

Reminiscences of Swami Vivekananda

Mrs Alice M Hansbrough

(Continued from the previous issue)

‘Do you remember the topics of the classes, or the name of any book he used?’ the swami asked.

‘No,’ Mrs Hansbrough replied, ‘but the classes were all taken down in shorthand, and some were later printed in *Prabuddha Bharata*. Sister Nivedita sent for them. In all, she got some forty lectures and class notes of Swamiji’s work. At first we had Mr Bagley, the nephew of Mrs John J Bagley with whom Swamiji had stayed in Detroit in 1894, to take the notes. I remember that he said Swamiji was “very hard to follow”. Later we had Miss McClary, who followed Swamiji everywhere.

‘This same Miss McClary on another occasion asked Swamiji if it were true that Hindu mothers threw their babies into the Ganges because they did not want them. He answered, “Yes, Madam, but I was one who escaped.” After a moment he added, “Nowadays all the babies are born of men.” Miss McClary then realized her own stupidity and hid herself behind her chair. Swamiji said, “I don’t blame you. I would, too, if I had asked such a question!”

Swami Ashokananda asked if there was anyone still living who had copies of all these notes, but Mrs Hansbrough could think of no one. She said that one copy of each had been sent to Sister Nivedita and a copy to each of the magazines in India.

The Swami then asked about Mrs Hansbrough’s close contacts with Swamiji after the lectures and classes had begun.

‘In connection with the work, I always saw him before and after the lectures and classes.

‘During questions after one of the classes, Mr Bransby asked Swamiji what difference there was between a cabbage and a man, if all things are one. Swamiji could be sharp on occasion. His answer was: “Stick a knife into your leg and you will see

the line of demarcation.”

‘On another occasion, a woman asked who supported all the monks in India. “The women, Madam,” Swamiji replied, “the same as in your country!”

‘And when was it that you asked him to visit you?’

‘I think it was at Mrs Blodgett’s home, once when Helen and I were there together.’ Mrs Hansbrough smiled. ‘Sometime before—as a matter of fact, before we had even met Swamiji, though it was after his second lecture—I one day said to my sisters, “Do you know, I think Swami Vivekananda wants to come to visit us.” My sisters thought I was crazy. However, I defended my thought by pointing out that the swami was not well and that he might find our home restful. We were then living [at 309 Monterey Road] in Lincoln Park, which is now



Swami Ashokananda (right) with Mr A Clifton (later Swami Chidrupananda), who recorded the conversations with Mrs Hansbrough presented in this article. Photo c. 1934.

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Josephine MacLeod, 1898

Swami Ashokananda asked. 'Did he look unwell? Would anyone know from his appearance that he was ill?'

'Oh no,' Mrs Hansbrough told him. 'He always looked bright, especially when he was particularly interested in something. Then his eyes actually sparkled.'

'When he declined my invitation to visit us, he was very gracious. I had explained that our home was very unpretentious, but that we would be very happy to have him with us. He smiled and said, "I do not need luxury", and explained that he was comfortably situated at Mrs Blodgett's.'

'Later on [in late December] I asked him to come for Sunday dinner [probably on Christmas Eve]. He readily accepted, and asked me to invite Miss MacLeod also. When I asked Miss MacLeod, she wouldn't believe Swamiji had accepted my invitation. She herself went to ask him about it, and he told her, "Yes, and you are to come too."

'It was about an hour's ride on the electric train for them to reach our house. The train stopped just at the corner, and then they had only a few steps to our door.'

'I can see the picture of them now, standing at the front door, so I must have met them when they arrived. After speaking to each of us as he came in, Swamiji turned and walked into the living room. The tall windows looked out through the trees in our garden. Swamiji walked to one of them and stood for some minutes looking out, the white curtains framing him against the sunlight. Then he

called South Pasadena, in a rented house. The property and the house are still standing, and the room still intact in which Swamiji slept (for he did come later to stay with us).'

'Of course we know that Swamiji was not well, but how did he look at that time?'

turned and spoke, answering again the question I had asked him at Mrs Blodgett's: "Yes," he said, "I will come to visit you!"

'Then he wanted to come right away, and he soon did. He had but one trunk, but he had many clothes, for he was always well dressed when he went out or met strangers. At home he cared little for his dress; he was most casual about it. Once while my nephew Ralph was blacking his shoes, he remarked, "You know, Ralph, this fine lady business is a nuisance!" He knew what was expected of him in public. When Mrs Bowler had invited him to speak in Pasadena, she had specifically asked that he wear his turban.'

"Do you *have* to wear the turban?" I asked him, for by that time he had given it up. "Don't you understand?" he said. "She wants the whole show!"

Swami Ashokananda then asked about Mrs Hansbrough's closer contacts with Swamiji after the lectures and classes had begun.

'In connection with the work, I always saw him before and after the lectures and classes. I remember one evening when we were going home after a lecture he asked me how I had liked it. He had been very outspoken that evening in criticism of the West, and I said that I had enjoyed the lecture but feared that he sometimes antagonized his audience. He smiled as if that meant nothing to him. "Madam," he said, "I have cleared whole halls in New York!"

'I think the finest gesture I ever saw him make,' Mrs Hansbrough went on, 'was in connection with a rumour of scandal which arose about him while he was in Los Angeles. Professor and Mrs Baumgardt came to see Swamiji one morning and the subject came up in conversation. They had heard of it but thought nothing of it. We were all seated in the dining room except Swamiji, who was walking slowly up and down the room. Finally he said, "Well, what I am is written on my brow. If you can read it, you are blessed. If you cannot, the loss is yours, not mine."

The conversation then turned once more to Swami Vivekananda's lectures, and Swami Ashokananda asked where Swamiji gave 'Christ the

Messenger’.

‘It was at Payne’s Hall,’ Mrs Hansbrough told him. ‘We had moved from the chapel in the Home of Truth, because Swamiji did not feel free to speak critically of metaphysical ideas from their platform. The original title of that lecture, you know, was ‘The Message of Christ to the World’; it was changed after it was sent to India.

‘Swamiji was introduced by a Dr John Smith, a physician who greatly admired Swamiji. The lecture drew a tremendous crowd: more than a hundred people were turned away. The Mr Blanchard for whom the hall where Swamiji gave his first lecture was named, was present at this one, and the size of the audience was not lost on him.* When Swamiji had finished, Mr Blanchard came up to me on the platform, where Swamiji was talking to some people. ‘I would like to make some money out of this man—for him as well as for myself,’ he said. ‘Could I announce to the audience now that he will speak next Sunday at Blanchard Hall?’ I told him I could not give him such permission. He then went to Miss MacLeod, who did give him permission. So while Swamiji was still there, Mr Blanchard announced from the platform that Swami Vivekananda would speak the following Sunday at Blanchard Hall, and that the admission would be ten cents. Mind you, there had been no admission charge at this lecture.

‘When Swamiji heard this announcement, he turned and asked who gave the man permission to make it. Somehow Miss MacLeod crawled out of it, and Swamiji turned on me. He was thoroughly annoyed and looked quite angry. He said the man should not have been allowed to make such an announcement. And he could not be persuaded to give the lecture at Blanchard Hall. He pointed out that he had had no end of trouble trying to get rid of people who wanted to make money out of him. We learned later that [on the following Sunday] more than one hundred people went to Blanchard

Hall nevertheless, and waited on the steps.

‘This episode almost broke up the lecture series, but it was after this that he lectured at the Shakespeare Club in Pasadena. After one of the lectures at the Shakespeare Club I said to the swami, “Swamiji, I think you would like me to go on to San Francisco.” His eyes lighted up as they always did when he was particularly interested in something and he answered, “Yes, of course I would.”

‘My sisters, Helen and Carrie, did not think much of the idea and discouraged it from the beginning. They did not feel that I was a “big” enough person to do what was necessary. They also felt that I was not “socially inclined” enough, and they never did think I was very bright.’ Mrs Hansbrough’s eyes twinkled. ‘At any rate, Swamiji brought the matter up again himself one morning after breakfast, when he and I were sitting alone at the table. “Well, when are you going to San Francisco?” he asked.

‘I was taken a little by surprise, as I had more or less abandoned the thought. “Why, I could go, if you wanted me to,” I answered. He seemed to have sensed that I had been discouraged from the plan by my sisters’ opposition. “When once you consider an action,” he said, “do not let anything dissuade you. Consult your heart, not others, and then follow its dictates.”



The Shakespeare club, Pasadena, right, and assembly hall, below



* In addition to his five morning classes in the first week of 1900, Swamiji gave two evening lectures in the auditorium of the Blanchard Building.



Swami Vivekananda, fourth from right in the middle row, on the Echo Mountain House Funicular, Mt Lowe, 13 January 1900.

‘Not long afterward a letter came from Dr B Fay Mills of the Unitarian Church in Oakland, inviting Swamiji to go there. So I said to Swamiji, “Well, I needn’t go now.” However, Swamiji wanted to give his first lecture independently, and was unwilling to start any San Francisco work with a lecture at the Unitarian Church. “We will support our own work,” he said. “I am willing to trust an American woman. I will trust an American man sometimes. But an American minister—never!” He gave his first lecture in San Francisco on February 23 at Golden Gate Hall, on “The Ideal of a Universal Religion”.

‘Speaking of San Francisco reminds me of a remark he made to me one evening after one of his lectures here. Several of us were walking home with him. I was in front with someone, and he behind with some others. Apropos of something he had been discussing, he said, “You have heard that Christ said, ‘My words are spirit and they are life.’” He pointed his finger at me and declared, “So are my words spirit and life; and they will burn their

way into your brain and you will never get away from them.”’

It was now late in the evening. The talk turned to Swamiji’s actual coming to San Francisco, so it was decided to continue the discussion on another evening. Swami Ashokananda said goodnight to Mrs Hansbrough and returned to the Temple.

Sunday, March 23, 1941

Sunday, March 23 was bright and cloudless, with a spring-like breeze that tempered the warm sun. After his morning lecture in the Century Club Building, Swami Ashokananda invited Mrs Hansbrough to drive home with him. On the way, the swami asked Mrs Hansbrough for further details regarding Swami Vivekananda’s stay in Los Angeles. After driving to the ocean beach and then through Golden Gate Park, the swami ordered the car to be parked overlooking the waters of Lake Merced.

‘Tell me now,’ Swami Ashokananda began, ‘how long Swamiji stayed at your home in Los Angeles.’

‘It must have been all of four weeks,’ Mrs Hansbrough replied. ‘He came in late January 1900 and it was on February 21 when he left to come to San Francisco.’

‘Did he ever express any opinion about Los Angeles?’

‘Yes, he said, “It has an atmosphere like India: it is restful.”’

‘And did you have many conversations with him while he was in your home?’ the swami asked.

‘Oh yes. Usually they were in the evening. Every night we would sit after dinner was over, and he would talk on many subjects: philosophy, science, our national development—’

‘You mean development of the United States?’ the swami put in.

‘Yes,’ Mrs Hansbrough answered. ‘He was very much interested in all phases of our national life. But he did not like to see the great concentration on material affairs. Swamiji said that our civilization would fall within fifty years if we did not spiritualize it.’

‘He did say that?’ the swami asked. ‘Did he ever

say that from the platform, or only in private conversation?’

‘Oh, only in private conversation. He said we were deifying material values, and that we could never build anything lasting on such a basis.’

‘How long would these conversations last in the evening? About what time would Swamiji retire?’

‘He would talk as long as we wanted him to,’ Mrs Hansbrough said, ‘though actually it was never later than around ten or eleven o’clock.’

‘And did he have a room to himself in your house?’

‘Oh yes.’

‘I have a picture of your house here,’ Swami Ashokananda said. ‘Can you point out his room to me in the picture?’

‘No,’ said Mrs Hansbrough, examining the photo. ‘This shows only the front of the house, and his room was in the back, on the second floor. We all moved to bedrooms in the front of the second floor of the house so that Swamiji could be alone.’

‘Well, now, let us see how he spent his day,’ the swami said. ‘At what time would he come down from his room? What time would he take breakfast?’

‘He usually came down about seven o’clock. There was a bathroom on the second floor where his room was, and I presume he would bathe in the morning, but he didn’t comb his hair.’

‘He didn’t!’ Swami Ashokananda exclaimed.

Mrs Hansbrough smiled. ‘No,’ she replied. ‘Though he was very careful about his dress when he went out, he was very careless about it at home. I remember that he himself remarked about it one Sunday morning: “Why should I be careful of my dress at home? I don’t want to get married!” You see, where we think there is a “proper” dress for the dining room, just as for other times and places, he put all this down as show.’

‘This reminds me of Frank Alexander’s writings about Swamiji. You know, he tried to paint Swamiji



The Mead Home (now Vivekananda House), South Pasadena, with views of the dining room and parlour



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as a great man in every little detail. My inclination has always been to do just the opposite: that is, to remember him as the real human being he was—to take off any paint of artificiality others tried to apply to him. For he was so great in himself that no paint was ever needed to make him so.

‘As I say, he would come down about seven in the morning, in his bathrobe and slippers and his long black hair not yet combed. He would have some kind of undergarment under his robe, which showed a bit at the neck. I remember that his robe had seen many winters. It was a black and white tweed of some kind, probably with a herringbone pattern in it, and with a cord around the waist.’

‘You said his hair was black, as we know. How did he wear it at this time? Was it long?’ Swami Ashokananda queried.

‘Yes, when Swamiji first came to Los Angeles, his hair had grown long, and it was beautifully wavy. In fact it was so beautiful, and it set off his features so well, that we would not let him cut it again.’



Swami Vivekananda in San Francisco, with long hair

‘So you were responsible for the long hair!’ Swami Ashokananda exclaimed, half-jokingly. ‘And you liked it because it was beautiful!’

Mrs Hansbrough smiled assent. ‘Swamiji himself did not object. In fact he appreciated the value that its beauty lent to his appearance. He actually remarked once when we were discussing it, “Beauty has its value.” He was wholly devoid of self-consciousness.’

‘Now, you were saying that he would come downstairs in the morning at about seven o’clock. What time would you have breakfast?’

‘Breakfast would be at about seven thirty, in order to accommodate Helen, who was working, and Ralph, who had to get to school. Swamiji would pass the half hour walking outside.’

‘In his bathrobe?’

‘Yes. You see, at that time that part of town was not very closely built up. There were no houses across the street and the neighbours on either side were separated from our house by trees and shrubs. Swamiji would walk in the garden behind the house, or along the driveway at one side, and no one could see him there.’

‘And what would he usually take for breakfast?’

‘He always had fruit, usually an orange or grapefruit, and he liked poached eggs. He would have toast, and coffee usually.’

‘Did he like his coffee with cream?’

‘Yes, he took cream and I think he took sugar also.’

‘And how big a breakfast would he eat?’

‘Swamiji was a moderate eater. Usually he took two eggs, two pieces of toast, and two cups of coffee. Once I offered him a third cup of coffee. At first he declined, but when I urged him he finally yielded and said: “All right. Woman’s business is to tempt man.”’

‘Breakfast would usually last about an hour, for we never hurried. Ralph had to be at school at eight or eight-thirty, and Helen would leave for work, but the rest of us were not occupied. After breakfast Swamiji would stroll in the garden again or browse through the library. Often he would play with the children in the yard. Dorothy [Hansbrough, who was four years old] had several friends who would come, and Swamiji would hold hands with them and play ring-around-the-rosy and other games. He used to like to talk with them, and would ask them many questions about their activities, why they played this game or that, and so on.

‘He was much interested in the problem of child training, and we often talked of it. He did not believe in punishment. It had never helped him, he said. “And I would never do anything to make a child afraid,” he declared.’

‘Well now, would Swamiji have any classes or meetings in the morning?’ Swami Ashokananda asked.

‘Yes, he was having both morning lectures and classes in Los Angeles and Pasadena while he was with us,’ Mrs Hansbrough replied. ‘They would start usually at ten-thirty or eleven, and we would leave the house at about ten.’

‘What would Swamiji wear to the meetings? Would he wear his robe?’

‘No, he wore the black garment we see in several of the pictures of him, something like a clerical frock, but looser. Sometimes if it was not too warm he would wear his overcoat over this. He would take his gerua robe and turban in a suitcase, and put them on when he arrived at the meeting place.’

(To be continued)