

Why I Became A Theosophist by Katherine Hillard

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To speak of *becoming* a Theosophist, seems to imply a passing from one condition to another, whereas to a child fortunate enough to have been brought up in a Unitarian environment, there was no violent change, but only a taking on of knowledge, and a widening of the windows of the soul. My father never spoke to us of religion, but I am sure that he was what in his own day would have been called "a free-thinker," and that his influence upon my mother was always in the direction of breadth and freedom. Her father was one of the old-school rigidly conservative Unitarians, and I can remember what a different atmosphere pervaded his house on Sundays, from what we had been accustomed to in England.

The first impression of a religious nature that I remember, a few years before we left England, was when my mother tried to explain the omnipresence of God and the divinity of Christ on a Unitarian basis. I was then about seven years old, and the result of her efforts I well remember was to make me exclaim, "Well, then, if Christ is divine, there are two Gods, and if God is everywhere there is only room for one!" Afterwards I went away and meditated, in a child's fashion, upon this hard saying, and finally came to the conclusion that there *was* only one God, and that Jesus was our Elder Brother, a phrase I had probably picked up in some book, for my reading in those days was very extensive and exceedingly varied. I had recently read about "the Crusade of the Children," and I made up my mind that as soon as I was a little older — seven seeming even to the child's mind somewhat too young for such an undertaking — I would get up a crusade of children to go about the world and preach a new religion, which should declare that there was but one God, our Father in Heaven, and that Jesus Christ was not another God but only our Elder Brother. Having settled this to my own satisfaction, I said nothing more on the subject, and my dear mother probably felt that she had explained the knotty question of the Divinity of Christ and the omnipresence of God in a manner perfectly satisfactory to her juvenile hearers.

Not very long after this, I got hold of Marryat's novels, and in one of them (I think *Midshipman Easy*, but I have never seen the books since), I came upon a boatswain who believed in re-incarnation, not in the theosophic sense exactly, but rather in the repetition of events and characters in regular cycles. It had a curious effect upon my mind, which seemed to be struggling with something known before and known better, like the twisted fabric of a dream that one cannot rightly recall.

Then came, long afterwards, of course, when I was about fourteen, the teachings of the Rev. Samuel Longfellow, a brother of the poet. Of him it was said that while Henry Longfellow was *made* a poet, Samuel was born one, and also it was said that he was good enough to be a saint and interesting enough to be a sinner. He was certainly a mystic, and his teachings were like those of all the mystics, — but another term for Theology. He preached to the Second Unitarian Church in Brooklyn for seven years, and then went to Germantown, after his brother Henry's death, retiring to live with his nieces in the old "Craigie House" in Cambridge. After this, through the influence of some of my literary friends, I became very much interested in Positivism, and the talks given by the Crolys and many others. Their foundation-stone, the creed that man had no rights, only duties, had a certain chilly grandeur about it, but the worship of an abstraction, called "Humanity," was not at all satisfactory to the religious sense, and even the severe and lofty ethical system of Positivism seemed lacking in food for the soul. I was sure I was not a Positivist, but that was all I was sure of.

On my first return from Italy in 1884, I came across Mr. Sinnett's *Esoteric Buddhism*, which was just then making a tremendous sensation, and like many another Theosophist took my first lessons in the "Wisdom Religion" from that fascinating book. Four winters spent in Italy, studying Dante and the mysticism of the middle ages helped me very much, as at the same time I was studying all the theosophical books that were

then published. Mr. and Mrs. Sinnett very kindly sent me lists of books, and long and helpful letters, but after the "first fine careless rapture" drawn from *Esoteric Buddhism*, I began to feel that too many of its symbols and allegories were taken as solid realities and matters of fact, and when I visited H. P. B. in May, 1888, *en route* to New York, I was glad to find that she sustained my objections.

That was twenty-one years ago, and it is harder sometimes to recall things of that date, than even our childish impressions, I suppose because the former come in crowds, and childhood's memories, strong enough to persist at all, are few and far between. My ideas of H. P. B. before I met her, were of the haziest description, and by no means worthy of her. On arriving in London, I went to an afternoon tea at the Sinnett's, and there met Countess Wachtmeister, who was then living with H. P. B., and she asked me to come and see her.

I arrived in the midst of a domestic tempest. H. P. B., in a gorgeous Oriental dressing-gown and a royal gaze, had been interrupted in her work with Dr. Keightley, I think (possibly Mr. Bertram Keightley), because the Countess smelt gas, and had insisted that the only available man should go down into the cellar and see about it, to the great disgust of H. P. B. The Countess took the blows of the winged words most meekly, and it was somehow conveyed to my moral consciousness, without a syllable being said on the subject, that such tempests were part of the training of the disciples who surrounded their great leader. After that I spent two or three evenings with Mme. Blavatsky, who smoked cigarettes and played solitaire, all the while she led the conversation. And she impressed me above all, as a great *Power*, and behind the clumsy figure in the Oriental robe, there seemed to be agencies unseen, that worked her will. Her eyes were the most piercing I ever saw, and appeared not only to meet your own, but to see through and behind your bodily presence. She advised me to settle neither in Rome nor London, but to return to New York. "You could not do better," she said in her emphatic way, "than to go back to New York, and study with W. Q. Judge. He is a *good man*." Never shall I forget the stress she laid upon those words, as if to answer the attacks she doubtless foresaw.

Later in the spring of the same year I met Mr. Judge, who came to see me in Brooklyn, and of that visit I can remember little or nothing. I did not appreciate him quickly. Seeing him at first in my own home, and not in his proper environment, some little time elapsed before I learned to recognize, under that quiet and rather insignificant exterior, the wisdom, the practical common sense, the humor and the independence of the man. Day by day I learned to know him better, and to trust him more. In the "Letters That Have Helped Me" (II, p. 116), is an extract from a paper that I wrote in commemoration of our Chief, which perhaps I may be excused for repeating here, as explaining another of my reasons for becoming a theosophist.

"To the mystical element in the personality of Mr. Judge was united the shrewdness of the practical lawyer, the organizing faculty of a great leader, and that admirable common sense which is so uncommon a thing with enthusiasts. . . . And blended with the undaunted courage, the keen insight, the endless patience, that made his personality so powerful, were the warm affections, the ready wit, the almost boyish gaiety that made it so lovable."

In the autumn I took up my abode in New York, and joined the T. S. In November the first volume of the *Secret Doctrine* was published, followed quickly by the second, and the problems that had found no answer in the earlier books, were all solved here. Twenty-one years of diligent, but of course not consecutive study have not exhausted its infinite variety.

K. H.