

Reminiscences of Swami Vivekananda

Mrs Alice M Hansbrough

(Continued from the previous issue)

DID Swamiji give any interviews to any newspapers while he was in Los Angeles?’ Swami Ashokananda asked.

‘Yes, there was an interview published under the title “A Prince from India”. It appeared in some paper, probably a weekly, the name of which I have forgotten. I may be able to get the name of it from Mrs John Schmitz, the doctor’s wife who was our first president in Los Angeles. She is still living there.’

‘Did Swamiji ever tell you anything directly about Divine Mother?’ Swami Ashokananda asked Mrs Hansbrough.

‘Oh yes, he talked a great deal of Divine Mother,’ she replied. ‘He said that she was the receptacle of every germ of religion, and that she was here as a form, but was not tied to that form. She had her desires, he said, but they were related to people. She would reach for people, though they did not know it, and gradually she would draw them to her.’

Swami Ashokananda remarked in the course of the conversation on how gracious Swamiji was. ‘He would not have held on to me as he did if he had not been,’ she remarked. It reminded her of an episode indicative of the way Swamiji had held her in spite of her best efforts to leave him.

‘One day while we were in San Francisco, I finally decided that I was going back to Los Angeles. I chose the day, and had all my bags packed, ready to leave for the train. All at once I heard a voice say: “You can’t go. You might just as well not try.” And for some reason I became completely exhausted—so exhausted that I had to lie down on the floor. I thought of getting some food, but I couldn’t move. And I couldn’t bear to look at the suitcases. So I had to make up my mind not to go.’

‘Did Swamiji say anything to you?’ Swami Ashokananda asked.

‘No, he said nothing. I don’t know whose was the voice I heard speaking to me.’

Sunday, April 6, 1941

Sunday morning, April 6, was bright with the spring sun when Swami Ashokananda left the Century Club Building after his lecture, accompanied by Mrs Hansbrough. The drive home this morning was through Golden Gate Park, and the swami had the car parked beside a lake, where ducks and swans swam about on the quiet water.

Swami Ashokananda asked Mrs Hansbrough to tell him about Swamiji’s stay in the flat she had taken with Mrs Aspinall on Turk Street while he had been in San Francisco.

‘We were in the flat on Turk Street about a month,’ Mrs Hansbrough said. ‘There were two rooms which might have been called “parlours”, with a sliding door between them. Next behind was the dining room, then Mrs Aspinall’s room, then the kitchen. There was a kind of hall bedroom at the top of the stairs which was meant, I suppose, for a servant, and I occupied that.’

‘Swamiji’s room was the second of the two parlour rooms. The classes were held in the front parlour, and if there were too many for the single room we would put a screen before the couch Swamiji used as a bed, open the doors into his room, and use both rooms. I think Mrs Aspinall and I paid about forty dollars a month for the flat.’

‘There was one item about the Turk Street flat which was distinctly different from our home in Los Angeles, and which had its amusing side as I look back. This was the bathtub, which was one of



1719 Turk Street: Swamiji, Mrs Aspinall, and Mrs Hansbrough occupied the top floor

those old-fashioned things built of zinc. Porcelain tubs were still not in use everywhere, and I had to go over the tub carefully every day with a stone they called a bath brick. Swamiji would ask me regularly if I had washed the tub. He was most particular and exacting about it; and as I recall it now, I think the goings-over that I got about that tub were more for my benefit than the tub's. Swamiji would go on at great length about it.

'One day I scrubbed it three times. After the third time, when he still complained that it was not clean, I said, "Well, I have scrubbed that tub three times, and if you can't bathe in it now, I guess you will have to go without a bath!" So then he let it go and took his bath.

'Both here and before we came north, Swamiji liked to prepare one meal of the day himself, and he often helped with meals. He cooked curries, and especially chapatis, of which Ralph and Dorothy

San Francisco Harbour

used to be very fond. He liked the way I cooked rice—in fact, he told me I was the only woman in America who knew how to cook it! In the Turk Street flat he often cooked pulao, that rich dessert made with [rice and ghee]. Sometimes he would cook breakfast; he used to like potatoes cooked in butter with a little curry powder.

'As I have mentioned before, Swamiji used to like to prepare one meal every day while he was at our home in Lincoln Park. Several of the ingredients he used had to be ground, and since he did not like to stand beside a table, he would sit cross-legged on the floor with a wooden butter bowl on the floor in front of him. One day during this ceremony we were talking about his health. Someone suggested that he had a weak heart. "There is nothing wrong with your heart," I told him. "If you mean that," he answered, "I have the heart of a lion!"

'And how did he spend his day while he was in San Francisco? Was his routine about the same as in Los Angeles?' Swami Ashokananda asked.

'Yes, it was just about the same while we were at Turk Street,' Mrs Hansbrough replied. 'When he had no class in the morning we would often go out during the day. Swamiji liked to go to the market with me, and sometimes we would go out for lunch or go for a ride here in Golden Gate Park which he liked. I remember that once Mr Aspinall brought us out in a carriage and we were strolling along. We crossed a bridge onto what proved to be a fairly sizeable island in the midst of a rather swift stream. When we had left the bridge some distance behind



and tried to discover some means of recrossing the stream, Swamiji realized we were on an island, and without thinking to use just that word he tried to indicate the fact to me as he looked about for a means of crossing. Finally when he saw that I had neither caught his meaning nor perceived that the land was an island he remarked, "Well, Madam, I am glad I haven't your brain!"

'Sometimes when he was not lecturing in the evening we would go out to dinner too. He never ate dinner before a lecture; he said it slowed his thinking. He was a hearty eater; in fact, Molly Rankin, one of the housekeepers at the Alameda Home of Truth, said that no person could eat as much as Swamiji did and be spiritual! Lucy Beckham and George Roorbach were quite agreeable, though. And Swamiji demanded what he felt he needed. Once, for example, he said: "See here, I must have meat. I cannot live on potatoes and asparagus with the work I am doing!" So they got meat for him, although they themselves were vegetarians.'

'About how many used to attend Swamiji's classes in the Turk Street flat?' Swami Ashokananda asked.

'I should say they numbered about thirty or forty,' Mrs Hansbrough replied. 'They were held three times a week, the same as his other classes. Swamiji would open the class at ten-thirty, usually with meditation, which often lasted for some time. Then he would speak or discourse on some sacred book. Sometimes he would ask the class what they would like for a subject.'

'Swamiji always sat cross-legged on the couch in the front parlour, and when all the chairs were taken people often sat cross-legged on the floor. There was a Mr Wiseman who came to the classes. He was a devoted follower of Miss Bell. He came late once to the class when all the seats were taken, and he had to sit on the floor. In those days the style of men's trousers did not provide the generous leg-room they do nowadays, and Mr Wiseman's trousers were so tight he could not sit cross-legged. Swamiji noticed him sitting with his knees up un-



A zinc bathtub

der his chin and suddenly exclaimed: "Don't look like a fool! Come and sit by me!" Mr Wiseman was a quiet, unassuming sort of man and he would have felt it presumptuous to sit on the same couch with Swamiji. But he accepted the invitation and took a seat on the end of the couch.'

'Was any charge made for the classes at Turk Street?' Swami Ashokananda asked.

'No, the classes at Turk Street were free,' Mrs Hansbrough replied. 'We made a charge of one dollar and a half for a series of three classes downtown, however, and had small cards printed.'

'Sometimes in these Turk Street classes Swamiji could be very sharp. Once when he was talking of renunciation, a woman asked him, "Well, Swami, what would become of the world if everyone renounced?" His answer was: "Madam, why do you come to me with that lie on your lips? You have never considered anything in this world but your own pleasure!" He told us at another time of a woman in Chicago who had asked him after a class or lecture, "Swami, do you hate all women?" It revealed a characteristic of many of his questioners, that they identified themselves with their question, but couched the question in general terms. I don't remember what Swamiji's answer was.'

'Stupid and emotional people apparently gave the Christian ministers excuses for not a little criticism of Swamiji in the Eastern States. The ministers accused him of "separating families". It seems that there was at least one instance, in Detroit, in which a woman divorced her husband and left her chil-

dren with him in order to “renounce the world”.

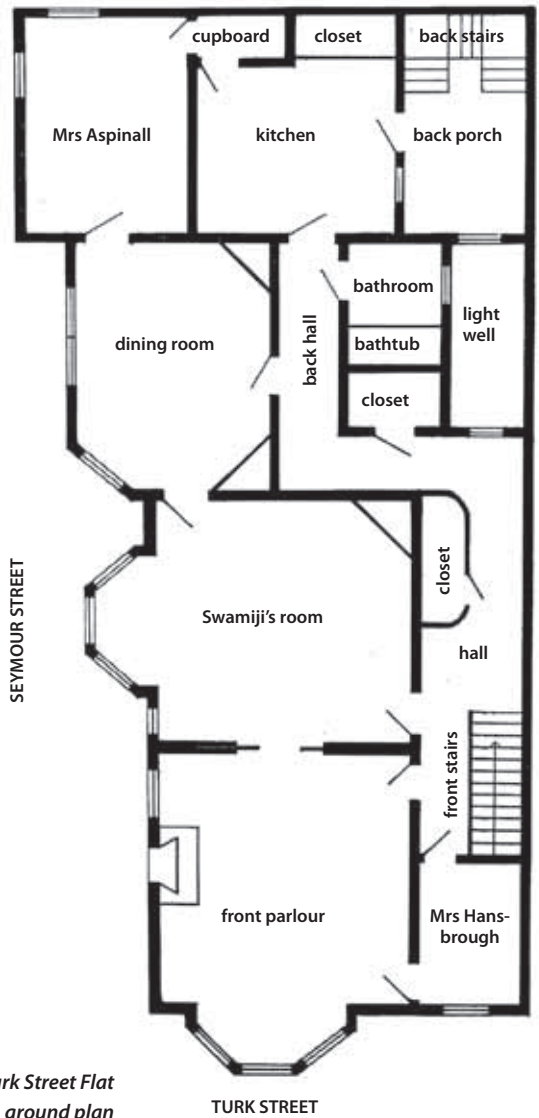
‘Swamiji often was asked questions about going to India, especially by women students. He used to tell them: “If you are going to India to see great yogis, don’t go. You will see only poverty, filth, and misery.”

‘Swamiji was a great one to think out loud when he was at home. That is, as he would talk casually, one had the feeling that this was what he was doing. He liked a listener, however. He would ask us many questions about our family lives, and then would tell us about family life in India.

‘One day when he and I were alone in the Turk Street flat he said: “I have in mind to send my mother a thousand dollars.” I do not remember the details now, but it seems that his mother was involved in some litigation in connection with his father’s estate, and she had appealed to Swamiji’s brother disciple Swami Saradananda, who had written to Swamiji. “Saradananda is an impractical fellow like me,” Swamiji remarked, “but I have written him what to do. In your country a man is allowed to have a mother; in my country I am not allowed. Do you think that is bad?” He was asking if I thought it wrong under these circumstances for him to send his mother money. I replied that it certainly did not seem bad to me, and I believe he did send the money later.’

‘Did Swamiji ever scold you?’ Swami Ashokananda asked.

‘Oh yes, often. He was constantly finding fault and sometimes could be very rough. “Mother brings me fools to work with!” he would say. Or, “I have to associate with fools!” This was a favourite word in his vocabulary of scolding. And though he himself said, “I never apologize”, he would nevertheless come after the scolding was over to find me, and say in a voice so gentle and with a manner so cool that butter and honey would not melt in his mouth, “What are you doing?” It was clear that he was seeking to make amends for the scolding. He used to say, “The people I love most, I scold most”, and I remember thinking he was making a poor kind of apology!



*Turk Street Flat
ground plan*

‘Going up the steps of a hall in San Francisco before one of his lectures, Swamiji asked me about something I had told him I was going to do. I had neglected to take care of it, and told him I had intended to do it, but had not. “Your intentions are good,” he remarked, “but how like devils you sometimes act!”

‘Once while we were in the Turk Street flat I questioned something about the way Swamiji was handling the work. He did not answer, but simply said, “Within ten years of my death, I will be worshipped as a god!”

‘Once in the Turk Street flat I was dusting after breakfast in the dining room. As I worked, Swamiji

was talking about something. I do not remember now what it was. “You are a silly, brainless fool, that’s what you are!” he exclaimed. He continued to scold me heatedly until suddenly Mrs Aspinall appeared and he stopped. I said to him: “Never mind Mrs Aspinall. Swami, if you’re not through, just keep right on!”

‘Somehow, I never felt hurt by his scoldings. I would often get angry and sometimes would walk out of the room, but usually I was able to hear him through. He used to complain of everything. But he used to say, “If you think I am hard to get along with, you should have travelled with Colville!” Colville was a spiritualist with whom Swamiji travelled when on tour for a lecture bureau during his first visit to the West.

‘There was the other side, however. As I have said, after a severe scolding, he would come back and speak in the gentlest of voices. And he could give credit, too, when he chose. On the evening we left the Turk Street flat to go to the Alameda Home of Truth, he was helping me on with my overcoat, and remarked, “Well, you have worked like a demon.” I always felt as if he were my very own, a very close relation for whom I had been waiting a long, long time.

‘Once at the Turk Street flat Swamiji asked me, “Why can’t you join our Order?” He never asked me directly to join, but he did put this question. My answer was that I had my own little world that I had to go back and take care of.’

‘Well, how did you go to Alameda that night [Wednesday, April 11, 1900] when you moved from Turk Street?’ Swami Ashokananda asked.

‘We took the streetcar and then the ferry across the Bay, and probably took the streetcar again on the other side. The three of us went together—Swamiji, Mrs Aspinall, and I—and we probably had dinner before we left San Francisco. Mrs Aspinall and I each had a small suitcase, and Swamiji probably had the same. His trunk with his many clothes in it, I sent by express. I may have packed it for him too, as I often did. About his clothes,



Cyclists in Golden Gate Park

he used to say, “In India I can exist on hips and haws and live in rags, but here I want to meet your demands.”

‘On the streetcar, Swamiji would always sit very straight with his hands, one on top of the other, on the walking stick he carried. He would often sing in a low tone of voice on the car, after he came north from Los Angeles. It was quite a trip across to Alameda, and as I say, I think the last part was on the streetcar too, as there was nothing like a cab service then such as there is now. When we arrived at the Home of Truth we were met in the hall by the teachers, George Roorbach and his wife, Eloise (both of whom were artists), and Miss Lucy Beckham. George Roorbach took Swamiji up to his room on the second floor. It was a fine, big room: the house was a mansion which had been loaned to the Home of Truth by a wealthy family while they were away in Europe. Swamiji was quite comfortable and did get some rest while he was there.’

‘How many of our present members who knew Swamiji ever attended the Turk Street classes or visited Swamiji there?’ Swami Ashokananda asked.



Edith Allan

‘I can remember only Mrs Allan at Turk Street,’ Mrs Hansbrough said. ‘She came for dinner once or twice. The Wollbergs, as I remember, came usually to the Sunday evening lectures downtown.’

(To be concluded)