

Reminiscences of Swami Vivekananda

Mrs Alice M Hansbrough

(Continued from the previous issue)

‘DID you ever see Swamiji in any especially exalted mood?’

‘No, not particularly, though sometimes when he had talked for some time, the air would become surcharged with a spiritual atmosphere. There was one occasion in particular: we had gone to the hill near our home where we used to have the picnics. Swamiji became absorbed in some subject he was discussing, and he talked for *six hours* without interruption—from ten in the morning until four in the afternoon! The air was just vibrant with spirituality by the time it was over.

‘At another time in Alameda, I was upset or depressed about something, and he said to me, “Come, sit down and we will meditate.” “Oh, I never meditate, Swami,” I told him. “Well, come and sit by me, and I will meditate,” he replied. So I sat down and closed my eyes. In a moment I felt as though I were going to float away, and I quickly opened my eyes to look at Swamiji. He had the appearance of a statue, as though there were not a spark of life in his body. He must have meditated for fifteen or twenty minutes, and then opened his eyes again.’

‘Do you think that when Swamiji came to San Francisco he felt as free as he did in your home?’

‘Not while he was in the Home of Truth. This was natural, for quite a number of people were living there and he could not feel as free or at home as he had in our house. After some time there he told me one day, “I must get out of here.” It was then that Mrs Aspinall and I took the apartment on Turk Street, and Swamiji came.

‘But if he found it difficult to live in the Home of Truth, imagine his having a spiritualist for a travelling companion.’

‘What do you mean?’ Swami Ashokananda asked.

‘Didn’t you know that he travelled with a spiritualist when he was on a lecture tour through the Eastern States?’

‘No!’

‘Oh yes. While he was under contract to that lecture bureau during his first visit to the West, he travelled with a very well-known spiritualist named Colville, who apparently was also under contract to the same bureau. Swamiji used to say, “If you think X is hard to live with, you should have travelled with Colville.” The man seems to have had a nurse to look after him all the time.’

‘Did you find Swamiji at all abstracted and apparently not much interested in his activities toward the end of his stay?’ Swami Ashokananda asked.

‘No indeed,’ Mrs Hansbrough replied. ‘Probably you are thinking of that mood which later came over him, when in India he was asked by some of the monks about something and he told them they would have to decide it, that his work was done.’

‘This was never apparent here, nor even in June of that year when he wrote me from New York City. No, he took the greatest interest in people and in “the Movement”, and in whom he would send to carry on after he left the Pacific Coast. I am sure that if his health had permitted, he would have come to the West a third time.

‘Swami Abhedananda was having trouble with the Leggetts in New York during the period when Swamiji was staying with us in Los Angeles. Mr Leggett expected to run the Society there in his capacity as president and expected Swami Abhedananda to acquiesce in this. One day Swamiji remarked

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about this situation. "You people think the head of a society can run things," he said. "You know, my boys can't work under those conditions."

The conversation had now lasted well over an hour and it was almost two o'clock. The Swami therefore directed that Mrs Hansbrough be driven home, and from there he returned to the Temple.

Sunday, March 30, 1941

On Sunday, March 30, 1941, Mrs Hansbrough was again invited by Swami Ashokananda to drive home with him after his morning lecture in the Century Club Building. The day, however, was windy and rainy, and the drive was therefore a short one.

There was some conversation about the attendance at the swami's lecture that morning, and this led the swami to ask if Swami Vivekananda's lectures in San Francisco were well attended.

'His Sunday morning audience usually ran from five to six hundred people,' Mrs Hansbrough said. 'At evening lectures there were not so many, but usually he did not lecture in the evening on Sunday.'

'And classes?' the swami asked.

'Class attendance averaged from one hundred fifty to two hundred—which was not bad, considering that there was a charge of fifty cents for each class. That is, the charge was a dollar and a half for a series of three. The lectures were free. We followed the custom of the day.

'If I were to have the work to do over again with my present perspective, I would do it much differently,' Mrs Hansbrough went on. 'I would get the Academy of Science to sponsor the first lecture, and

have it free. If we had done this, it would have given Swamiji at the start a group of intellectual people, and then he could have chosen from there on what he wanted to do. As it was, Miss MacLeod was very determined in the view that his first lecture should be charged for. Swamiji usually let us decide these things as he was unfamiliar with the country. I did not have the temerity and outspokenness that I have now, or I would have ridiculed Miss MacLeod into agreeing that it should be a free first lecture. As it was, we charged a dollar admission.'

'Once after we had moved to the Turk Street flat a woman said something to Swamiji about his teaching religion. He looked at her and replied: "Madam, I am not teaching religion. I am selling my brain for money to help my people. If you get some benefit from it, that is good; but I am not teaching religion!"'

'Where do you think Swamiji showed the greater power in his lectures, here or in Los Angeles?' Swami Ashokananda asked.

'I think he showed greater power here,' Mrs Hansbrough replied. 'He seemed to get greater satisfaction from his work here.'

'Swamiji said many seemingly contradictory things. For example, he said of his lectures and work, "I have been saying these things before, over and over again." In the Turk Street flat one day he said, "There is no Vivekananda", and again, "Do not ask these questions while you have this maya mixed up with your understanding."'

'Did he ever express any opinion about San Francisco?'

'No, not that I remember. He seemed to be like a bird in flight: he would stop here, then there, with no great concern for liking or disliking the places where he stopped.'

'Now, what instructions did Swamiji give you before you came to San Francisco from Los Angeles?'

'Well, I gave him the instructions,' Mrs Hansbrough said with a smile. 'I told him to give me a week and then to come on, and that I would get a place for him to stay so he would not have to be in

a hotel. I got in touch with all my old friends and acquaintances, mostly those who were interested in so-called “new thought”, and found nearly all of them readily agreeable to helping arrange plans for Swamiji’s lectures. Later I found that their motives were largely to publicize themselves through publicizing Swamiji, though it did not occur to me then because I was so absorbed in working for him. I arranged for him to stay at the Home of Truth centre at 1231 Pine Street. (The building is still standing today, though it is no longer the Home of Truth.) They were delighted to have him, and provided him, free of charge, with a room and his board. You see, the Home of Truth centres were supported by public subscriptions: the idea was started by Emma Curtis Hopkins, who branched off from Mary Baker Eddy and Christian Science.’

‘And did you make arrangements for the lectures and classes?’

‘Yes, I selected a hall—Washington Hall it was—for the first Sunday morning lecture, and another smaller hall across Post Street for the classes. I had come north about the middle of February, and this first lecture of Swamiji’s was near the end of the month. The attendance was very disappointing from the standpoint of numbers: there were probably less than one hundred and fifty. [Swamiji’s first lecture was held at Golden Gate Hall, San Francisco, on Friday evening, February 23, 1900. The subject: The Ideal of a Universal Religion.]

‘I remember that Swamiji was seated down in the front row in the audience before the lecture began, and when I went to sit by him, he

made a sign to ask how many I thought there were. When I estimated one hundred and fifty, he wrote in the palm of one hand with his finger 100 as his estimate. He did not say anything, but he seemed disappointed. If we had had the first lecture free I am sure we would have had a better attendance. As it was, we charged a dollar per person.’

‘Oh my!’ Swami Ashokananda exclaimed. ‘And one hundred came at a dollar each? Well, that shows that there was real interest.’

‘How did Swamiji come from Los Angeles? Did he come alone?’

‘Yes, he came alone, by train. It must have been the day train, because I remember that we met him at the Oakland Mole, came across on the ferry, and had dinner at the Home of Truth.’

‘And how was he dressed when he arrived?’

‘He had on that black loose-fitting suit which he usually wore, and the black silk turban.’

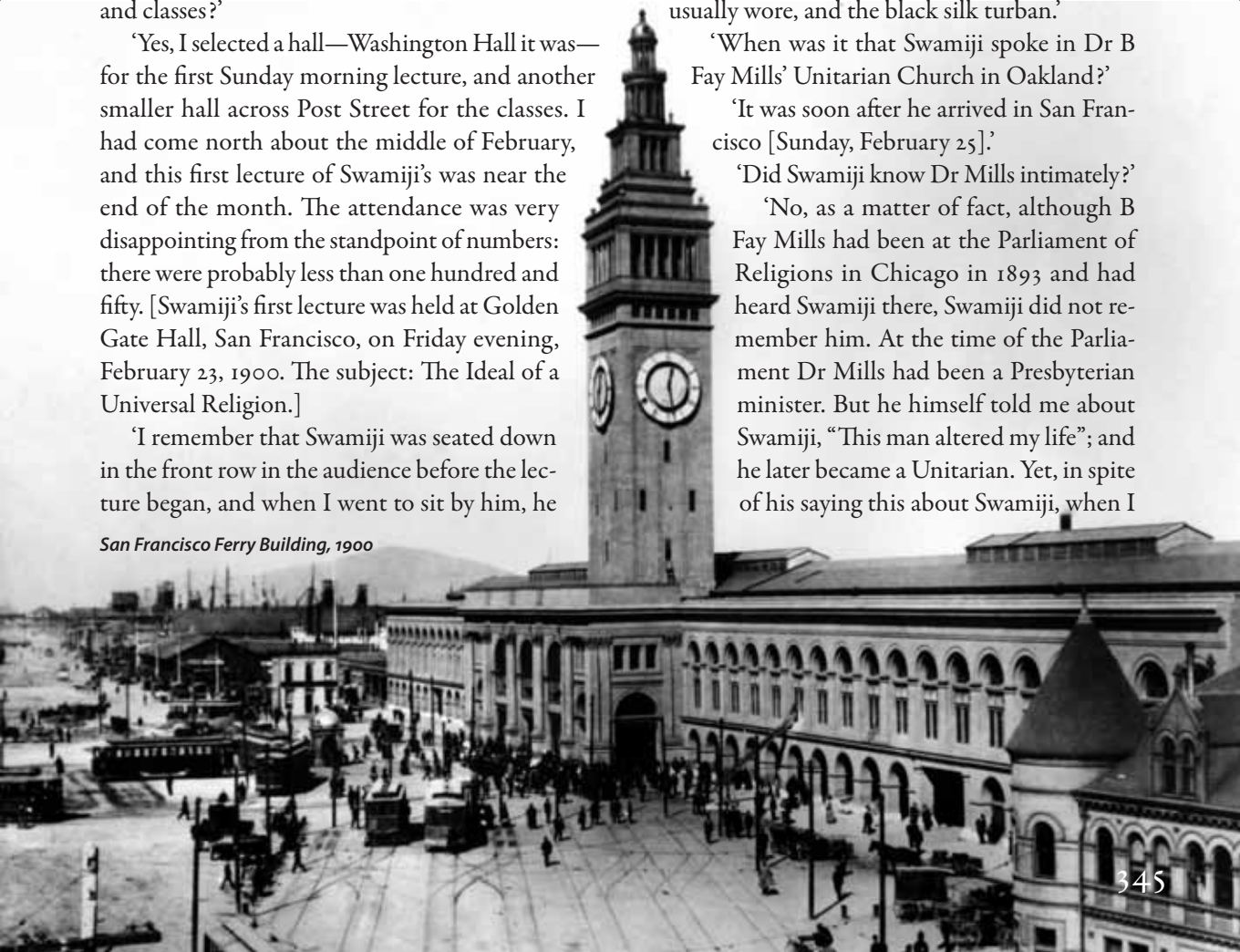
‘When was it that Swamiji spoke in Dr B Fay Mills’ Unitarian Church in Oakland?’

‘It was soon after he arrived in San Francisco [Sunday, February 25].’

‘Did Swamiji know Dr Mills intimately?’

‘No, as a matter of fact, although B Fay Mills had been at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 and had heard Swamiji there, Swamiji did not remember him. At the time of the Parliament Dr Mills had been a Presbyterian minister. But he himself told me about Swamiji, “This man altered my life”; and he later became a Unitarian. Yet, in spite of his saying this about Swamiji, when I

San Francisco Ferry Building, 1900





Rev. B Fay Mills

went to see him while he was lecturing in Metropolitan Temple to ask if he would announce a course of lectures by Swami Vivekananda, he refused! And he had wanted to manage Swamiji's whole visit in San Francisco; he had written Swamiji and asked to do so. This

was after Swamiji's first lecture, and we felt that if he could obtain some announcements of this type it would help increase the attendance. I did not have the temerity then that I have now, or I would have told Dr Mills plainly what I thought of him!

'He was an astute man of business. His plan for introducing Swamiji in San Francisco had been to have him speak first outside of San Francisco—that is, in his own church in Oakland. Then he would advertise here that "many hundreds had been turned away"—which we used to do quite truthfully in Los Angeles—in first introducing him here. He did this when he advertised the lecture Swamiji did give at his church, and with good effect.

'I never could figure why Swamiji was unwilling to allow B Fay Mills to handle his arrangements here unless it was because of the trouble he had had [in 1894] with the lecture bureau and others seeking to gain a commission from whatever income he realized from his lectures and classes.'

'Was Swamiji comfortable in the Home of Truth in San Francisco?' Swami Ashokananda asked.

'No, he wasn't,' Mrs Hansbrough replied. 'So I took him to the home of a friend of mine. He

was not comfortable there either; and it was then that Mrs Aspinall—she and her husband were heads of the Home of Truth on Pine Street—said, "See here, we must find a place where this man can be comfortable." So she and I took the flat then on Turk Street, and she explained to her husband that it was in order to



Mrs Emily Aspinall

make a comfortable place for Swamiji to stay. It was a poor sort of place, but the best we could do for the money we could afford to spend. When I told Swamiji this, he said, "That is because I am a sannyasin and can't get anything good."

'Mr Aspinall did not like the idea of Mrs Aspinall's leaving the Pine Street Home of Truth to set up the Turk Street flat with me so that Swamiji could have a quiet place to stay. At the time he objected strongly to it, but Mrs Aspinall told him, "Benjamin, you know that we do not have any truth; we just talk." She meant that in Swamiji she felt she had found someone who really had found the truth and could give it to others.'

'Did Swamiji speak in the Pine Street Home of Truth?' Swami Ashokananda asked.

'He spoke there once, probably in the evening. He also spoke one morning in another Home of Truth in San Francisco where a Miss Lydia Bell was head. In the Alameda Home of Truth he spoke at least twice.'

'When did he go to the Alameda Home?'

'After the lectures closed here on April 14. [He actually moved on April 11.] His idea was to go there to rest for a few days. He wanted, before he left for the East, to accumulate a certain sum of money for some purpose. I don't remember the amount, but I remember that one woman in Oakland gave him a thousand dollars. And someone introduced Mrs Collis P Huntington to him, and she gave him six thousand dollars for Sister Nivedita's girls' school. The money from the lectures and classes, I used to keep in a teapot when we were in the flat. In those days gold coins circulated freely, and I had several pots half full of twenty-dollar gold pieces. One day Swamiji wanted to figure out how much he had accumulated to date, so I got my notebook and pencil and brought the pots and dumped the coins out on the table. After count-

\$20 gold piece



ing the money, Swamiji found he needed more than he had so he said we would open some more courses. When he had the sum he wanted, he opened a bank account and deposited the money in it.

‘One woman told someone that she did not like Swami Vivekananda because of the thin little woman who was always running along behind him with the black case. It was I, and the black case held my notebooks, advertising matter, and other things connected with the work—and the collections. Once Swamiji and I stopped in a market to do some shopping, and when we had gone out I discovered I had left the case. I said, “Just a minute, I forgot something!” and rushed back. There was the case, sitting on the counter. It had three hundred dollars in it!

‘There was one conversation at the Alameda Home of Truth which reminds me of your question last week as to whether I had ever seen Swamiji in any particularly exalted mood. I think this was the most inspiring instance except at Camp Taylor. We were seated at the breakfast table in the Alameda Home. Mrs Aspinall, the two Roorbachs, Mr Pingree, the two housekeepers, the two gardeners, and myself. (Those who worked in the Home of Truth centres were all members, who gave their services according to their talents. Mr Pingree, for example, was a teacher, and the only member, incidentally, who demanded any pay: he asked for and got his board and room and fifteen dollars a month.) It was Mr Pingree with whom Swamiji used to walk in the garden of the Alameda Home, and who Swamiji said had an intuition of the conversation of the trees. He used to say the trees talked: he would put his hands on them and say he could understand what they were saying.

‘Well, Swamiji began to talk as we all sat there at the breakfast table. Then someone suggested we go into the front room so that the housekeepers could clear the table. The two rooms were separated only by an archway with curtains hung in them. So five of us went into the front room and the rest went about their affairs: Swamiji, Mrs Aspinall, the Roorbachs, and I took our seats, Swamiji sitting on

a chair facing the rest of us. He talked a great deal of his master that day. Two stories which he said were his master’s I remember, because he directed them at me.

‘The first was a story of an old water-demon who lived in a pool. She had long hair, which was capable of infinite extension. When people would come to bathe in the pool, sometimes she would devour them if she was hungry. With others, however, she would twine a hair around one of their toes. When they went home, the hair, invisible, would just stretch and stretch; and when the old demon became hungry she would just start pulling on the hair until the victim came back to the pool once more, to be eaten up.

“You have bathed in the pool where my Mother dwells,” Swamiji said to me at the end. “Go back home if you wish; but her hair is twined round your toe and you will have to come back to the pool in the end.”

‘The other story was of a man who was wading down a stream. Suddenly he was bitten by a snake. He looked down, and thought the snake was a harmless water snake and that he was safe. Actually it was a cobra. Swamiji then said to me: “You have been bitten by the cobra. Don’t ever think you can escape!”

‘Swamiji did not move from his seat once during the whole conversation. None of us moved from our seats. Yet when he finished it was five o’clock in the afternoon. Later the two housekeepers told us they had tried twice to open the door from the kitchen into the dining room to clear the table, but could not get it open. They thought we had locked it so we would not be disturbed. Even when

Alameda Home of Truth





Left to right: Carrie Mead Wyckoff, her son Ralph, Helen Mead, and Alice Hansbrough; behind is Mrs Hansbrough's daughter Dorothy.

and Ralph would go up to his room and bring it down. Once he asked him, "Can you see your own eyes?" Ralph answered no, except in a mirror. "God is like that," Swamiji told him. "He is as close as your own eyes. He is your own, even though you can't see him."

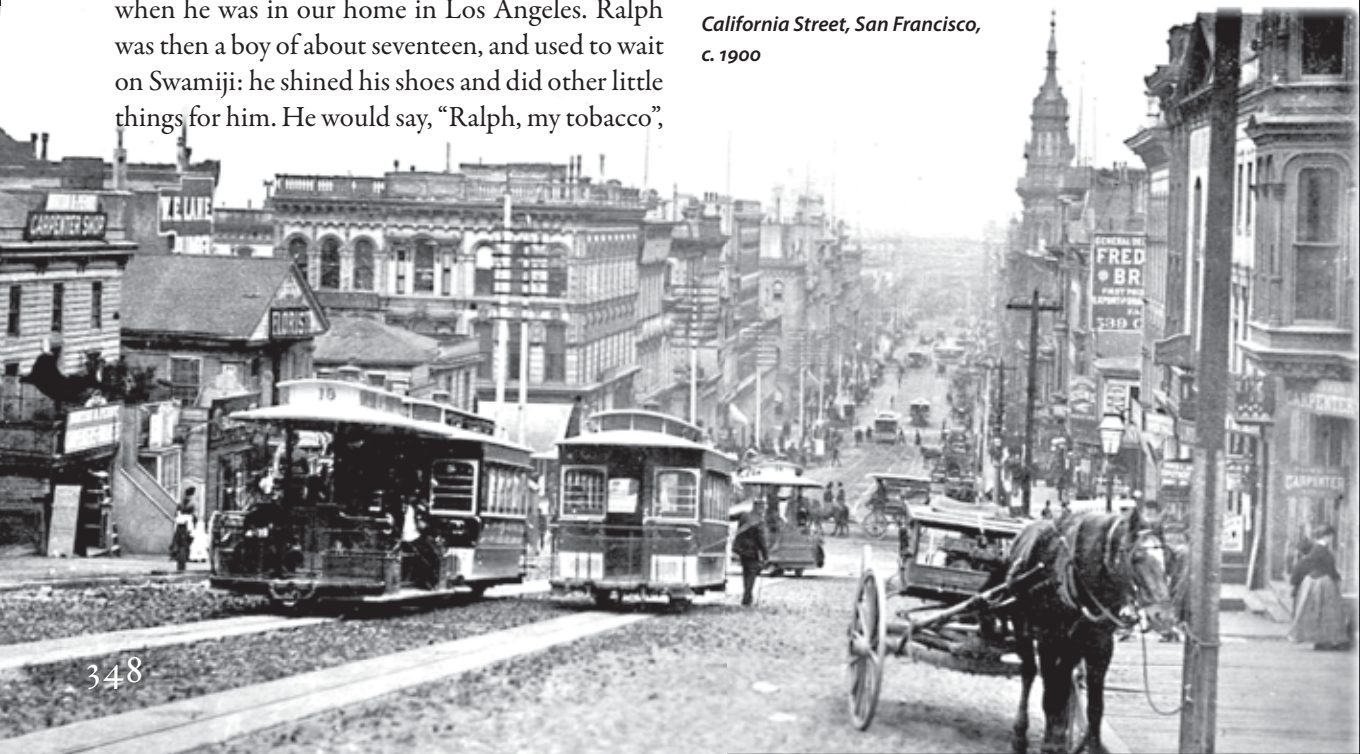
'It must have been one morning in our home in Los Angeles that Swamiji gave what I call "baptism" to Dorothy and Ralph. I remember he laid his pipe aside and called Dorothy to him, and he only smoked after breakfast and dinner. Dorothy was four years old at the time. She went and stood between his knees, with her hands on his thighs. Swamiji put his hands at the back of her head where the hair joins the neck, and tapped up and over the top of her head to the eyebrows. Then he called Ralph and did the same thing. Ralph must have knelt, because I remember that Swamiji did not leave his seat. My two sisters may have been there too; I am not sure.

"What is the meaning of this, Swami?" I asked. Usually I never questioned him, but I did ask him this.

"Oh, it is just a custom we have in India", was all he would tell me.'

(To be continued)

California Street, San Francisco, c. 1900



Swamiji had finished, Mrs Aspinall was the only one who thought of taking any food. After talking with Swamiji for a few minutes in his room I put on my coat and came back to San Francisco. As we went up the stairs to his room, Swamiji said: "They think I have driven them crazy. Well, I shall drive them crazier yet!"

'My, my,' murmured Swami Ashokananda. 'Did Swamiji talk in a loud tone, or quietly?'

'No, he talked in a low tone of voice,' Mrs Hansbrough said. 'Even in private conversation he was always a calm man, except when he was giving someone a dressing down. (This he never did to Helen or Carrie.) The only time I ever saw him get excited was when the missionary woman called him a liar.

'He used to talk often to my nephew, Ralph, when he was in our home in Los Angeles. Ralph was then a boy of about seventeen, and used to wait on Swamiji: he shined his shoes and did other little things for him. He would say, "Ralph, my tobacco",