a radical difference between the mysticism of Theosophy and the Scientific Materialism of Secularism." These remarks in the *National Reformer* were perused by Madame H. P. Balavatsky, the founder of the Theosophical movement, who replied in gentle but firm terms that Mrs. Besant's remarks were made under a misconception of Theosophy and form "crafty misrepresentations."

It was in 1884 that Mrs. Besant was present at a debate between Mr. Bradlaugh and Mr. Hyndman of the Social Democratic Federation. Bradlaugh carried the palm, more by his personality and oratory than argument. She at least found her opponent more convincing and the principles advocated by Mr. Hyndman were most appealing to her. She began to see matters in a new light. Before openly avowing the next cause, she hesitated for a while to consider the effect of her new attitude on her friend Bradlaugh who was a veritable opponent of Socialism and with whom she worked hand in glove for the past several years. She gradually expressed her change

of attitude in her weekly the *National Reformer*. Not long after, she was accused of erring on the side of socialistic tendencies which her writings displayed. It was about this time that she met Bernard Shaw with whom she began to associate herself. She had been one day to a meeting which he was addressing. His lecture left such an indelible impression on her mind that instead of opposing him, she advocated his cause and requested him to nominate her for election to the Fabian Society. After this declaration, Bradlaugh never again felt the same confidence in her judgment as he felt before. He never thereafter consulted her on his own policy, though their private friendship remained unbroken.

Mrs. Besant was not, however, inclined to sever her connections with the Radicals all on a sudden. She therefore joined the Fabian Society, a milder organisation of the Socialists and became a sort of expeditionary force carrying the Fabian message out into the world. It was a matter of doubt whether she ever felt so completely and comfortably at home in the Fabian Society as she had with her National Secular Society. Of course there was something radically different in the Fabian outlook. She therefore remained, in some degree, always an outsider, but her services were utilised for making free speeches and for forming, on her own initiative such *adhoc* organisations, as were necessary to make the tenets and dogmas of the Fabian Society effective. It was during this period that her work for Trade Unionism was completed. She fought for the right of free speech in Trafalgar Square against the persistent policy of aggression. In the East End district, she urged the necessity for feeding starving children before attempting to educate them. She also arranged meetings to discuss the sufferings of Russian prisoners and to help poor workmen to a fair trial and providing bail and legal defence. In 1883, she started a six-penny monthly of her own, *Our Corner*

in the interest of Socialist propaganda. Though this monthly was widely circulated among all the Socialists, it aroused bitter feelings of rancour among her Secularist friends, who denounced her in most contemptible and ungenerous terms. This monthly ran for nearly six years till 1888.

In 1887, Mrs. Besant resigned her co-editorship of the *National Reformer*, as she was a pronounced Socialist who held incompatible views with Mr Bradlaugh, the stern Radical. She strove not a little to organise the Socialist Defence Association to help poor labourers sentenced without an opportunity of defending themselves being giving to them. A Defence Fund was opened by her friend W. T. Stead, to which contributions were freely subscribed. Mrs. Besant moved freely with the labourers and identified herself with their sufferings. This earned for her the high approval of even Mr. Bradlaugh, who was opposed to the Socialist faith.

Throughout 1888, she ran, with W. T. Stead another weekly entitled *The Link*. The former was an Atheist, the latter was a Christian. Both became great friends, as they were burning with a common desire, *viz.*, love for man and hatred against oppression. This weekly was projected with the object of drawing as many sympathisers as possible to work for the common cause. This weekly exposed unjust land-lords and employers, cruelty to children and insanitary workshops. It fought for the sweated dockers, raised funds to feed starving children, public facts concerning the wages of match-girls and organised and won strikes for them and for other illegally oppressed workers.

In spite of her unceasing devotion to Socialist and other labours, she found in her a growing quest for finding a " new road." The feeling that something more than she had, was needed for the cure of social ills was growing in her. Early in 1889, she had a definite experience. " In the beginning of the year, before I joined

the Theosophical Society, I was making desperate efforts to pierce the darkness, and was seeking with passionate earnestness to obtain some direct evidence of the existence of the soul and of the super physical world; one evening as I was alone, concentrating my mind on this longing, I heard the Master's voice—but knew not whose it was—and after some questions asked by him and answered by me, came the promise that I should soon find the light." This promise was quickly fulfilled. Hardly a fortnight passed, when Mr. Stead gave into her hands two large volumes of *The Secret Doctrine* by H. P. Blavatsky with a request to have them reviewed for the *Pall Mall Gazette*. She became absorbed in the book, as she turned page after page. She recognised instantly that it contained the revelation that she had been seeking. She did not lose a moment to obtain an introduction to the author and within a few days she found herself before Madame Blavastky who was then in her best mood. The discussion was very lively and it only enhanced the regard and interest she entertained to the new faith. When they parted, Madame Blavatsky expressed that she would be only too glad to receive her into her fold. Though Mrs. Besant was first inclined to yield, her pride and caution held her back. How could she estrange her friends and comrades who worked with her shoulder to shoulder in the Socialist organisation until recently? A bitter conflict arose in her mind and her decision to join the new faith came with startling suddeness even to her intimate friends. Bradlaugh, who read of her decision in a weekly paper, regretted the suddenness of the step she had taken. Bernard Shaw was surprised when he learnt casually in the editorial office of the *Star* as to why and how Annie Besant became a Theosophist. He deeply regretted the loss of a powerful colleague who had done her best for the Fabian Society. He rushed to her office in the nearby Fleet Street, and delivered an unbounded denounciation of Theosophy in general, of female incon

sistency and in particular of H. P. Blavatsky. But Mrs. Besant was not the sort of woman who would be easily moved to change her conviction. She had found her road and had come to see the universe and herself in their real perspective. It was therefore, no wonder that she defended herself stoutly against the unjust and ungenerous aspersions and caluminations cast against her.

2. Her association with Theosophists

At this stage, it is necessary to give our readers an insight into the beginnings and general progress of the Theosophical Society. The Society owes its existence to Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, a Russian lady of aristocratic descent. She married at seventeen years of age. Her erratic nature made her relation with her husband very strained. She therefore severed her connections with him and went about the globe without any fixed aim. On a certain night in August, 1851, she met the "Master of her dreams" who reminded her life should be dedicated to the founding of the Theosophical Society. From that day onwards, she dedicated herself to this purpose avowedly, and worked under the definite orders of the "Masters." These Masters were described by Mrs. Besant in her later life as merely living men who had developed their spiritual nature to such an extent that they could, by their mastery of forces of nature, utilize them at their will. Madame Blavatsky had been to America in 1874 and at the home of certain spiritualists, she came into touch with Colonel H.S. Olcott, late special Commissioner of the United States War Department and a special investigator for a New York newspaper. This Colonel was interested in the study of spiritualism. The unusual psychic powers developed by the Madame arrested his attention. The formation of a Society for the study of occult matters was proposed in September 1875. He was appointed the life president of

this Society whose inaugural address, he delivered in New York on November 17th, 1875.

There were originally three sections of this Society. The last consisted of the ordinary members who were newly admitted, the last but one, of the pupils of Madame Blavatsky and the first of the Masters themselves. Early in 1879, the Colonel and the Madame sailed for India and settled at Bombay. It was here that they exhibited a series of occult phenomena which made their Society known throughout the world. It was this phenomena that brought not only fame but also converts to this Society. In due course, the members felt that it would be better if they confined their attention to Philosophy and Metaphysics and to leave occulticism alone. The Masters therefore withdrew, leaving only the last two sections in existence.

In 1885, Madame Blavatsky fell ill seriously and she therefore sailed for Europe. The members who were not satisfied with her teachings began to attack her in her absence, and even persuaded the Colonel to expel her from the Society but their efforts were dissipated. The interest evinced by the members however lessened and the membership consequently dwindled.

With the departure from India of Madame Blavatsky, the spiritual centre of the movement was transferred to the West. When she recovered from her illness, she gathered about her, a number of disciples in London who were pledged to serve the Masters faithfully under all circumstances. This band of disciples were designated the Esoteric section of the Society. Shortly after the formation of the section, the Society began to gain momentum, chiefly due to the influence of the Masters who poured life into it, by keeping themselves aloof from that organisation. Since then, the Society had been flourishing continuously.

Mrs. Besant joined the Theosophical Society in 1889, because she was convinced of the teachings of Madame

Blavatsky, as set forth in the pages of *The Secret Doctrine*. She applied herself to the new cause without hesitation or stint. Within a few months of her joining the society, she became the co-editor of *Lucifer* and the 'right hand' of Madame H. P. Blavatsky. Even after joining this society, Mrs. Besant buried herself with Trade Union, Socialist and School Board work. In the middle of 1889, her services were requisitioned in Paris where the Labour Congress met for six days. From these, she paid a flying visit with Madame Blavatsky to Fontainebleau. It was here that Mrs. Beasant first experienced her communion with her Master. "Sleeping there one night, in a small room by herself, she was 'waked suddenly and set up in bed startled, to find the air of the room thrown into pulsing electric waves, and then appeared the radiant astral Figure of the Master, visible to my physical eyes.' She was to have in the next year or two, a considerable number of such first-hand experiences."

In 1890, Madame Blavatsky and Annie Bessant moved on to London, which was the headquarters of the Theosophical Society in Europe. The latter gave herself up to more and more intense study of Theosophy under that noble and heroic soul.

Annie Besant was continually being attacked by her old comrades and Free-thinkers. She therefore withdrew from all non-Theosophical activities and also resigned her membership of the National Secular Society in 1891.

The same year in the month of May, Madame Blavatsky died. Before her death, she pitched upon Annie Besant as her successor and entrusted to her the most valued signet ring. Besant was thereafter to be the Chief Secretary of the Inner Group of the Esoteric Section and Recorder of the Teachings and as Outer Head also of the Esoteric Section.

What followed Madame Blavatsky's death was internal friction and dissatisfaction. The only two serious claimants were seen to be, Mrs. Besant and William Quan Judge, then General Secretary of the American Section. The former's position seemed to be the stronger, in view of the fact that she was the favoured pupil of Madame Blavatsky and that, under her superior personal influence, Theosophical work seemed to be gathering force everywhere. The only factor that counted little was she had scarcely been a Theosophist for a period of two years. On the other hand, William Quan Judge was one of the original members and had been the Vice-President for several years .

After visiting the convention of the American Section, Annie Besant was bound homeward, when, in the mid-ocean, the death of Madame Blavatsky was announced. She was the first to be on the scene but her rival Quan Judge also followed her by the next boat. Colonel Olcott who was then in India, realising the gravity of the situation, made haste to patch up a compromise which was eventually effected, of course, with great difficulty. It was agreed that thereafter there should be two divisions of the Esoteric Section, *viz.* Eastern and Western, the former which included Europe and India to be under Mrs. Besant and the latter representing America to be under Quan Judge.

In 1893, she visited the Chicago Parliament of Religions and scored a vast success for herself and for Theosophy. The same year during winter, she paid her first visit to India. She proceeded to Adyar, the Indian head-quarters of the Society. It was here that she was requested to take action to wash away the stains on the Theosophical Society. When after some time, she returned to London, she found William Quan Judge responsible for having forged the names and handwritings of the Masters and misused the said names and handwritings to advance his reputation and his authority. In

July 1894, an inquiry was held, in London, into the charges levelled against Judge but no decision could be declared, as the issue involved a question of the existence of the Masters upon which the Society as such had no hold.

Mrs. Besant then sailed for Australia, carrying with her the Presidential powers conferred on her by Colonel Olcott. On her return to Adyar, she announced, " Last year, only India would have stood against Mr. Judge, America and Europe going with him, two sections to one, or the majority of the Theosophical Society. But by my Australasian visit, a new section has been built up, and this stands with India and Europe in demanding Mr. Judge's resignation..... That is, we have three sections to one." But Judge assumed full control of the Esoteric Section and declared that Besant was no longer the head of any part of this Section. This she did not accept. At the Annual convention at Adyar held in December of that year, she had a resolution passed, calling upon Mr. Judge to resign his Vice-Presidency. To this, the American Section replied by affirming its loyalty to stand by Mr. Judge. In April of the following year, 75 branches seceded and 14 only affirmed for the parent body. These were however administered by Colonel Olcott under a new General Secretary. The ten years following the expulsion of William Quan Judge and the Session of the American Section were a peaceful period for the Society as a whole. No sensational revelations, attacks or innovations disturbed its steady progress.

3. Propaganda in India

Mrs. Besant's personal associations with India commenced on 16th November 1893, when she landed for the first time upon Indian Soil at Tuticorin. Her landing created considerable sensation among Indians and Europeans, and members and non-members of the

Society. She visited all the sacred places of India, indentified herself with the leading priests and proclaimed herself an Indian in heart and feeling. So much so, when she returned to India towards the end of 1894, she made up her mind to make it her home thenceforward, save for occasional visits to England and Europe. As though to mark the permanence of this change, she became a Hindu, mostly because, she found in Hinduism, a satisfactory exposition of the "Wisdom."

Her first lecture delivered in India was calculated to open the eyes of the Indians to the inadequacy of Western materialism. They paused a moment to consider whether their own ancient philosophy was not sufficient to satisfy their moral, religious and national needs. Mrs. Besant remarked : " I honestly believe that the future of India, the greatness of India and the happiness of her people, can never be secured by political methods, but only by the revival of her philosophy and religion. To this, therefore, I must give all my energies." She felt that the conditions then obtaining in India were most unsuited for reviving the spiritual desire. Her foremost object was to awaken in the minds of the Indians a national self-consciousness and for this she considered that there should be a new form of education, purely national in character. She started propaganda, advocating the organization of education upon national lines. She strongly supported the education of women and of the depressed classes, and worked for the revival of Indian Arts and Industries. She criticised and opposed certain Indian customs such as that of child marriage.

On 7th July 1898, she started a School at Benares for the avowed purpose of teaching Hinduism to Hindus and at the same time, of imparting sound instruction upon secular and religious subjects. A year later, the school was removed to the spacious premises, generously presented by His Highness the Maharajah of Benares. She

received in this project the aid of colonel Olcott and of many Indian Princes and other prominent Hindus. This was the beginning of the Central Hindu College, originally affiliated to the Allahabad University but subsequently became the nucleus of the Hindu University. In 1904, the Central Hindu Girls' School was founded in Benares and two years later free schools for the poor classes. She opened at intervals numerous other schools for women and the depressed classes.

In the year 1905, there fell upon the Society a shadow of disaster, in connexion with Charles Webster Leadbeater, an Englishman and a psychic. The latter had been associated with the Society for a very long time. He had for some time been in America acting as tutor to a number of boys belonging to Theosophists. He was accused of certain charges of an unpleasant nature and the Members of the Society demanded an inquiry. Early in 1906, a committee meeting was held in London, at which Leadbeater made certain admissions on which his resignation was accepted. Annie Besant who had closely associated herself with this Leadbeater during the previous years, considered his exile as an irrepairable loss. Consequently her opinion of and attitude to him became the subject of severe criticism for the entire society.

In February 1907, Colonel Olcott who was now eightyfour years of age passed a w a y leaving the reins of office to his successor Mrs. Besant. The same year in June, she was elected President of the Theosophical Society by a large majority of members. The effect of her election upon the society was twofold. On the one hand, she openly started her devotion to the will of the Masters. On the other she imposed a business-like organization of activities. Her first object was to put the society on a sound financial basis. With that object in view, she set up a regular auditing of accounts. She established a printing press at Adyar and

enlarged the Oriental Library. Secondly she strove hard to make the members, good workers in all branches of beneficient activity. Annie Besant said in her Presidential address : " The Lodge should be the centre and not the circumference of our work. To the Lodge for Inspiration and knowledge ; to the world for service and teachings." She said she would make the Presidency a centre of life radiating force, inspiring and uplifting the whole society.

During the next few years, she not only worked hard but also travelled far and wide. In July 1907, she left Adyar for America, stayed there for two months, visited Holland, Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Italy in October and returned to Adyar back again in November. In all these places, she visited the sections of the society, gave public lectures and enlisted new recruits to her faith. During the spring and summer of the following year, she toured through Australasia. In 1909, she visited parts of India, Europe and America, then Europe and India again, in all travelling between January and December nearly fortyfive thousand miles.

The agitation that she had been making hitherto for the revival of natural education eventually led her proclaim publicly that the " price of India's loyalty is India's freedom." She reorganised the increasing demand of Indian's for self-Government and worked to guide that demand towards the idea of Home Rule within the British Empire.

4. In the Political horizon

In the autumn of 1913, she started her new campaign with a series of public lectures in Madras, " with a suggestion to the Indian National Congress that it should put itself at the head of a national movement embodying religious, educational and social as well as political reforms." The congress was not amendable to this suggestion. She therefore started forth from Adyar

The Commonweal, a weekly newspaper, the first issue of which appeared on 2nd January, 1914. *The Commonweal* ceased on the appearance of the *Citizen*, the weekly organ of the Madras Liberal Party.

In July 1914, she was re-elected President of the Theosophical Society. In the same month, she purchased an Indian daily *The Madras Standard* and began its publication from Adyar under the new title, *New India*. She hoped to infuse new life into it and to make it popular among the Indian reading public. It voiced the hopes and aspirations of the Indian people and their grievances. "She publicly proclaimed that her new enterprise should provide, both herself and others of her way of thinking, with an instrument by means of which Home Rule for India might be brought within the realm of things."

Her desire was Home Rule for India. If Indian aspirations were to support her in the achievement of this desire, she felt that the great body of her representatives *viz.*, the Indian National Congress should be upon her side. It was clear that her influence was seen all over the country and that it was more keenly felt in the Congress itself. The time seemed to her most propitious for setting afoot an active educative propaganda in favour of Home Rule. In December 1914, at the Congress session, she appeared for the first time upon its platform and was welcomed as a powerful ally and advocate. The Congress was then divided on several important matters. Despite this cleavage, she worked her way for their reunion and an united front, with considerable degree of success. She established, a Parliamentary Debating Society at Madras, to give training to the Indians in Political forms and usages.

In December 1915, she proceeded to Bombay and delivered an impressive address to second the resolution asking for self-Government for India. She convened a

meeting of the Congress leaders to discuss with them the formulation of a Home Rule League which should take upon itself the organisation of propaganda work and the duty of implementing the decisions of the Congress. Her proposal did not receive full support from the Congress leaders who held that the setting up of an organisation parallel to the National Congress was unwise and uncalled for. Annie Besant did not agree. She therefore started a Home Rule League at Madras and arranged for wide and effective propaganda.

She continually harped at the theme of Home Rule in her own daily *New India* and infused life and vigour in the political activities of the people in a growing measure. On 26th May 1916, a security of Rs. 2000 was demanded by the Madras Government for the publication of this daily. No reason was given for this unexpected change of attitude on the part of the authorities who had till then allowed the publication of the paper without demanding any security whatsoever. She immediately organised a Defence Fund for *New India*, appealed to the Madras High Court, and conducted the case herself. The appeal, however, went against her. The Press Association in India soon passed a resolution on the inexpedient action of the authorities in applying the Provisions of the Press Act of 1910 in the case of the Publishers of the *New India*. The Association also forwarded a strong representation to the Viceroy of India, asking for the repeal of the Press legislation. A deputation also waited in vain, on His Excellency to urge upon him the need for his interyention in the decisions of the local Governments.

On 10th July 1916, the Bombay Government issued orders prohibiting the entry of Annie Besant in the Bombay Presidency, as they considered that her activities, if allowed therein, would prejudice public safety. Annie Besant received the orders coolly and wrote a reply in the *New India* to the effect that she would not dis-

obey the Government orders knowingly, as she would be deemed a menace, were she to do so. The Government of the Central Provinces followed suit and in September 1916, she was served with a similar order, prohibiting her entry in that Presidency. Mrs. Besant strongly objected. She made it plain that her intended visit to the Central Provinces was to preside over the Theosophical Conference there and that it had no other ulterior motive connected with Politics. The order of the C. P. Government came in for strong criticism in the Press as as well as before the Public. Protest meetings were held throughout the country. In spite of these agitations, the order of prohibition was not rescinded.

It was nearly two years since the commencement of the Great War. Thanks to the magnificent services rendered to the Empire in the hour of trouble, by the Princes and people of India, there was a growing enthusiasm on the British Statesman to look upon India, in a new angle of vision. This zeal waved away gradually, instead of translating itself into a definite form of action. This made Mrs. Besant keenly realise that it was her duty to urge the Indian demands and to strike the iron while it was hot.

She contributed vehement articles to the dailies, made touching eloquence in her lectures and issued series of pamphlets and leaflets. As a result, the country from one end to the other was ringing with the cry of Home Rule for India. Her terse method of writing and poignant oratory, coupled with the boldness and courage, with which she criticised the actions of the authorities, were resented in official quarters. The Government lost no moment in considering drastic measures to prevent her from pursuing her propaganda work. Early in 1917, Lord Pentland, the Governor of Madras expressed that the course pursued by the agitators for Home Rule was in direct violation of the Government policy and that the public should not be surprised if repressive measures were

restored to, to put down the unconstitutional and unauthorised agitations. In spite of this warning, Annie Besant began writing a series of articles in *The New India*, criticising in vehement language the attitude taken up by His Excellency. She urged all the members of the Congress and the Muslim League to continue the agitation, unmindful of the consequences. She was therefore summoned by His Excellency Lord Pentland for an interview on June 16th, 1917. His Excellency told her that she was to be interned. "She asked why. He replied: 'I cannot discuss that, Mrs. Besant.' She pointed out, not without acerbity, that Sir Reginald Craddock had said that no one would be interned without a full statement of the offence committed. Again he replied: 'I cannot discuss it. Mrs. Besant.' He offered her a safe conduct to England on condition that she would remain there for the duration of the war. She refused, and suggested that she was only wasting His Excellency's time. He said: 'I wish you consider, Mrs. Besant, that we cannot discriminate and the whole of your activities will be stopped.' She replied: 'You have all the power and I am helpless, and you must do what you like. There is just one thing I should like to say to your Excellency, and that is, that I believe you are striking the deadliest blow against the British Empire in India!"

An hour after her interview with His Excellency, the news flashed forth that Mrs. Besant, Mr. B. P. Wadia and Mr. G. S. Arundale had been removed for internment at Ootacamund. The three took up their residence in the cottage of the Theosophical Society at Ootacamund. The biting cold of Ooty was most disagreeable to Mrs. Besant and she boldly put up with the sufferings. She had been busy all along in public life. Her internment brought about a series of disabilities and there could be no free speech or writing. Consequently she broke down in health.

While she calmly suffered all the disabilities, the public outside carried on the agitation in an orderly manner. Throughout the land, the spirit of passive resistance was freely talked over. The Swadeshi movement was inaugurated and many resorted to boycott. The Home Rule Movement was thus gaining ground. The storm of protest broke out in India, was echoed even in England and America. The agitation continued until the Imperial Government made a declaration on August 20, 1917, that Responsible Government was the goal of British administration in India. It was also announced that Mr. Montagu, the then Secretary of State for India would visit the country to learn the wishes of the people.

By this time, Mrs. Besant's health got worsened and she was therefore moved on to Coimbatore where she improved a little. A few months later, she was released unconditionally, as also her two followers. She visited Calcutta, Allahabad, Benares and Bombay and in all these places, she was accorded a fitting reception. She became more popular and more powerful than before, so much so that for the National Congress that was to be held at Calcutta, four months later, she was elected President and was acclaimed again and again as India's Champion. During the year 1918, she made extensive tours throughout the country in her capacity as President of the Indian National Congress. She also resumed her editorial responsibility in the *New India*.

By now, the long promised Montagu-Chelmsford Proposals for Reform were issued. Mrs. Besant was the first among the critics of the proposals. She opined that the scheme as a whole should not be rejected but that it might be accepted with some modifications. This view was embodied in the resolutions passed by the Madras Provincial Congress Committee and the special session of the All India Congress held in August 1918 at Bombay. But the subsequent resolution of the Delhi

Congress decried the Montagu-Chelmsford proposals vehemently. As a result, Annie Besant, refused to serve on the proposed Congress deputation to England. She reorganized the National Home Rule League and on its behalf, she proceeded to England and worked in close collaboration with the members on moderate lines.

The Rowlatt Bills were then published. These satisfied none. There was again great agitation. Despite this, the bills became law in February 1919. Under the guidance of **Mahatma Gandhi**, Satyagraha campaign was started in the country. Hartals were observed and monster meetings were arranged.

Mrs. Besant identified herself with the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms and wrote incessantly in favour of these reforms. She proceeded to England and urged before the Joint Parliamentary Committee for the liberalisation of important features put forward in the Montagu Scheme.

She saw the danger of Gandhiji's policy of Non-Co-operation and how inevitably it must lead to strife and disorder. She urged discretion and the need for constitutional progress. No one would listen. Gandhiji became the absolute leader of the Congress. Those who supported Mrs. Besant up till now and hailed her as the Champion of freedom began to jear at her and hound her out of the field of Politics. She was howled down, hooted and hissed at meetings. Yet she remained cool and calm. She opposed Gandhiji in her papers, gathered those who would work for her proposals and eventually founded the Reforms Conferences and the National Conference movement.

When Gandhiji became the accredited leader of the Congress, and took upon himself the duty of directing the political affairs of the country, and when the majority of the people began to regard him as their saviour,

Mrs. Besant thought that it was safe to retire from politics, as the enthusiasm and encouragement she had hitherto received from the public came to be bestowed upon Gandhiji. On the other hand, she continued her social activities in the country and incessantly worked for the advancement of National Education and the consolidation of the Theosophic Movement to which she had dedicated herself heart and soul, for nearly half a century. By 1933, she had become an old woman, eightysix years of age, until at last, one September morning in 1933 came her own Master, with her friends H. P. Blavatsky and Colonel Olcott to fetch her to rest with Them in Their Home far north and she, sleeping, as it were, in her Master's arms passed away from earth.

[THE END]

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