

New Light on the First Marriage of HPB

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Blavatsky?

G.R.S. Mead, who was a HPB's private secretary during the last years of her life, gives an account of how strange, not to say vulgar, it seemed to him hearing somebody referring to her, after some years of her death, as simply "Blavatsky." He says:

"Blavatsky?" No one who knew her, knew her thus *tout court*. For her enemies even, while she lived, she was Madame Blavatsky, or at least, H.P. Blavatsky; while for her friends and lovers she was Helena Petrovna, or HPB, or the 'Old Lady.'" (*Concerning H.P.B.*, 1.)

In this article we will review how HPB quit being Helena Petrovna Von Hahn and became Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, that is, we will review Helena Petrovna and Nikifor Blavatsky's marriage story.

As for HPB's other family name, "Petrovna", it comes from the Russian habit to indicate in the name who is the father. This way, Petrovna means "Peter's daughter", once her father's name was Peter Alexeyevich von Hahn. We can see this same ending "vna", which means "daughter of" in her grandmother's and mother's names. Her grandmother Helena Pavlovna was Prince Paul Vassilyevich Dolgurukov's daughter, and her mother, Helena Andreyevna, was Andrey Mihailovich de Fadeyev's daughter. Similarly, for men, Russians use the ending "vich", i.e., her father, Peter Alexeyevich is Alexis Gustavovich Hahn von Rottenstern-Hahn's son.

The "Official" Story of HPB's Marriage to Nikifor V. Blavatsky

We have always heard the story, told by HPB herself to her first biographer Alfred P. Sinnett, and seconded by her aunt, that HPB decided to marry the old Blavatsky, who was three times her age, due to a provocation of her governess, Miss Jeffries (*Incidents*, 54). Miss Jeffries would have said to HPB not even the old Blavatsky would marry her, due to her difficult temper.

Let us remind that when Sinnett wrote his book HPB was still alive. She did not want him to reveal many details of her life's period previous to the foundation of ST, after which she became a widely known person. Many biographers have simply repeated this story of her marriage, with very few changes, even in recent biographies, as it is the case of Sylvia Cranston, in her book *The Extraordinary Life and Influence of Helena Blavatsky*.

In short, the story presented by Cranston is the following: At 16 years old, HPB would have met Prince Galitzin. At that time she was very busy with the mystic books in her great grandfather's library, and Galitzin was somebody with whom she could discuss this type of subject. After several months, prince Galitzin would have left Tiflis, and it is not known if HPB met him again later. In the winter of 1848-49, HPB, 17 years old then, surprised her family saying that she was going to get married and that the selected candidate was old Nikifor Blavatsky. Her aunt, Nadya, explained that this attitude was an answer to her governess' provocation, who would have said that she would not find a man who wished to marry her, because of her temper, not even the old Blavatsky, who she found so ugly and whom she had laughed at, for several times, calling him "a plumeless raven". Then, in three days, HPB was engaged to him. Later, she was sorry and wished to turn back. In despair, she escaped from home. She disappeared for some days. This escape would have caused some gossiping, and her relatives insisted upon the marriage. Surprisingly she did not resist longer and got married with Nikifor on July 7th 1849. (Cranston, 35-36) This is, in short, the "official" story of HPB's marriage.

The Story According to Madame Pissarev

In deeper researches, however, other studious biographers reveal a quite different story to her marriage. From them we also depict a headstrong and determined HPB, who had not married as a consequence of a thoughtless reaction to a provocation, but as a part of a plan to make possible her intense search for the Occult.

*The "old" Blavatsky, was not, in fact, so old - he was 40 years old on the occasion of the marriage, and everything indicates that HPB governess story is not true. There is a biography of HPB written for the Russian public, by Helena Fyodorovna Pissarev, named Yelena Petrovna Blavatskaya. In this biographical outline the version about HPB marriage is very different from the "official" one given by Sinnett and repeated by most of biographers. This story is tuned up to the details told by HPB herself in her letters to her friend, Prince Dondoukoff-Korsakoff, that we find in HPB *Speaks II*.*

Madame Pissarev says in her book that Madame Yermolov, who was the wife of Tiflis governor in the years from 1840 to 1850, told these facts to her. All the Yermolovs were intimate friends of HPB's family, especially of the Fadeyevs, while they lived in Tiflis. Let us give an outline of her narration.

Prince Galitzin and the Escape from Home

In spring or early summer of 1849, Helena disappeared from her home, probably following Prince Galitzin, a student of the Occult. There is very little information available about him. Prince Galitzin would be a Mason and was regarded as a magician. He usually went for frequent visits to HPB's grandparents' home, when they lived in Tiflis. Probably, Helena found in him someone who could understand and help her on the intense interior search in which she was engaged since she was 14 years old. For she had an interior spiritual life that nobody around her could understand, not even her relatives, as she states in her letters to Prince Dondoukoff-Korsakoff:

"I was in search of the unknown. The world - especially people addicted to unkind gossip - know only the outer and objective side of my youth, which they exaggerate in a truly Christian way. But nobody, not even my parents, have understood anything whatsoever of my intimate inner life, that which I would call in The Theosophist 'Soul-life'." (HPB Speaks, II, 61)

"...my great grandfather on my mother's side, Prince Paul Vasilyevitch Dolgorouki, had a strange library containing hundreds of books on alchemy, magic and other occult sciences. I had read them with the keenest interest before the age of 15. All the devilries of the Middle Ages have found refuge in my head and soon neither Paracelsus, Kunrath nor C. Agrippa would have had anything to teach me. All of them spoke of the 'marriage of the red Virgin with the Hierophant', and of that of the 'astral mineral with the sibyl', of the combination of the feminine and masculine principles in certain alchemical and magical operations." (HPB Speaks, II, 62)

Prince Galitzin used to have long talks with Helena. In certain occasion, soon after a visit of the prince to the Fadeyevs, Helena disappeared from home, what, no doubt, was the reason for a scandal in the province. Upon her return, her family hurried up to arrange her a marriage. According to Madam Yermolov, Helena's family thought she would not agree to the marriage, but, for everybody's surprise, she promptly complied with all the plans.

Basing her conclusions on Madam Yermolov's account, Madam Pissarev expresses her opinion that Helena accepted this arrangement to marry the State employee Nikifor V. Blavatsky, with the clear purpose of becoming free from her family reservations and supervision, so that she could go on with her plans of devoting herself to Occultism.

Helena Chose Nikifor

That is to say, she disappeared from home, it was a scandal, they arranged a marriage and HPB herself chose the fiancé. This is very different from her having escaped because she was sorry of assuming thoughtlessly a marriage commitment and, upon her return, having agreed to keep her word.

As I take it, the main difference is that in the last case there appears an HPB only willful, while in the first one what shines through is someone who was already firmly decided to go on in her search and who had made some plans for that. And, for that reason, chose Nikifor Blavatsky. She saw in him someone who could help her on this particular area.

The references that HPB does about her marriage in a letter to her friend, Prince Dondoukoff-Korsakoff, reinforce the idea that HPB expected Nikifor to help on her search. Previously to her marriage she used to share with him talks about the Occult and he understood her more than the others did, and that motivated her to choose him to marry. What a difference from a simple willfulness of a willful girl, as reported by Sinnett in the "official" story. She says in these letters to Prince Dondoukoff-Korsakoff:

"Do you know why I married old Blavatsky? Because, whereas all the young men laughed at 'magical' superstitions, he believed in them! He had so often talked to me about the sorcerers of Erivan, of the mysterious sciences of the Kourds and the Persians, that I took him in order to use him as a latch key to the latter. But - I never was his wife, I swear it upto the hour of my death. NEVER have I been 'WIFE Blavatsky', although I lived for a year under his roof." (HPB Speaks, II, 63)

HPB married on July 7th, 1849, with Nikifor Vassilyevich Blavatsky, and the couple departed on the same day to Darachichang (which means "Valley of Flowers"), a station in the mountains close to Erivan. The months of July and August might have been spent in this place, where they received the visit, in late August, from Helena's grandparents and aunts. After a quick visit, they all went to Erivan, visiting, on their way, the old Monastery of Echmiadzin.

The stories of Helena riding a horse around Mount Ararat and its surroundings probably belong to this time, when she was accompanied by a Kurdish chief, Safar Ali Bek Ibrahim Bek Oglu, who had been appointed her bodyguard and who in certain occasion saved her life. (Collected Writings I, 32). Colonel Olcott mentions this personage in his book People from the Other World.

I Was Ready to Sacrifice Myself

Nevertheless, the intensity of their search was very different one from another. While she was ready to great sacrifices in favor of her search, including a sacrifice of her public honor, he had not the same intention. These differences naturally did not please Nikifor Blavatsky and were a reason for the quarrels, almost battles that culminated on HPB's escape, on horseback, going back to Tiflis, three months after the marriage. HPB writes to Prince Dondoukoff-Korsakoff:

"Neither have I been anybody's wife as evil tongues have pretended - for I was for about ten months in search of the 'astral mineral' that had to have the 'red Virgin' pure and entire and I did not find that mineral. What I wanted and searched for was the subtle magnetism that one exchanges, the human 'salt', and father Blavatsky did not have it; and to find it and obtain it, I was ready to sacrifice myself, to dishonour myself! This did not suit the old man, hence quarrels, nearly battles, till I ran away from him and came to Tiflis from Erivan - on horseback - where I went into hiding with my grandmother." (HPB Speaks, II, 63)

Her family, then, decides to send her to her father. HPB, however, instead of meeting him, goes to Constantinople, starting a long period of almost 10 years travelling around the world. Only after this time she returns to Russia.

Helena Pissarev suggests that Prince Galitzin had introduced HPB to an occultist, who tested her psychic capabilities and gave her an address in Egypt, probably Paulus Metamon's, who was her first instructor. Besides, the prince would have been responsible for her travelling together with another Russian Lady, the Countess Kisselev.

Smoke Curtain about the Marriage

As we noticed previously about the development of the story that became the "official" version of her marriage, HPB herself was responsible for the smoke curtain that enveloped this part of her life. She makes herself known only for her friends, in personal letters. And if she acted that way, she did because, as she was a searcher and a server of the Occult, her life, to a certain degree, did not fit within the conventional limits of the common people.

This way, even in what concerns the duration of her life with Nikifor, she affirms different things in different moments. To Sinnett, who was writing her biography, she said that it had been three months. In January 1875, in an answer to NY Sunday Mercury's editors, she says that she had lived with Nikifor for only three weeks:

"If I married a Russian 'nobleman' I never resided with him anywhere; for three weeks after the sacrifice I left him for reasons plausible enough in my eyes..." (Collected Writings I, 55)

We find in her Scrapbook a clipping of the article published in the NY Sunday Mercury, in January 18th, 1875, which caused an answer from her; where we took the above quotation. In the clipping, some parts were marked by HPB, who added some comments indicated by asterisks, as follows:

"Helena P. Blavatsky, who is about forty years [of] age (*), at the age of seventeen married a Russian nobleman then in his seventy-third year. For many years (**) they resided together at Odessa, and finally a legal separation (***) was effected. The husband died recently in his ninety-seventh year.

(*) a fib; (**) a lie - was with him but for three weeks;

(***) legal, because he died." (Collected Writings I, 54).

It is important to observe that right after, on April 3rd, 1875, HPB married Michael Betanelly. Considering that she never divorced legally from Nikifor, if she did not say that he was dead, she would be bigamous. This marriage also lasted only a few months. In July 1875, HPB was already separated, living in New York. The divorce was legalized almost three years later, on 25 May 1878, by request of Betanelly, who gave, as a justification, HPB's home abandonment. William Q. Judge acted in the case as HPB's lawyer.

HPB and Nikifor Reunion

In a previous quotation, we saw that HPB confessed to her friend, Prince Dondoukoff-Korsakoff that she lived with Nikifor "for a year under his roof". However, her sister's (Vera) accountings, which are very accurate in what concerns dates, indicate that her time with Nikifor right after the marriage, was indeed three months, what allows us to discern the fact that HPB turned to live with Nikifor some time later, and this explains her having lived "for a year under his roof".

From some sources we could easily get the impression that the marriage with Nikifor Blavatsky had been annulled, or at least that some steps towards this action had been taken. However, besides the letter to Prince Dondoukoff-Korsakoff, of March 1882, mentioned above, where she affirms having lived "for a year under his roof", in a later letter, in June 1884, she reaffirms clearly that after returning to Tiflis, she reconciled with Nikifor:

"It was in 1861 that I returned to Tiflis and that Blavatsky & I were reconciled and I lived for one year in the same house as he; but I lacked the patience to live with such a fool and I again went away." (HPB Speaks, II, 152)

In this letter she joins an official request to Dondoukoff, who at that time was Commander-in-Chief in the Caucasus. In the request she asked him to release an official testimony stating that there wasn't any negative record about her in Caucasus. In the request she says:

"Then the second time I came to Tiflis to see my relative, the Privy Councillor André Mihailovich Fadeyev, in 1860, and stayed with him about a year with my husband Blavatsky (who was then a Councillor of State). The address was Golovinsky Avenue, in the house of Mr. Dobrzhansky." (HPB Speaks, II, 156)

There is a passport issued to HPB on August 23rd, 1862, in Tiflis, and its original is in the Point Loma's Archives. In this document it is said that it was issued "in pursuance of a petition presented by her husband to the effect that she, Mme. Blavatsky, accompanied by their infant ward Yury, proceeds to the provinces of Tauris, Cherson and Pskoff for the term of one year." (Collected Writings I, xlvii)

This might have been the end of the period of "about a year" living again with Nikifor. And it demonstrates the co-operation of Nikifor to HPB. This way, it becomes clear that, since the beginning, there was some kind of collaboration between both of them. Therefore, their relationship had not been just a teenager wilfulness of marrying an "old man", or a teenager who abandoned him three months later, and they never more got together, as according to the "official" story.

Perhaps Helena Petrovna never quit being Helena Petrovna **Blavatsky** in gratitude to that man who helped her in the beginning of her journey.

Small Biography of Nikifor V. Blavatsky

Nikifor Vassilyevich Blavatsky was born in 1809 and belonged to the landed gentry from Province of Poltava, in the Ukraine. At the end of 1823, he became a clerk in the Office to the Civil Governor of Poltava. In 1829, he was transferred to Georgia, in Caucasus, performing the same function. In 1830, he served for some months on the Staff

of the Commander in Chief, Field Marshal Count Paskevich-Yerivansky, and until 1835, he was Assistant Journalist in that governmental office. He was temporarily attached to the Office of the Commissary of the Active Army and, in 1839, he was transferred to the Office of the Civil Government of Transcaucasia. In 1840 he became Inspector of the Police in Shemaha. (H.P. Blavatsky, *Tibet and Tulku*, 12)

He married Helena Petrovna Von Hahn on July 7th, 1849, and was abandoned by her about three months later. On November 27th, 1849, he was appointed Vice-Governor of the newly created Province of Erivan, and he governed it during the absence of the Military Governor. In 1857, he was temporarily indicated to an international committee for the investigation of controversial matters related to the frontiers.

In the summer of 1860, he was licensed for two months and went to Berlin for health treatment. In the following summer the same happened. He resigned from the position of Vice-Governor on November 19th, 1860, and was assigned to the Central Administration Office of the Viceroy. Between 1861 and 1862, he and HPB turned to live together, in Tiflis. His resignation from all positions was accepted in December of 1864. At that time he owned a small property in the Province of Poltava. In a contemporary document he stated that he was still married. (H.P. Blavatsky, *Tibet and Tulku*, 12)

During his entire carrier, Nikifor V. Blavatsky served in civil functions, and his hierarchical level was never superior to Civil Counsellor, which was awarded to him on December 9th, 1856. All efforts to determine N.V. Blavatsky's year of death did not work out. It is known, however, from a letter written by Nadya A. de Fadeyev to HPB and dated from October 1877, that he was alive, living in Poltava. (Collected Writings, I, xxxv)

Helena P. Blavatsky herself, however, did not confirm this latest information. As we saw above, she wrote that their separation was "legal because he died"!

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