

# Reminiscences of Swami Vivekananda\*

Mrs Alice M Hansbrough

ONE bright Sunday morning in March 1941, Swami Ashokananda invited Mrs Alice M Hansbrough to drive home with him from his lecture at the Century Club in San Francisco. On the way, driving by a roundabout route over San Francisco's many hills to enjoy a sun made welcome by weeks of rain, the swami asked Mrs Hansbrough if she could not give an account of her contacts with Swami Vivekananda during his visit to California in the winter of 1899 and 1900. Mrs Hansbrough had met Swamiji in Los Angeles a few days after his arrival there, and from the day of the meeting, had become a faithful follower. She served him devotedly during his stay in Los Angeles and San Francisco, and during her intimate contacts with him had many glimpses of Swamiji's spiritual greatness and of his human qualities as well.

Mrs Hansbrough readily agreed to give whatever recollections Swami Ashokananda desired. The swami evidently had already given considerable thought to the proposal, and ways and means were discussed. It was arranged that he should go to Mrs Hansbrough's home and that, through questions, he would suggest to her a direction of conversation

which would bring out all that she could remember of her contacts with Swami Vivekananda; and that the swami would have someone (Mr A T Clifton) with him to take down the conversations. These talks covered several meetings, the first of which took place the day following Swami Ashokananda's first proposal of the subject to Mrs Hansbrough.



Swami Ashokananda, 1938

## Monday Evening, March 3, 1941

Swami Ashokananda arrived at Mrs Hansbrough's home a little after eight o'clock in the evening. She was living with her daughter, Mrs Paul Cohn, at 451 Avila Street, near the broad Marina parkway on San Francisco Bay. As the swami walked to the door of the handsome Spanish-style residence, he caught a glimpse of Mrs Hansbrough reading beside the fire in the living room. In a moment she had greeted the swami at the door and escorted him to a seat before the fire.

The door to the spacious, high-ceilinged living room was across one corner; and across the corner to the right was the broad hearth of the fireplace, with a couch at right angles on the right, and comfortable chairs opposite. Another couch stood against the wall beyond, and in the far corner was a handsome old grand piano. The swami chose a

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\* In 1941 Mrs Alice Hansbrough gave these valuable reminiscences of Swami Vivekananda in a series of informal interviews with Swami Ashokananda in San Francisco. They were recorded by Mr A T Clifton (later Swami Chidrupananda), who was present at the interviews. Marie Louise Burke used portions of these reminiscences in her work *Swami Vivekananda in the West: New Discoveries*. Swami Chetanananda and a group of Vedanta students have revised and reorganized the original manuscript of reminiscences for publication. It has been made available for publication by courtesy of the Vedanta Society of Northern California.

chair, and Mrs Hansbrough sat on one couch in the light of a small table lamp.

Mrs Hansbrough was now well on in years [75 years old], but still was blessed with a keen intelligence and a ready humour, which must surely have endeared her to Swamiji. She was slight and below medium height, dignified and unvaryingly good natured in her manner, and possessed of a natural peacefulness which communicated itself to others. Her memory was clear and her conversation therefore filled with interesting details.

After inquiring about Mrs Hansbrough's daughter, Swami Ashokananda said: 'Let us begin with your first acquaintance with Swamiji's work. How did you first hear about him?'

'I first learned of Swamiji in the spring of 1897 at a lecture in San Francisco about three years before he came to California,' Mrs Hansbrough replied. 'Two friends and I went to hear a Mrs Annie Rix Miltz speak on some metaphysical subject, and in the course of her talk she brought out some points from Swamiji's *Raja Yoga* and also quoted from the book. I was leaving not long after for Alaska, and my friends asked me what I would like for a steamer present. *Raja Yoga* was my answer. At the Emporium where they went to get it, the clerk inquired if it was for someone interested in such subjects. When they said it was, he recommended that they also get Swamiji's *Karma Yoga*, as the two were, as he said, "parts of a set". So I left for Alaska armed with the two books.

'Our ship was a steam schooner. The captain was not familiar with the course and we went far out of our way on the voyage. The result was four weeks en route, during which time I read from my books. I started with *Karma Yoga*, but found it a bit too high in thought for me, so put it aside and read *Raja Yoga* first. Then when I had finished it, I went back to *Karma Yoga* and read that. During the two years I was in Alaska I read both books over again many times.

'I remember that I used to read for a while, and the thought would come to me, "What marvellous thoughts these are!" I would hold the place with

my finger, close the book and shut my eyes and think, "What a wonderful man he must be who wrote these words!" And I would try to form a picture in my mind of what he looked like.

'I met a man in Alaska who was interested in Theosophy. We used to talk about Swamiji's books and he looked through them; but he did not find anything interesting in them because he felt they were not Theosophy.'

'And after you returned from Alaska,' Swami Ashokananda asked, 'did you go to Los Angeles?'

'Yes,' Mrs Hansbrough replied. 'I came through San Francisco on the way, and arrived in Los Angeles on November 23, 1899. Swamiji had been in Los Angeles only a few days, I later learned.' [Swamiji arrived on December 3, 1899.]

'How did you first happen to meet him?' Swami Ashokananda asked.



*Mrs Blodgett's cottage, sketched by Miss MacLeod: 'windmill ... Eucalyptus ... House overgrown with roses - geraniums - heliotrope - chrysanthemum etc. etc. etc. ... Cypress hedges'*

'Well, perhaps you would like to hear first what circumstances brought him to the West Coast,' Mrs Hansbrough suggested. 'The brother of Miss Josephine MacLeod at whose home Swamiji had been staying in New York, had been ill in Arizona with tuberculosis for some time. By the time November came, Mr MacLeod was not expected to live; and the wife of his business partner, a Mr Blodgett, wired Miss MacLeod to come west to see him, which she did. The brother died on November 2, 1899, however, and Miss MacLeod stayed on in Los Angeles, at Mrs Blodgett's house at 921 West 21st

Street, where Swamiji later came.’

‘Can you get a photograph of the house?’ Swami Ashokananda asked.

‘I might be able to,’ Mrs Hansbrough said. ‘Well, when Miss MacLeod first entered her brother’s bedroom at Mrs Blodgett’s house, the first thing she saw was a full-page newspaper picture of Swamiji—you know that one that you have in your office in the Berkeley Temple, where he stands partly turned to the left—which Mrs Blodgett had taken from a Chicago paper and had framed. It hung above her brother’s bed.

“Where did you get that?” Miss MacLeod exclaimed. Mrs Blodgett told her she had heard Swami Vivekananda speak in Chicago and had cut the picture out of one of the papers at the time. “Well, Swami Vivekananda is our guest now in New York!” Miss MacLeod said.’

Swami Ashokananda then asked, ‘Mrs Blodgett had some healing power, didn’t she?’

‘I never heard of it,’ Mrs Hansbrough answered.

‘Miss MacLeod said so some years ago at Mayavati,’ the swami remarked. ‘She said this was the reason it was suggested that Swamiji come to Los Angeles, as he had been unwell for a long time.’ [Miss MacLeod took Swamiji to a healer named Mrs Melton.]

Mrs Hansbrough said she remembered that Mrs Leggett had come to Los Angeles for some such reason, and Swami Ashokananda was surprised to learn that Mrs Leggett had come west at all. After some discussion on this point, the conversation turned to Mrs Hansbrough’s first hearing a lecture by Swami Vivekananda.

‘It was on December 8, 1899,’ she said. ‘My sister

Helen came home that evening and said: “Who do you think is going to speak in Los Angeles tonight? Swami Vivekananda!” All during the two years I had been reading his books in Alaska I had never expected to see him. Well, we rushed through dinner, made up a party, and went in. The lecture was at eight o’clock. Blanchard Hall was on Broadway between Eighth and Hill Streets. The audience was between six and eight hundred people, and everyone was enchanted with Swamiji. This was his first lecture in California and the subject was “The Vedanta Philosophy”.

‘He was introduced by a Professor Baumgardt, who had arranged for the hall and the lecture. Professor Baumgardt was connected with one of the Los Angeles newspapers in some busi-

ness capacity. He was an astronomer. He had met Swamiji through the Academy of Sciences, which was a group of prominent scientists and scholars who had gathered together and called themselves by that name. Mrs Blodgett, with whom Swamiji was staying at the time, had introduced both Swamiji and Miss MacLeod to these men, and it was through these introductions that this first lecture came about. She also introduced him to a wealthy family called the Stimsons, with whom Swamiji later stayed for a week or so, but I don’t think he enjoyed his visit with them.

‘Professor Baumgardt had asked Swamiji to give the same lecture he had given at the Brooklyn Institute on the Vedanta Philosophy. When the lecture was over, the professor complained that it was not the same lecture at all; and Swamiji told him that it was impossible for him ever to give the same lecture twice: that he could talk on the same subject, but it



would not be the same.’

‘How was Swamiji dressed?’ Swami Ashokananda asked.

‘He wore a yellow robe and turban.’

‘Yellow?’

‘Well, a light orange, a little lighter than the robe you use,’ Mrs Hansbrough replied.

‘And how did he look?’

‘His complexion was lighter than all the swamis here today, except Swami Devatmananda,’ Mrs Hansbrough said. ‘His hair was black—very black—with not one grey hair. A lady once asked him later on if Hindus’ hair ever turned grey!’

‘How did he impress you?’ Swami Ashokananda then asked.

‘I got the same impression I had previously had of him; that is, he was a most impressive personality. You know, you have told me that it is not possible to get an impression of a personality from the individual’s writings; but I felt that I had sensed Swamiji’s personality from his books, and the impression was verified when I heard him speak.’

‘His voice I should say was baritone—certainly nearer to bass than tenor; and it was the most musical voice I have ever heard. At the end of the lecture he closed with that chant, “I am Existence Absolute, Knowledge Absolute, Bliss Absolute.” Everyone was enchanted with his talk.’

‘Whenever he quoted from Sanskrit he would chant the quotation—’

‘He would actually chant?’ Swami Ashokananda interrupted to ask.

‘Yes,’ Mrs Hansbrough replied. ‘He would chant in Sanskrit and then translate. Once later on he apologized for quoting in Sanskrit, and explained that he still thought in that language and then had to translate his thoughts into English.’

‘When it was over, the rest of our party went up on the platform where a number of people had collected to speak to Swamiji. I sought out Professor Baumgardt, however, to find out when and where Swamiji was going to lecture again. When I asked him he inquired, “Are you interested in the swami’s teachings?” I told him I had been studying them for

two years, and he said, “Well, I will introduce you to the swami’s hostess.” He introduced me to Miss MacLeod, who, when I told her I had been studying Swamiji’s works for so long, asked if I wouldn’t like to go to call on him. Of course I said I would be delighted, and so it was arranged. It was not until after his second lecture, however, that we did meet him.’

‘And what and where was his second lecture?’ Swami Ashokananda asked.

‘His second lecture [on December 12] was also arranged by the Academy of Sciences,’ Mrs Hansbrough said. ‘But this one was held in the Congregational Church and was free, whereas tickets had been required for the first one. The subject was, “The Building of the Cosmos”, and it was equally as enchanting as the first one. I still have a copy of it, and often read it.’

‘You have a copy of that lecture!’ Swami Ashokananda exclaimed. ‘Are you sure?’

Mrs Hansbrough assured the swami that she was. Here the talk turned for the moment to Mrs Hansbrough’s collection of notes, early copies of the *Brahmavadin* and *Prabuddha Bharata*, and notes belonging to Dr M Logan on the founding of the San Francisco Vedanta Society. Then Mrs Hansbrough spoke again of the work in Southern California.

‘Did you know that a Vedanta Society was actually established in Pasadena?’ she asked. ‘It was suggested to Swamiji that he visit Pasadena, which he did. There he met a Mrs Emeline Bowler, a wealthy woman who was president of the Shakespeare Club, and with whom Swamiji later spent a few days. During this visit, however, he wrote me that he was not happy there, and asked me to go and get him.’

Swami Ashokananda laughed at this.

‘Why do you laugh?’ Mrs Hansbrough asked him.

‘Well, it is amusing that Swamiji had to ask you to go and get him,’ the swami replied.

‘He always did that,’ Mrs Hansbrough said. ‘Invariably he either phoned or wrote me whenever he wanted to leave any place. For instance, later in San





Telephone from ca. 1900

Francisco he was the guest of some physician, and had expected to stay for some time. But the very day he went to the doctor's home he either phoned or wrote me—I forget now, which he did—to come for him. When I arrived, his hostess came in, introduced herself, and then withdrew again. Then Swamiji explained: “The trouble is, she is not a lady: she doesn't know what to do with me!”

‘But to return to Pasadena,’ Mrs Hansbrough continued. ‘It was in the rooms of the Shakespeare Club that the Pasadena Society was formed. I had suggested it, but Swamiji had no interest in organizing. “It won't last,” he said—and he said the same about the San Francisco Society later. Nevertheless, we went ahead with the project. He was present at the organization meeting, but as I say, he was not interested in the proceedings. I had drawn up a set

of proposed by-laws, in which a proposal was included that each member pledge to contribute to the Society for a period of ten years. Mrs Bowler objected to this, on the grounds that a member might die during the ten years. I said that would be all right: the deceased member would then be excused from further contributions. This amused Swamiji greatly.

‘Mrs Bowler was perhaps overly interested in the financial affairs of Swamiji's lectures. Later, when I had begun to help Swamiji with arrangements for hall rentals, placing the newspaper advertisements, and so on, she once asked me, “How much are you getting for this?” I told her the truth: “The privilege of paying for the halls. And we are not wealthy people, Mrs Bowler.”’

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‘I might mention here, speaking of the organization of the Pasadena centre, that it was I who suggested the founding of the San Francisco centre also. We held two meetings for the purpose, as the details were not completed at the first meeting. At this first meeting, I suggested to Swamiji that he leave before the meeting opened. He asked me why, and I told him that it was because I wanted to say some things about him that I would rather he did not hear. So he agreed, and went home with X. It was not that his staying would have made any difference to Swamiji; my reason for asking this was that I myself would have been embarrassed to speak as I wanted to about him in his presence. I then told the group about the arrangements which had been made in Los Angeles and Pasadena, and we proceeded with the organization here [in San Francisco].’

Here Swami Ashokananda asked about Mrs Hansbrough's first meeting with Swamiji.

‘It was the day following his second lecture,’ she told him. ‘As I mentioned, Miss MacLeod had arranged for us to call on him at Mrs Blodgett's home, and my sister Helen and I went in the morning. He was dressed to receive us in the long, knee-length coat we see in the picture where he stands with Sister Lalita [Mrs Hansbrough's sister, Carrie Mead



Blanchard Hall, Los Angeles

Wyckoff]. He wore a kind of minister's collar with what must have been a clerical vest; and his hair was covered by a black turban, which rolled back something like those the women wear here now. This was the dress he always wore on the street.'

'Was Miss MacLeod present at this first meeting?' Swami Ashokananda inquired.

'She was there at first,' Mrs Hansbrough said, 'but she went out after a few minutes. Later she told me that she always did this when visitors first called on the swami, because she felt the visitors liked it better.'

'And how did you feel about Swamiji when you met him?'

'I can only describe myself as enchanted by him,' Mrs Hansbrough answered. 'As I mentioned, this was my feeling from his books before I ever saw him, and the feeling has stayed with me throughout my life.'

'And what did he talk about with you at this first meeting?'

'The conversation was only general. He was rather shy and reserved in manner, as I remember. He said he was very glad we were interested in his lectures. We asked how long he expected to stay in Los Angeles, and he replied that he did not know, but that if we cared to arrange a class, he would be glad to address the group.'

'Naturally, with such an offer, we eagerly went about getting a class together, and the first meeting was in the Blanchard Building, December 19. There were three meetings over a period of a week [December 19, 21, and 22] in this first series of classes, for which each person paid a dollar for every meeting.'

'We had three rooms in the Blanchard Building, which opened into one another. The arrangement was not very satisfactory, especially since the attendance was running between 150 and 200. So when Mr J Ransome Bransby suggested moving to a

nice chapel, which he could arrange for at the Home of Truth, it was decided to follow his suggestion. Accordingly, Swamiji moved there, and gave two more series of classes.'

'Now, tell me,' Swami Ashokananda asked, 'what disposition was made of the money taken in from these classes?'

'We gave it all to Swamiji,' Mrs Hansbrough replied.

'Was there no printing of leaflets or anything of the sort?'

'I don't think so, although there may have been.'

'Did Swamiji keep any account of the money?'

'Never. He never knew anything about the financial details connected with the work.'

'And was this true of San Francisco, too?'

'Yes.'

'Now, there I have you,' Swami Ashokananda said with a playful smile, 'for I have documentary proof that he did. When I was in India in 1934 and 1935, I was allowed to go through all the papers in his room, and among his things I found a notebook in which there were accounts, in Swamiji's own handwriting, of income and expenditures in connection with his lectures and classes.'

'Oh yes, afterward Swamiji may have made such records,' Mrs Hansbrough replied. 'But if he did, they were made from statements I gave him, for he never paid any attention to the money at the time.'

*(To be continued)*



*Swami Vivekananda in Pasadena; Sister Lalita is standing on the porch behind*