

Reminiscences of Swami Vivekananda

Mrs Alice M Hansbrough

(Continued from the previous issue)

DID Swamiji ever express any opinion about San Francisco and his work here?’

‘He thought that he got a better response here than he did in Los Angeles. And he was much more jolly here: he could see the end of his work after he had come here and had succeeded in collecting some of the funds he sought, and I think this helped to lighten his heart. Personally, I think he would have had even better response if B Fay Mills had managed his visit for him. Mills was an astute businessman. Sometime later he went to Los Angeles and founded a group he called [?] Fellowship. The membership at one time rose to three thousand members, and he actually persuaded the businessmen to close their offices not only on Sunday but on Wednesday in addition!’

‘How did Dr Logan come into the work?’

‘I don’t remember just when he first became interested, but he was present the night the San Francisco lectures closed. The Wollbergs were there, but I don’t remember whether the Allans

were or not. We had asked a Mr Chambers to invite any to stay at the close of the lecture who would be interested in continuing the study of Swamiji’s teachings. He did this, and when the others had left he asked me to tell about the organization of the Los Angeles and Pasadena centres. Then we discussed the or-

ganization of a centre here, but did not complete the arrangements that night. Dr Logan then suggested that we meet the next night in his office at 770 Oak Street, which we did, and it was on that night, April 14, 1900, that the organization of the Society was completed. Swamiji later held some classes there, and he also held some there after he returned from Camp Taylor [in mid-May].’

‘That means, just before he returned to the eastern states?’

‘Yes, we went to Camp Taylor from Alameda; then Swamiji spent a few days [two weeks] in San Francisco, at Dr Milburn Logan’s home, 770 Oak Street, before he took the train on May 30 to Chicago and New York.

‘Well now, did Swamiji express any opinion about the proposed organization [of a Vedanta Society] in San Francisco?’

‘No, he didn’t. The object of the Society was simply to keep in touch with his work, and the money which came in was to go to his work. He simply suggested that meetings should be held in someone’s office.’

‘What sort of man was Dr Logan?’

‘He was a man of middle age at that time, and apparently devoted to Swamiji. He was very helpful to him. But when Swami Trigunatita came to take charge of the Society, he forced Dr Logan out of the work, because he said the doctor was in it for “name and fame”. Swamiji seemed to like all peo-



Swami Ashokananda, 1940



Dr Milburn H Logan



Japanese Garden, Golden Gate Park, c. 1902

and rose from the table. Of course we went home. Mr Neilsen was very disappointed because he knew the Chinese who owned the restaurant; but Swamiji later explained that it was because of the character of the cook that he was unable to eat the food. One other such oc-

ple. He was most compassionate; it seemed as if he never saw distinctions between people—almost as if he didn't see the difference between a duck and a man! He felt that he had come to the West for two purposes: to deliver a message and to get help for India. But he was terribly disappointed in the amount of help he got.

'Well now, you spoke of Swamiji's going out during the day in San Francisco. What places did he visit besides Golden Gate Park?' Swami Ashokananda asked.

'There were not a great many, but I think he visited the Cliff House, and he often went to Chinatown. For some reason, incidentally, he had a fascination for the Chinese. They would just flock after him, "shaking themselves by the hand" as the saying went, to express their pleasure at his presence. Mr Charles Neilson, a well-known artist who lived in Alameda and who became an admirer of Swamiji, invited us to have dinner one evening in Chinatown. We sat down and ordered, but the food had no sooner been put on the table than Swamiji said he could not eat it,

currence took place when we had had fried shrimps somewhere. When we got home Swamiji vomited his dinner. I said fried shrimps were always hard to digest and probably these were not good, but he insisted that it was the bad character of the cook that was responsible. "I'm getting like my master," he said. "I shall have to live in a glass cage."

'Did he ever seek any amusement? For example, did he ever go to the theatre?'

'He went to the theatre once in Los Angeles to a play, but generally speaking he never sought entertainment, such as playing cards. He did enjoy going out to dinner. He went out to dinner several times with Mr Neilson, the artist, who also took Swamiji to an exhibition of his paintings at the Hopkins Art Gallery, where the Hotel Mark Hopkins now



Chinatown, San Francisco, 1898

stands on Nob Hill.

‘Speaking of dinner reminds me of an incident one evening just as we were preparing dinner in the Turk Street flat. A Mrs Wilmot, a Theosophist who had been coming to Swamiji’s lectures, phoned and asked Swamiji if he could come to see her. She said she felt she was losing her mind, that she was having trouble with the “elementals”, whatever they were. She was very anxious for Swamiji to go right over to her home. “No,” Swamiji said, “we are just preparing dinner. You come over here. Bring the ‘elementals’ and we will fry them for dinner!”’

‘What was the play that Swamiji went to see?’

‘It was a comedy which was a great hit at the time, called “My Friend from India”. It was written, as a matter of fact, as a result of Swamiji’s visit to the United States, though it had no real bearing on his actual activities here. The plot revolved around a wealthy family consisting of a man and his wife, their son and two daughters, and an unmarried sister. They became interested in a man from India, a “wearer of the yellow robe” as he was called, who had come to the West to teach Indian religion; and the whole family took to wearing yellow robes. The play was concerned chiefly with the night of a party to which the family had been invited. At the last minute the women discovered that they had all bought the same model yellow gown for the party. When they came home afterwards, the son tried to sneak a tipsy friend quietly to his room to put him to bed, by disguising the friend in his yellow robe and introducing him as the “friend from India”, a bit wobbly from too much meditation! A Christian minister who was trying to make love to the maiden aunt also tried to get into the house disguised as the “friend from India”, and the father finally concluded that he had lost his mind because he was sure he saw too many yellow robes and too many “friends from India”.

‘It was Professor Baumgardt who invited Swamiji,

Cliff House, San Francisco, c. 1900

and a party of us went together. The play was really very funny, and Swamiji enjoyed it hugely. Professor Baumgardt said he had never seen anyone laugh so hard or so much as Swamiji did.’

May 4, 1941

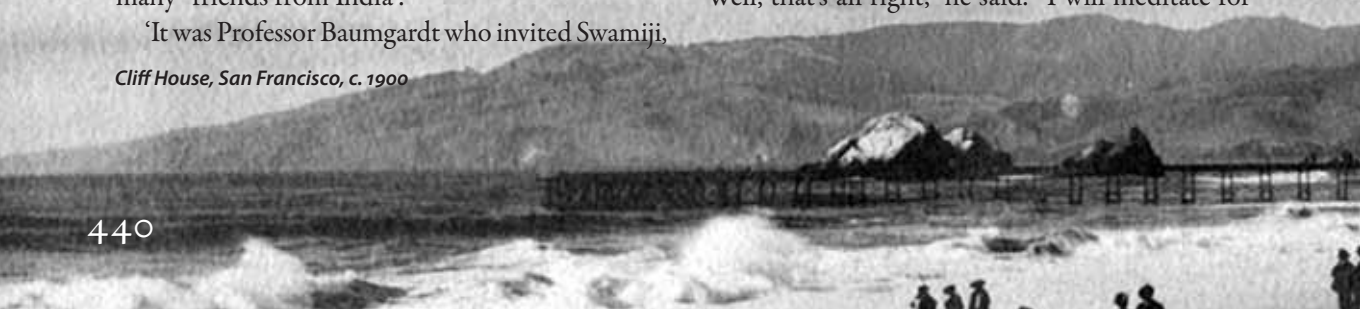
Several weeks passed before Swami Ashokananda again had an opportunity to talk with Mrs Hansbrough of her days with Swamiji. However, on the fourth of May, Sunday, she once more accompanied him on a drive en route from his morning lecture at the Century Club Building. The talk turned to the emphasis some preachers put upon sin and the devil, rather than upon God, and Mrs Hansbrough said that Swamiji had told those in his meditation class that they should try to think of themselves as related closely to Kali or Shiva, or to whomever they meditated upon.

‘Did Swamiji hold a meditation class?’ Swami Ashokananda asked.

‘He always held a meditation period at the beginning of his classes,’ Mrs Hansbrough replied, ‘but I wouldn’t call that exactly a meditation class.’

‘Well, how long would he meditate? Very long?’

‘No, I should say fifteen minutes or half an hour. I remember one class particularly. When we were in the Turk Street flat, I used to prepare a lamb broth for Swamiji every day. I would cook it very slowly for three or four hours, and it was very nourishing because every bit of food value would be cooked out of the meat. One day for some reason I had not been able to get the broth made by the time the class was to start at ten-thirty. Swamiji looked into the kitchen before going to the class. “Aren’t you going to the class?” he asked. I told him that because I had neglected to plan my work properly, now I had to stay in the kitchen and miss the class. “Well, that’s all right,” he said. “I will meditate for



you.” All through the class I felt that he really was meditating for me. And do you know, I have always had the feeling that he still does meditate for me.’

‘Did Swamiji ever rest during the daytime while he was in the Turk Street flat?’ Swami Ashokananda asked.

‘Yes, when he did not have a lecture or some engagement in the afternoon he took a nap after lunch every day. He would sleep for about two hours.’

Swami Ashokananda’s eyes twinkled. ‘And did he ever snore?’ he asked.

‘No,’ Mrs Hansbrough answered with amusement, ‘I never heard him snore.’

‘Now, when was it that Swamiji went to Camp Taylor?’

‘It was about the first of May 1900. The lectures and classes closed in San Francisco on April 14, but on April 11 Swamiji moved to the Home of Truth in Alameda. It was Mrs Aspinall who suggested his going to Camp Taylor. She and Mr Aspinall had already arranged to go there, and one Sunday evening [April 22] when we were all sitting in the Home of Truth, she was conjecturing where each of us would be a week hence: Swamiji in Chicago (I had already bought his ticket for him), I in Los Angeles, and they at Camp Taylor. Then, turning to Swamiji, she said, “You had better change your mind and go with us.” And Swamiji replied, “Very well. And madam (indicating me) will go with us.”

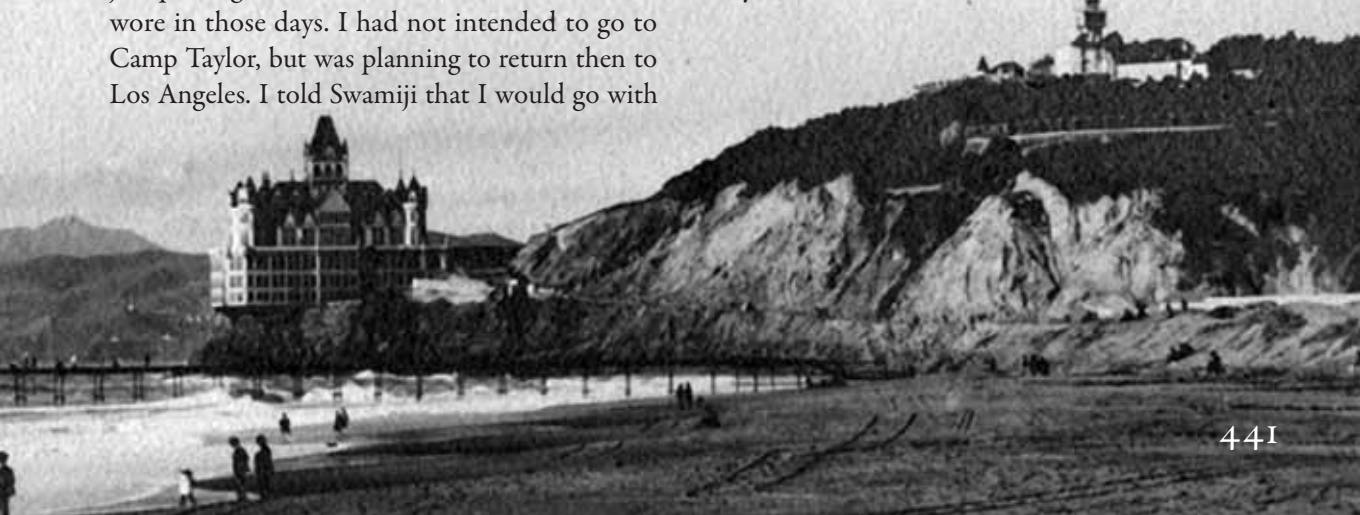
‘We set out the next morning. When I went to his room, Swamiji had on the English hunting suit which someone had given him in the East. He was just putting on the detachable cuffs, which men wore in those days. I had not intended to go to Camp Taylor, but was planning to return then to Los Angeles. I told Swamiji that I would go with

him on the ferry to Sausalito and say goodbye to him there.

‘He took off his cuffs and dropped them in the bureau drawer. “Then,” he said, “I go to Chicago.” Of course I at once said that I would certainly go to Camp Taylor, and we started off shortly afterward.

‘In the party were Mr and Mrs Aspinall, Mr and Mrs Roorbach, Miss Ansell and Miss Bell besides Swamiji and myself. I had packed Swamiji’s things in two big wicker hampers, and Mr Roorbach undertook to handle them for Swamiji. When we got to the ferry, Mr Roorbach walked on ahead with his bulky load. As I mentioned before, he and all the others in the Home of Truth were vegetarians; and as Swamiji saw him struggling with the big baskets he said, “Boiled potatoes and asparagus can’t stand up under that.”

‘In San Francisco we took another ferry to Sausalito, where we were to get the train for Camp Taylor. But the brief discussion I had had with Swamiji about leaving him at Sausalito had been just enough to make us miss the ferry that would have connected comfortably with the Camp Taylor train. The result was that we arrived just in time to see the train pull out. Mr Roorbach said there was a narrow-gauge train that also went there, and we found that that was just ready to leave. We hurried to the proper platform. This train was just getting under way. I called to the conductor on the back platform, who called back, “If you’ll run, I’ll wait for you.” I looked at Swamiji. He simply said, “I will not run.” Even though the train was there within a few yards of him, he would not hurry to catch it.





Kitchen at Camp Taylor, August 1900: seated, Mrs R N Miller; standing at the stove, Eloise Roorbach

“Well, there were no more trains that day, so we had to go all the way back to the Home of Truth in Alameda. On the way back I remarked that we had missed the train because there was no engine hitched to our cars. Swamiji turned to me and said: “We couldn’t go because your heart was in Los Angeles. There is no engine that can pull against a heart—there is no force in the world which can pull against a heart. Put your heart into your work and nothing can stop you.” It was a tremendously significant statement, and it has been vivid in my memory all these years.

“The Aspinalls had gone on ahead of us to Camp Taylor, and I had discovered when we missed the train that my baggage was missing. Later I found they had taken it up with them. After all the missed trains and the loss of time, I had once more decided to go back to Los Angeles, but the next day I had to go up to Camp Taylor to recover my luggage. Mrs Aspinall tried to make me promise that I would not go to say goodbye to Swamiji when I got back to the city: she said I would surely prevent him from getting there [to camp] a second time. When I had told Swamiji I would have to go up [to the camp] for my baggage, he remarked, “Strange, Mother’s dragging you up there, when you tried your best not to go.” And when I returned with the baggage, he said, “Well, come up there for a week and we won’t stay longer.” (When I finally had departed for the south [several weeks later], he told someone, “She had to go back because the babe (Dorothy) wanted her.”)

“So I went [to Camp Taylor]—and we stayed two weeks. On May 2 when we got on the train at Sausalito, we were soon travelling through wooded country, along the bank of the stream, and in the peaceful atmosphere Swamiji began to relax almost at once. He was sitting next to the window so that he could look out, and he began to sing softly to himself. “Here in the country I’m beginning to feel like myself,” he said. That first night Swamiji built a fire on a spit of sand that ran out into the stream. We all sat around the fire in the quiet night and Swamiji sang for us and told stories, such as those about Shukadeva and Vyasa. This was to be our custom on most nights. We would often cook chapatis, too, in pans over the coals.”

“How was Swamiji’s voice?” Swami Ashokananda inquired. “Was it a powerful voice?”

“No, it was not a powerful voice, but it had great depth. The manager of Washington Hall in San Francisco once told me he had never heard so sweet a voice.”

“What was the usual routine of Swamiji’s day at Camp Taylor?”

“We would usually have breakfast sometime between seven-thirty and eight. Then about ten or ten-thirty Swamiji would hold a meditation, which took place in Miss Bell’s tent, as she had requested it. We were located about a mile upstream from the old hotel, in a quiet, windless spot on the east side of the stream called Juhl Camp. The railroad ran by on the opposite bank. Mr Juhl was an admirer of Miss Bell and had arranged the location for us. We had five tents: one for Swamiji and one each for Mrs Aspinall, Miss Bell, Miss Ansell, and Mrs Roorbach. I slept outside Mrs Aspinall’s tent until the rain drove me inside. She had some printed mottoes such as the Home of Truth people often put up, and she had pinned some of these to the sloping roof of the tent. Of course, wherever the

pins were, the tent leaked; and one night I found the water dripping steadily on my forehead from "Love never faileth"! There was a delightful pool in the stream for bathing, which all of us used except Swamiji, who found the water too cold. Water for cooking and washing was piped to the camp, and we did our cooking outside. Swamiji really enjoyed his stay at Camp Taylor.

'After two weeks there, Swamiji returned to San Francisco [in mid-May] and was the guest of Dr Logan for a time. I stayed with a brother-in-law of mine, Jack Hansbrough, for about three days and then went back to Los Angeles. After I had left, Swamiji took another brief vacation trip somewhere outside of San Francisco with a Dr Miller [Hiller?] before he left for the Eastern States.

'In addition to Swamiji's one-night visit to Dr Miller's home in San Francisco, another doctor took him after he had been to Camp Taylor, to another resort outside of San Francisco for a rest.

'I saw him every day before I left, and twice the last day. Then he was ill in bed. I stood at the foot of the bed and said good-bye to him. "Come and shake hands," he said. "I never make a fuss over people even when I have known them many years." I assured him that I had certainly not expected him to make any fuss over me. "The Lord bless you and keep you," he said, and I departed. Later I discovered that I had left a handbag there. But after all the false starts for Camp Taylor I was not going back for that, so I asked Mrs Aspinall to get it when she had an opportunity and send it on to me. She told me later that when she went for it, Swamiji remarked:

"So she left that, did she? Take it out of here!"

'I did not hear from him until he reached Chicago and New York.'

June 22, 1941

Driving home from the Sunday lecture at the Century Club.

'Swamiji had marvellous patience with all of us,'

Mrs Hansbrough declared. 'He made a great effort to do something for us. He took away any feeling on our part that he was superior to us.

'He paid a good deal of attention to children when he met them privately,' she continued. 'There was an old stable in the vacant lot next to our home in Los Angeles, where Swamiji used to sit with the children and look at their picture books. He particularly enjoyed *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*. He said they were absolutely typical in their portrayal of the processes of the human mind. He said that Lewis Carroll had some kind of



Swami Vivekananda at Mr Charles Neilson's house, Alameda, in the spring of 1900

intuition, that his was not an ordinary mind, to have written these books.'

Later Mrs Hansbrough spoke of an episode, also in their home in Los Angeles, involving a woman portrait painter, who was determined to do a portrait of Swamiji. She had approached him several times after meetings, but Swamiji had always declined.

'One day the woman came to our home,' Mrs Hansbrough said, 'and asked me if I would help her by letting her sketch him unawares. Somehow Swamiji sensed her presence and called me. "You get that woman out of here or I'll leave!" he told me. Needless to say, I saw her to the door.'