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Madame Blavatsky and the Mahatma Letters

By

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In 1885 the Society for Psychical Research published the report of a committee appointed to investigate "phenomena connected with the Theosophical Society". The report was mainly concerned with the writing and delivery of what have been called the Mahatma Letters and Madame Blavatsky's connection with this. The committee did not itself actually do the investigating at first hand, but relied upon the reports of Mr. Richard Hodgson. The committee's report ended with the words, "For our part, we regard her (Madame Blavatsky) neither as the mouthpiece of hidden Seers, nor as mere vulgar adventures; we think that she has achieved a title to permanent remembrance as one of the most accomplished, ingenious and interesting imposters in history". (Pro. S.P.R. iii, 207).

Madame Blavatsky was persuaded by her friends not to attempt personally to meet this attack. The whole subject of the Mahatma Letters was far too complex, and, by the standards of the contemporary world, too incredible, to bring out into controversy; and she herself was temperamentally unfit to figure as a witness in her own case or engage coolly and dexterously in controversial cut and thrust. It was really impossible to prove to the world that the Masters existed; but one course remained open and that was to show that the report was evidentially unsound. This has been ably done by many hands, right up to our own time; and the structure built up by Richard Hodgson, the solitary and rather callow investigator of the S.P.R., has been left in ruins.

From those ruins and from that past, there stand out the Mahatma Letters themselves. Evidence with regard to their phenomenal mode of delivery on many occasions can be studied by anybody who is interested; and there are sufficient reproductions of them, quite apart from the actual manuscripts, to enable anybody to form some opinion as to whether they could be forgeries or pseudographs. The arguments may be studied along with specimens of the scripts in Mr. C. Jinarajadasa's book *Did Madame Blavatsky Forge the Mahatma Letters?*

Many years ago the writer of this article submitted, without giving any background information, reproductions of the K.H. and M. scripts and of the handwriting of Madame Blavatsky to a medical man who had specialized on handwriting. He at once dismissed as impossible the notion that Madame Blavatsky could have forged or invented the K.H. and M. scripts. Then he said that these two scripts were very remarkable. Though they were very different in character, each was the handwriting of a very highly integrated and where he was going and was free of psychological conflict "One might describe them", he said, "as very masterful handwritings". Those were his actual words.

Thus, historically and for most members of the Theosophical Society, the integrity of Madame Blavatsky and the genuineness of the Mahatma Letters passed through a testing fire from which they emerged vindicated and greatly enhanced in the esteem of thousands of people. From the 1920's on, several collections of the letters have been published, *The Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett* being published by Mr. A. Trevor Barker, and several other collections being brought out by Mr. C. Jinarajadasa. The letters have been much quoted, and many people have accepted them as representing the actual words of the Masters of the Wisdom who wrote the letters.

Here we come to some problems which, in the view of the writer of this article, need to be re-examined. Setting aside any question of forgery or malpractice in the original production of the letters, were all these

letters really written by the Masters and do they really represent the Masters' words?

We who look at the letters today look at them in an atmosphere in which still hang some of the dust and some of the glow of the aftermath of the S.P.R report and the various refutations of it. We look at them with the uncritical piety of a later generation and have forgotten how they appeared to the eye of those who were actually recipients of the letters or were involved in that early period of the history of the Society.

It has been said that the right use of criticism is to test by reason the promptings of the intuition. Many members of the Theosophical Society have had feelings of considerable doubt about some of these letters. They have felt that the letters do not all represent a direct expressions of the Master to whom they are ascribed, that many passages have, as it were, no Master behind them.

Some have perhaps felt a little guilty at entertaining such a thought, feeling that it involves a measure of disloyalty to Madame Blavatsky to whom they owe so much. A little research, however, shows that they need not feel at all guilty in this respect; for Madame Blavatsky herself held and expressed the very same view of the letters, and indeed expressed it much more sweepingly than any who came after her have ventured to do.

"It is hardly one out of a hundred occult letters, " she wrote, "that is ever written by the hand of the Master in whose name and on whose behalf they are sent, and the Masters have neither time nor leisure to write them; and when a Master says, "I wrote that letter, " it means only that every word in it was dictated by him and impressed under his direct supervision. Generally they make their chela, whether near or far away, write (or precipitate) them, by impressing upon his mind the ideas they wish impressed, and, if necessary, aiding him in the picture-printing process of precipitation. It depends entirely upon the chela's state of development how accurately the ideas may be transmitted and the writing-model imitated". (Lucifer, iii, p.93).

Sinnett was himself familiar with and accepted the view that many of the letters were written entirely by chelas and were not direct communications from the Masters, even though written in the Masters' handwritings and carrying Their initials as signatories. In 1888 Sinnett was shown by Colonel Olcott a signed letter in the K. H. script, and he then wrote to C. W. Leadbeater, "It reads to me very much en suite with the other letters in blue handwriting that came during the 1884 crisis, when Mm. B. herself admitted to me afterwards that during that time the Masters had stood aside and left everything to various chelas, including freedom to use the blue handwriting". (C Jinarajadasa, The K.H. Letters to C.W. Leadbeater, p75).

We thus see that, if we accept what Madame Blavatsky wrote and said on several occasions, and what is said in the letters themselves, the majority of the Mahatma Letters are likely to have been expressed as to detail in the idiom and within the temperamental limitations of various chelas, and many of them were written by chelas without any supervision from the Master whose signature is upon them.

One may well ask, if this was so, why this aspect of the letters was not more openly stated and explained by Madame Blavatsky herself. To find the answer to this we have to take note of certain curious traits of her character.

In his valuable little book, *The Work and Worth of Madame Blavatsky*, Mr. T.H. Redfern pints out that one of the strongest evidences that the letters were not composed by Madame Blavatsky is that some of them contain such acute adverse criticisms of her own character and acts. One of the things that she did which got her into deep trouble and which yet arose from her profound devotion to the Masters was that she attributed to Them a wide range of minor psychic phenomena which were actually brought about only by herself. This pathetically indiscreet effort to enhance the reputation of "the Brothers "brought deplorable results. Mr. Redfern quotes, in a justly sympathetic spirit, a long passage from one of the Mahatma Letters discussing this strange side of her nature.

"Was, or rather is, it lack of intellectual perceptions in her?" says the writer of that letter. "Certainly not. It is a psychological disease, over which she has little if any control at all. Her impulsive nature ... is always ready to carry her beyond the boundaries of truth, into the regions of exaggerations; nevertheless without a shadow of suspicion that she is thereby deceiving her friends or abusing their great trust in her". (Op. cit. .29).

This all referred to her tendency frequently to attribute "phenomena of the most childish nature" to "the Brothers". But, in a letter to Frau Gebhard, she herself confessed that she had done the same thing with regard to letters, evidently partly to avoid the trouble and probable misunderstanding that would arise if she tried to explain the methods by which these letters were written. She referred to herself as "having insisted that such and such a note was from Master written in His own handwriting, all the time thinking, jesuitically,

I confess, "Well, it is written by His order and in His handwriting, after all, why shall I go and explain to these, who do not, cannot, understand the Truth, and perhaps only make matters worse".

But this was not her only motive. She also confessed to having "used Master's name when I thought my authority would go for naught, when I sincerely believed acting agreeably to Master's intentions". (C. Jinarajadasa, *The Early Teaching of the Masters*, Foreword, p.x).

In this letter again she indicates that most of the letters were written by persons other than the Masters themselves, and she describes herself as "shocked and startled, burning with shame when shown notes written in Their handwritings ... Exhibiting mistakes in science, grammar and thoughts, expressed in such language that it perverted entirely the meaning originally intended". She said that "it is very rarely that Mahatma K. H. dictated verbatim; and when He did there remained the few sublime passages found in Mr. Sinnett's letters from Him." (Ibid).

A further problem with regard to the Mahatma Letters remains to be discussed in connection with Madame Blavatsky, though probably it can never be solved. Several members have lately told the writer that they have felt sure that some of the material in the letters came from H.P. B herself and represented her own thoughts and opinions. As we shall see, A.P. Sinnett held this view, and some confirmation of it can be found in her own words. The idea is not that she wrote the letters but that, since she was to a large extent the medium through whom their delivery became possible, much material from her found its way unconsciously into them.

We do know that much of the language in the letters comes at least from the same pool of language which she herself used. One of the most plausible and telling lines of criticism advanced by Richard Hodgson was his demonstration that the language, usage, spelling and sentence structure of the K. H. letters were on many points identical with the same features in Madame Blavatsky's writings. (Proc. S.P.R., iii, 306). She herself admitted in the letter to Frau Gebhard which has already been quoted, that "Two or three times, perhaps more, letters were precipitated in my presence by chelas who could not speak English and who took ideas and expressions out of my head". (Early Teaching, xi.)

Here we see that not only could language pass from her into the letters but also "ideas". Some have felt that this leaking of Madame Blavatsky's own ideas into the letters was much more extensive than she herself realized. An example that has been proposed to the writer and which may be examined by any interested student is the case of those teachings about the after-death condition of suicides and of the victims of sudden death which appear in the Mahatma Letters and in the writings of Madame Blavatsky herself but which do not seem to have found any subsequent confirmation in the experiences of any psychic inside or outside the Theosophical Society. Could it be that these teachings originated solely with Madame Blavatsky herself?

She has given a vivid description of how in her youth things which she believed herself to have been writing down at the dictation of a dead person proved to have come entirely from the unconscious resources of her own memory ([A.O. Hume] *Hints on Esoteric Theosophy*, I, 120). Could something similar have occurred through her connection with the production of the letters? Of some interest in this connection is Letter 134 in the *The Mahatma Letters to A.P. Sinnett*. She claimed that she wrote this down at the dictation of the Master M., but later in the letter she said that she was "translating" what M. said (the last phrase of M's. I translate ...). The tone and contents of this letter were such that when it was later published Colonel Olcott denied its authenticity and wrote in *The Theosophist* of April, 1895, that it "grossly violates that basis principle of neutrality and eclecticism on which the T.S. has built itself from the beginning. "

Sinnett seemed to believe that Madame Blavatsky's own mediumship greatly reduced the value of the letters and for this reason he held that they ought not to be published. He wrote in 1905, "The correspondence as a whole was terribly contaminated by what one can only treat as Madame Blavatsky's own mediumship in the matter ... The extracts I published in *The Occult World* were selected with great care and they, I feel sure, reflected the Master's thought with sufficient accuracy. But it must always be remembered that correspondence from a Master, precipitated through the mediumship of a chela cannot always be regarded as His ipsissima verba" C. Jinarajadasa, *The Story of the Mahatma Letters*, p.25)

The writers of the letters themselves directed that they were not to be printed. "My letters must not be published, " wrote K.H. And again, , "The letters ... were not written for publication or public comment upon them, but for private use, and neither M. nor I will ever give our consent to see them thus handled."

(The Mahatma Letters to A.P. Sinnett, letter 63). The contents of the letters were described as "crude and complicated materials" (Ibid).

Those who came after Madame Blavatsky in this present century said that little about the letters. Mrs. Besant would not have said anything that might have been construed as an adverse criticism of her teacher, H.P.B. She certainly deplored the publication of the letters to Sinnett. Bishop Leadbeater also said little about the letters, though he was the recipient of several, but he recorded in his little book *Messages from the Unseen* the view that they were written largely by chelas (quoting H.P. B to that effect) and so are not to be regarded as all direct communications from the Masters or as an exact rendering of Their teaching. Mr. Jinarajadasa, who wrote much about the letters, generally referred to them as if, in a formal way, they came from the Masters, but at the same time - as is clear from the source references in this article - he published most of the evidence on which one may form a clear impression of the obscure and composite authorship of the letters. Mr. A Trevor Barker, who published *The Mahatma Letters to A.P. Sinnett*, seems to have been alone, among those associated with the letters, in putting forward the letters as the actual words of the Masters and as a definitive authority on the topics with which they deal.

The view of the matter taken by the Masters themselves is perhaps beyond our capacity for speculation. But we may suppose that They may have felt that anybody who imagined that the occult can be satisfactorily expounded in words, or that the truth or wisdom of any saying depends on the handwriting in which it is communicated, had got an inadequate understanding of what was involved and did not have to be considered very seriously. Besides, quite apart from communication with the Masters Themselves, to put somebody in the outside world into touch even with a chela, - or indeed with Madame Blavatsky herself - was to confer no small benefit and stimulus.

The letters contain a vast range of very wise sayings and insights, making very worthwhile the anthologizing activities of such writers as Mr. Jinarajadasa and Miss Clara Codd. But they do not constitute an infallible authority.