

Reminiscences of Swami Vivekananda

Mrs Alice M Hansbrough

(Continued from the previous issue)

DO you remember any incidents in connection with any of these meetings?' the swami asked.

'I remember that on one occasion when Swamiji was going to speak at the Green Hotel, Professor Baumgardt was talking with some other gentlemen on the platform before the lecture began. One of them asked him, regarding Swamiji, "He is a Christianized Hindu, I suppose?" And Professor Baumgardt replied, "No, he is an unconverted Hindu. You will hear about Hinduism from a real Hindu."

'On another occasion, Swamiji was speaking in some church. I do not remember now why, but he did not have a previously announced subject on that occasion. So when he came on the platform he asked the audience what they would like to have him speak on. I noticed several women and a man conferring together, and the man finally stood up and asked if Swamiji would speak on Hindu women. So Swamiji took this as his subject, and spoke principally about Sita and one other woman (was it Mirabai?).'

'Yes, I know of that lecture,' Swami Ashokananda said.

'Do you know about the questions at the close of the talk?' Mrs Hansbrough asked.

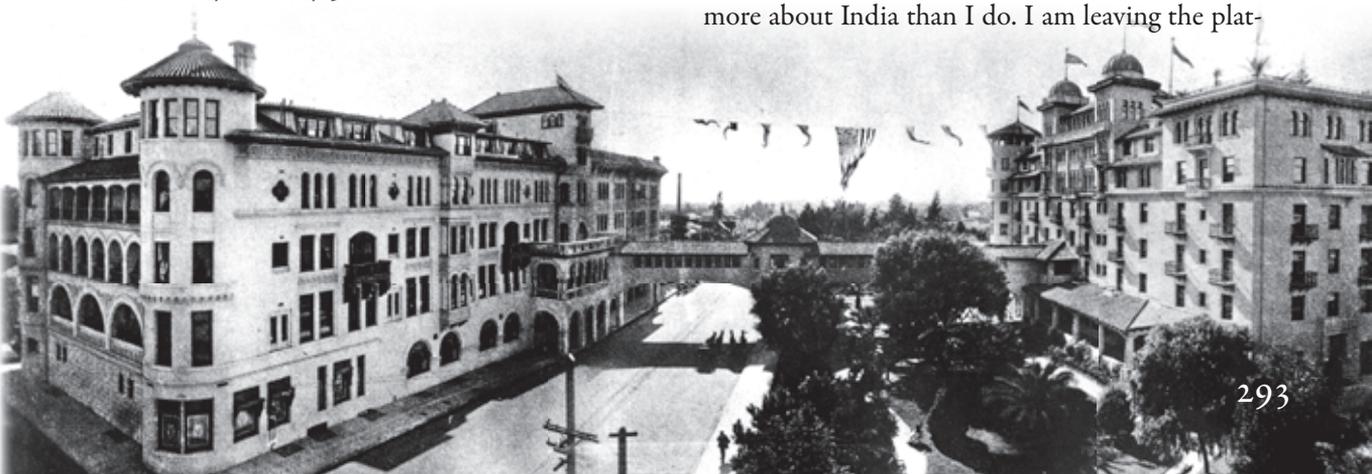
Green Hotel, Pasadena, 1900

'No.'

'Well, it was clear afterward that the group who had asked for this subject had done so in an attempt to trap Swamiji into saying something that would discredit him. We learned later that they belonged to some group who had missionaries in India. The questions they asked were along the line always taken by those trying to discredit India: the claim of abuse of Indian women, child marriages, early motherhood, and so on.

'Swamiji answered several of the questions directly; then when he saw the direction the questioner was taking, he said that the relationship between the husband and wife in India, where the basis of marriage was not physical enjoyment, was so entirely different from that of a married couple in the West that he did not think Western people could understand it. As the questioner continued to press him, Swamiji really became angry. It was the only time I ever saw him angry on the platform. At one point, to emphasize a statement, he hit his knuckles on the table so hard that I really feared he would break the skin. "No, Madam," he burst out, "that relationship in which children creep into life amidst lust, at night and in darkness, does not exist in India!"

'Finally, the woman openly called him a liar. "Madam," Swamiji replied, "you evidently know more about India than I do. I am leaving the plat-





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Hilltop picnics. In the top photograph, Mrs Alice Hansbrough is seated to Swamiji's left, Mrs Carrie Mead Wyckoff stands behind him, and a Mrs Bruce sits to his right.



form; please take it yourself!" He was thoroughly aroused. We had already gotten up, for we feared anything might happen now, and our only thought was to see him safely out of the building and home. He started up the middle aisle, but the woman with her friends blocked him and tried to continue her argument. Again he told her to take

the platform herself. At last we got through, but as I passed her the woman turned on me and exclaimed: "You little fool! Don't you know he hates you?" I said no, I hadn't found that out yet. One woman in particular set out to corner him. She started talking about how the English were trying to reform India, and Swamiji simply said: "Madam, I am a monk. What do I know about politics?"

'Swamiji spoke more than once of the indignities to which he had been subjected in the West. It was because of the constant possibility of some unpleasant occurrence that he always preferred to have a woman escort. He said that people would respect the woman where they would not respect him. Once in San Francisco, when I was taking him

somewhere into a rather rough part of the city on some call which escapes my memory now, some rowdies made some slighting remarks about him which he overheard. He said nothing, but after we had gone he remarked, "If you had not been along, they would have thrown things at me."

'He mentioned that well-known incident in Chicago when a man came up and pulled his robe and asked him why he wore his nightgown in public. He was deeply offended by such rudeness on the part of the American public. "A man could walk the length of India (in any costume) and such a thing would not happen to him," he said.

'He also spoke of the missionaries and their activities. He once said of Mr Leggett, "When I exposed the missionaries, he stopped giving his ten thousand dollars a year to them—but he did not then give it to me!"

'Well, now let us pick up the routine of his day again,' Swami Ashokananda said. 'What would he do in the morning when he did not have any lecture or class?'

'It seems as if there was always something going on,' Mrs Hansbrough said. 'This was always true on Sunday mornings. But during the week, if he did not have a formal meeting somewhere, we would often go for a picnic lunch to the top of a hill about four city blocks' distance from our house.

'The weather was especially pleasant that win-

ter; in fact they said it was the pleasantest winter in five years. You have seen that photo of Swamiji in a picnic group; that was taken on top of that hill. We would make up a party of people who were attending his meetings more or less regularly—or Swamiji would even hold some of his smaller class groups there. Naturally the talk was always on spiritual subjects.

‘I remember that on one of these picnics a young woman Christian Scientist, Lillian Davis, was arguing with him that we should teach people to be good. Swamiji smiled and waved his hand to indicate the trees and the countryside. “Why should I desire to be ‘good?’” he asked. “All this is His handiwork. Shall I apologize for His handiwork? If you want to reform John Doe, go and live with him; don’t try to reform him. If you have any of the divine fire, he will catch it.”

‘Was he a heavy smoker?’

‘No. He would smoke after breakfast, lunch, and dinner, but never to excess.

‘Sometime before he left for San Francisco he said one day, “I always leave something wherever I go. I am going to leave this pipe when I go to San Francisco.” He left it on the mantelpiece in the living room, and we kept it there for a long time as an ornament. Then one day Mrs Carrie Wyckoff saw it. For some time she had been suffering a good deal from some nervous ailment. For some days the pain of her illness had been almost unbearable, and this, added to her other troubles, made her feel extremely depressed. She went to the mantelpiece and picked up Swamiji’s pipe. No sooner did she have it in her hand than she heard Swamiji’s voice, saying, “Is it so hard, Madam?” For some reason she rubbed the pipe across her forehead, and instantly the suffering left her and a feeling of well-being came over her. After that we felt that the pipe should belong to her; and she still has it today.’

‘That is most interesting,’ Swami Ashokananda said. ‘Did you ever have any such experience?’

Mrs Hansbrough was thoughtful for a moment. ‘Well, isn’t it the same kind of experience when he talks to us all the time?’ she asked.

‘Oh yes,’ the swami replied.

After a minute or two he returned to the routine of Swamiji’s day. ‘Now, what would he do after lunch? Would he go to his room for rest?’ he asked.

‘No, he very rarely went to his room after lunch. He would usually recline on the couch in the living room and read there, or talk, or do some such thing.

‘It was probably during an after-lunch conversation when he was walking up and down the living room, that Swamiji told us: “The master said he would come again in about two hundred years—and I will come with him. When a master comes,” he said, “he brings his own people.”

‘I had the feeling that by “his own people” he meant Sri Ramakrishna would bring with him a spiritual host to help him; that it would not necessarily include all the disciples who had been with him in this incarnation, but that Swamiji definitely would be one of them.

‘I always felt, however, that whereas the rest of us were going up in our successive incarnations, Swamiji had come down to meet us on our level.

‘Miss MacLeod said that she brought him West “for his health”, but he never complained of it while he was with us.’

‘He was never sick or tired or any such thing?’

‘No, he never missed a meal or showed in any other way at that time that he was unwell.’

‘Was he at all susceptible to heat or cold?’

‘Cold did not bother him, but he was sensitive to heat. We always had a fire in the grate after dinner in the evening, and once when it had gone out, he exclaimed, “Praise the Lord, that fire’s out!”

‘Did you ever have guests for meals?’

‘Yes, often there would be luncheon guests. We would go to class or lecture in the morning, and Swamiji would ask some to come for lunch afterward. Mrs Leggett and Miss MacLeod especially were frequent luncheon guests. Miss MacLeod was also a house guest for a few days. She asked Helen one day, “Can you put me up for a few days?” Helen told her she was welcome, provided she didn’t mind



*The Mead sisters
Alice Mead Hans-
brough, Pasadena,
1901 (left), and Car-
rie Mead Wyckoff
(Sister Lalita), Belur
Math, c. 1936 (right)*



“hospital style accommodations”. As I said before, we had all moved to two front rooms of the second floor to let Swamiji be alone in the back of the second floor, so Miss MacLeod came and slept on a couch in the front room with the rest of us. She stayed several days and I think enjoyed it.

‘Miss MacLeod set aside her superior airs when she was with us. It was principally with people who affected the same airs that she put them on. And she never made the mistake of putting on airs with Swamiji. He often told her “where to get off” when she had a tendency to be too high-toned. But the only time I ever heard him speak sharply to her was before class in the ballroom of the Green Hotel. She was expressing an opinion as to what should be done about some phase of Swamiji’s work, and he suddenly turned on her. “Keep quiet about what should be done!” he said. “We will do whatever has to be done.” But he also said of her, “Jo has a very sweet nature.” He always called her “Jo”.

‘Now let us go back once more and finish his day,’ Swami Ashokananda said. ‘Tell me about the evening meal. What time would you sit down to dinner?’

‘Dinner would be about six-thirty. We would usually have soup, and either fish or meat, vegeta-

Pasadena, 1908

bles, and dessert—pie, perhaps, which Swamiji sometimes liked, or something else. Usually he did not take coffee in the evening.

‘It is Lent now, and this reminds me of one evening when Swamiji was walking up and down in the dining room while the table was being set for dinner. We always had a plate of spring fruit on

the table, and on this evening there were some guavas among the others. We were speaking of Lent and the custom of giving up some favourite food or pleasure during the forty days. Swamiji said that a similar custom existed in India which was always observed by the monks. “All but the wicked fellows like me renounce something,” he said. “Now I, for example, will renounce these guavas!” We took the hint and did not have guavas anymore after that!

‘When the evening meal was over, instead of going into the living room we would clear the dining room table and sit there, where we could light a fire in the open grate. Some would sit at the table, others would sit in easy chairs. We had an easy chair for Swamiji, which was large enough for him to sit cross-legged in, which he used to do. He usually wore either what you would call a dinner jacket or smoking jacket or his robe.’

‘Did Swamiji ever read to you from any of his books?’ Swami Ashokananda asked.

‘Yes, he often read to us, and he was an excellent reader. People used to ask where he got his fine pronunciation of English. He himself used to say that it came after he reached the United States. He said that until he came to the United States he had a “bookish accent”. Well, he read from various



things. Once he was talking about Advaita and asked for his “Song of the Sannyasin”, which he read to us. On another occasion late one evening as we sat by the fire, he asked for “The Need of a Guru”. He had been talking to Helen, and then he began to read from this. For some reason, after he had read for some time, Helen got up, lit his bedroom candle and offered it to him. By now it was about eleven o’clock. “Does that mean I must go to bed?” Swamiji asked. “Well, it is eleven o’clock,” Helen said, so the conversation closed.



Kitchen at the Mead house: Swamiji cooked here

‘Long afterward, we were talking of the incident and all three of us felt that indirectly Swamiji had been inviting Helen to ask for discipleship.’

‘Why didn’t your sister take it?’ Swami Ashokananda asked.

‘She said she herself didn’t know,’ Mrs Hansbrough replied. ‘She said she just didn’t feel impelled to at the time.’

‘Did you ever hear Swamiji sing?’

‘Yes. He would usually sing when he was on the way somewhere. He would sing a song in Sanskrit or Bengali or whatever it might be, and then ask, “Do you know the meaning of the song?” Then he would explain it. Of course he would also sing or chant on the platform, too.’

‘At home he would sometimes sing that old hymn, “The heathen in his blindness bows down to wood and stone”. I had taught it to him and it used to amuse him.’

‘Sometimes he would ask Lalita [Carrie Wyck-off] to stroll with him in the garden, and he would sing songs and explain them in a much more personal way than from the platform.’

‘Once while Lalita was preparing something

in the kitchen for Swamiji, he was walking to and fro across the room as he often used to do. Suddenly he asked her, “Were you happily married?” For a moment she hesitated, then answered, “Yes, Swamiji.” He left the kitchen for a moment, and then came back. “I am glad”, he said dryly, “that there was one!”

‘At another time, Swamiji had prepared some dish for Lalita to try. When he asked her whether she liked it she said that she did. After a moment’s pause, Swamiji inquired, “Was it true, or just for friendship’s sake?” Then Lalita confessed, “I am afraid it was for friendship’s sake.”’

‘Tell me,’ Swami Ashokananda asked, ‘did Swamiji ever use slang?’

‘He did occasionally, but not in public. Once, however, he did in a lecture at the Shakespeare Club in Pasadena. He was speaking of the Christian missionaries in India and their attitude toward the Hindus. He said their teachings amounted to saying, “Here, take my tomfool tin pot, and be happy! That is all you need.”’

‘And regarding missionaries, he was once speaking of their antagonism toward him, and he told of



a dinner to which he had been invited in Detroit. For some reason he suspected that his coffee had been poisoned. He was debating whether or not he should drink it, when Sri Ramakrishna stepped to his side, and said, "Do not drink—it is poisoned." He always spoke of his master as "Atmaram". Whenever there were difficulties he would say, "Well, if things do not go well, we will wake up Atmaram."

"The missionaries were not the only ones who opposed Swamiji. There were many teachers of metaphysics, and many pseudo-teachers, who resented him or maliciously condemned him either because he was so far superior to them or because he exposed their shallowness and "spoiled their business" by teaching true metaphysics. Mr Bransby was one of these, more or less. He was constantly finding fault with Swamiji. One of his criticisms was that Swamiji was breaking the rules of his Order by taking money. I later told this to Swamiji. He was chanting something at the time, and he stopped, smiled, and said, "Yes, it is true; but when the rules don't suit me, I change them!"

"Mrs Allan has told me of another occasion when Bransby had been to see Swamiji while he was in Alameda. When he returned, he said, "How do you think I found the great man? Sitting on the floor, eating peanuts!"

"On another occasion in a conversation at home when Mrs Leggett was there, he was talking of the English in India. He said that actually, "the English did not come to India to conquer us, but to teach us." The great misfortune however was, he said, that the English soldiers—even the officers—were of such low caste. And he told of a time when he was sitting on the lawn in a park close to a footpath. Two soldiers passed by and one of them kicked him. Surprised, Swamiji said, "Why did you do that?" "Because I like to, you dirty something-or-other!" "Oh, we go much further than that," Swamiji retorted. "We call you 'dirty mleccas'!" He spoke of the raping of low-caste Hindu women by the English soldiers. "If anyone despoiled the Englishman's home," he said, "the Englishman would kill him, and rightly so—but the damned Hindu just sits and whines!" he exclaimed.

At this, Mrs Leggett, who always agreed with everything Swamiji said, remarked, "How very nice!"

"Do you think," he went on, "that a handful of Englishmen could rule India if we had a militant spirit? I teach meat-eating throughout the length and breadth of India in the hope that we can build a militant spirit."

"And that reminds me of a remark a Miss Blanche Partington once made about Swamiji later in San Francisco. She had been talking to Swamiji at the 1719 Turk Street flat. In answer to something she had said, Swamiji, bowing, had replied, "I am a loyal subject of Her Majesty [the Empress of India]!" Speaking of it afterward, Miss Partington said, "But it seemed to me he bowed almost too low!"

"Did Swamiji laugh and joke very much?" Swami Ashokananda asked.

"Not much," Mrs Hansbrough replied, "though he always told some story on the lecture platform. He said he gathered his mind in this way."

"Did you ever find him aloof, or did he make himself one with all?"

"I never found him aloof, though some said that he was. I felt as though he were someone to whom I was closely related, whom I had not seen for a long, long time, and who had been a long time coming."

"And indeed, Swamiji himself once said to Lalita, Helen, and me, "I have known all three of you before!" I think it was once when we were standing waiting for a train in San Francisco.

"Do you remember speaking the other day of the Christian in "Pilgrim's Progress" and the burden he carried on his back? Well, I felt that mine was on my chest—that is, after I met Swamiji, I felt the lifting of a burden which had been on my chest for so long that I had ceased to be conscious of it."

"When I returned to Los Angeles from San Francisco, after Swamiji had returned to the East, someone asked me how I felt about my brother [William Mead]. I replied that I did not know how I felt toward my brother, but that I felt much closer to the man I had been assisting in San Francisco than any other person I had ever known."

(To be continued)