

A TRIBUTE TO DR. BESANT

*The Report of a Lecture delivered at Adyar
Hall, Sydney, on October 2nd, 1927,
by the Rt. Rev. C. W. Leadbeater*



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Last time I had the privilege of speaking from this platform my subject was one of the greatest women of last century, or perhaps of all time—Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, the Founder of the Theosophical Society, a Teacher sent to enlighten our Western world by bringing to it the wisdom of the East. To-night I have again to speak about a great woman—a very great woman—but this time happily one who is still among us, Dr. Annie Besant, the chief pupil of Madame Blavatsky, and the present President of the Theosophical Society, and leader of several other movements. We are celebrating her eightieth birthday, and I have the honour of being chosen to address you about her because I have known her longer and more closely than you have. That is no mere figure of speech, I assure you; I do indeed feel it to be a very great honour to speak of her, though I know full well that no words that I can use will ever do justice to my subject.

This is a very great day for us—this eightieth birthday of our President. I know that a mighty host of her followers all over the world will join in this celebration, for it is, to us who are Theosophists, all that the festival of his patron saint is to the most ardent Churchman—all that and much more; for a man's relation to his patron saint, though it may sometimes be very real and very valuable, is often but vague and nominal; whereas in our case we have the strongest ties of love and gratitude to one whom we have seen and know well, a great Teacher who has done for many of us the greatest of all services, for she has

lifted our lives from darkness to light, she has made them vivid, full of meaning and power—made them emphatically worth living in the highest sense of the word.

That you may see that I know that whereof I speak, let me first touch a personal note, and tell you a little of what your President is to me, her humble representative in certain capacities in this part of the world. She has just completed her eightieth year; for nearly half of those years—for 37 of them—I have had the privilege of very intimate association with her, of working with her as a comrade and a close personal friend. There is a cynical proverb to the effect that no man is a hero to his *valet de chambre*—that is to say, to those who are in daily contact with him; but in the case of our great President absolutely the contrary of that is true; the closer the association that we have with her the deeper is our reverence and our love. For she is that rare phenomenon, a character wholly consistent, a saint who is always saintly, who never disappoints her devotees by falling below her highest level—a person of dauntless courage and immense determination, inflexibly carrying through to the end whatsoever she undertakes, yet ever gentle, courteous, and kindly to all. Wise with that eternal wisdom which she has learned at the feet of the Masters of Wisdom, she yet fails never to show forth the qualities of power and love which complete the triangle of the divine manifesting in man.

She is unquestionably the greatest woman in the world — the greatest, too, in many different directions,

More and more as the years roll on we learn to appreciate her many-sidedness, to see in how many different ways she towers above average humanity. We cannot but admire her amazing versatility, her extraordinarily complete grasp of a vast number of subjects, her power of dealing instantaneously yet effectively with any and every emergency. I remember a most remarkable instance of that versatility. She is a person of very wide reading on philosophical, religious, and scientific subjects, but I am not aware that she had ever turned her attention to unravelling the tangles of the law. Yet when an action was brought against her in India to try to annul the papers of adoption which had been given to her by the father of her ward, Mr. Krishnamurti, she declined to engage counsel in the ordinary way, but instead sent for a cab-load of law-books from the library in Madras, devoted herself for a fortnight to an exhaustive study of the Indian law on that subject, and then went into Court and conducted her own case with a brilliancy and vigour which astounded all those who were concerned in the affair. I myself attended as a witness, and can bear testimony to the eagerness with which all the lawyers not at the moment otherwise engaged crowded the court to listen to her speeches.

Her whole life shows evidence of this amazing thoroughness. When she took up Theosophy she very quickly mastered its intricacies and became its foremost living exponent; yet when she was instructed by her Master to work for the freedom of India she at once turned from Indian philosophy to Indian politics, and immediately became a powerful factor in that entirely new sphere of action.

She is the most strenuous worker that I have ever seen. From very early in the morning, long before sunrise, to very late at night, she toils incessantly, never wasting a moment. The instant that one piece of work is

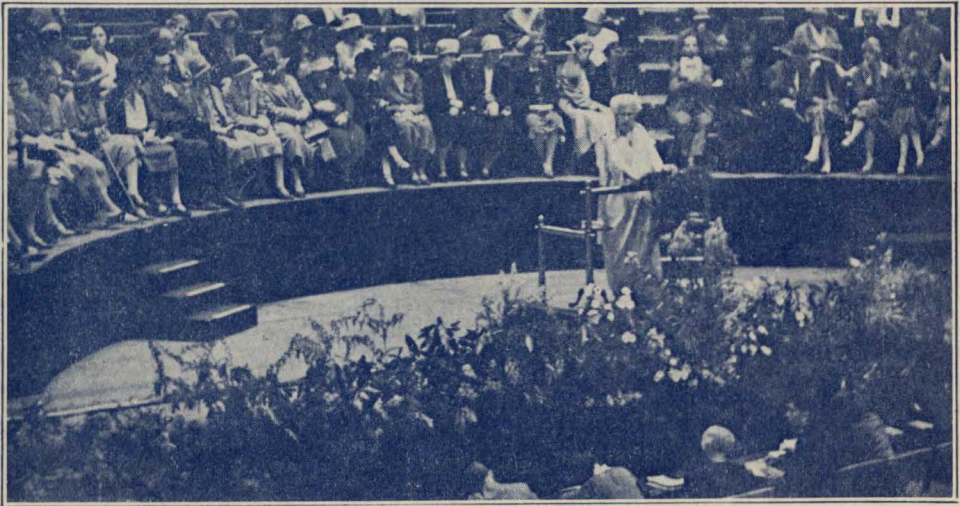
finished she lays it aside and turns promptly to the next, with no thought of rest or relief. Yet all her work is done with extreme care and accuracy. She is the most extraordinary mixture of tremendous energy, flaming enthusiasm and steady persistence; and now at the age of 80 all these qualities are just as strong as ever. The Psalmist somewhat gloomily remarks: "The days of our age are three-score years and ten; and though men be so strong that they come to four-score years, yet is their strength then but labour and sorrow." The Psalmist, however, had not the privilege of the acquaintance of Dr. Annie Besant, or he might have seen fit to modify his statement.

Our President has attained the four-score years, and in the course of her long and eventful life she has certainly laboured harder and with infinitely greater result than most people; certainly also in the course of that life she has had more than her share of sorrow and of persecution; yet her attitude now is one of serene cheerfulness and indomitable hopefulness. Her intellect is colossal, and the breadth of her mental vision seems all-comprehensive. At the time of those legal proceedings in India I have often heard her discussing points of law with the late Sir Subramania Iyer, and it was most interesting to watch the play of intelligence between those two great minds, to see how instantly each grasped the points made by the other, leaving the other lawyers present far behind them.

She is by far the greatest orator of our time, at least in English-speaking countries. Here again I know whereof I speak, because I have in my time heard a large number of celebrated speakers, including Mr. Gladstone and others in Parliament, and all the most famous preachers of various denominations. She undoubtedly surpasses them all in fire and effectiveness, and her Irish poetical temperament gives her a wonderful readiness and grace-

fulness in speech. She possesses a faculty along those lines which I, at any rate, cannot in the least understand; she tells me that while in her public lectures she is speaking one sentence, she sees the next sentence in the air before her—usually in three alternative forms, from which, while still speaking, she deliberately selects that which she thinks best suited to the audience. I have never myself had any experience in the slightest degree like that, and I cannot comprehend

pamphlets she has written, but some time ago the number was well over three hundred, and that does not include twenty-five works written in collaboration with others, twenty-one books and twelve periodicals edited by her, and six translations. As to articles, their name is legion. They are by no means all on Theosophical subjects, for her industry was equally great when she fought in the ranks of Free-thought. I know of no other teacher in the physical world who can be com-



Dr. Besant speaking in the Queen's Hall, London, June 24th, 1928.

how it is done, but at least I can testify to the magnificent result achieved. She is a veritable artist in words, and knows so exactly how to apply them. She delivers enormous numbers of lectures, and as her life is so full of the most pressing business she has no time to revise them; yet so splendidly are they put together, and so beautifully are they expressed, that the stenographic report of them is usually printed without the slightest alteration.

Again, she is one of the most prolific of writers. Most of her books and articles are on the deepest and most difficult of subjects, yet she produces them with amazing rapidity. I do not know exactly how many books and

pared to her; she is revered and loved by hundreds of thousands who have been led by her lectures and her books to come out from the wilderness of doubt, and to build their spiritual lives on a sure and certain foundation. During the 20 years of her Presidency the Theosophical Society has more than trebled its membership, and the number of Charters issued has risen from 900 to 2500. Her services to the Liberal Catholic Church, to the Comasonic Order, and to the cause of the newer, saner, and more scientific education are well-known to all who have any acquaintance with such matters.

All her life she has battled for freedom, for herself in earlier days, and

then for others. I do not know how many of you have read her wonderful *Autobiography*. If there be any who have not yet perused it, I should earnestly recommend them to do so without delay. It is a very wonderful record of the struggle of a soul from darkness to light, from slavery to freedom—a report of terrible suffering and persecution bravely endured, and of the royal reward which came as the end of it all. Born in orthodox surroundings, she presently found herself compelled to struggle for freedom from the fetters which they imposed upon her. The narrowness and illiberality of the presentation of Christianity which she encountered drove her eventually to adopt the atheistic position, and for some years she spoke and wrote with characteristic vigour against the fundamental delusions of orthodoxy. Her eloquence was scathing, but never vulgar. She never descended to the low levels of personal abuse by which many Free-thinking writers spoiled the effect of perfectly legitimate arguments, and disgusted all nice-minded people. Atheist herself, she yet never asserted: "There is no God," but simply said: "I see no certain evidence of His existence, and therefore I cannot believe in Him."

The condition of the poor at that period, the hours and the circumstances of their work, and the utterly scandalous slavery of little children aroused her burning indignation, and she was constantly engaged in various movements which were endeavouring to ameliorate those conditions. Just as she sought to free men's minds from the tyranny of a heartless creed, so did she also strive to obtain for them freedom and humane treatment on the physical plane.

It was in that earlier and stormier part of her career that I first saw her. I am not quite sure of the exact date, but I think it must have been about 1877, that, seeing an advertisement of a distinctly anti-Christian lecture, and being at that time an enthusiastic

young clergyman of the Church of England, I went to the Hall of Science in Old Street, turning out of the City Road, to hear what this wonderful lady orator had to say. I confess that I was startled by her vehemence, and I felt that she was stating certain objections to the faith rather more strongly than need be; yet even then I was forced to admit that there was much reason in what she said, and that many of her arguments were unanswerable. There was an unfortunate young man present who represented the Christian Evidence Society, and made feeble endeavours to argue with her, but in a very short passage of arms she reduced that poor fellow to stuttering imbecility, so that one could not help being rather sorry for him, even while recognizing that he had not a leg to stand upon. I heard her two or three times at the same place when I happened to be in town, and I may say that it was in consequence of these lectures of hers that I came into touch with the works of Colonel Ingersoll and other liberal writers, so it was really she who prepared my mind for the ready response to the Theosophical truths which were to come to me some five years later.

We have all heard how Theosophy was brought to her notice by the fact that Mr. W. T. Stead invited her to review for his magazine *Madame Blavatsky's Secret Doctrine*—how she at once recognized the mighty truths that were hidden in that most wonderful of books, and promptly tried to come into touch with its author in order to learn more of the system. Madame Blavatsky met her with characteristic frankness, answered all her questions, and made a tremendous impression upon her, but would not allow her to join the Theosophical Society until she had first read the *Psychical Research Report* on the Coulomb case, at that time the most recent of the many amazingly unscrupulous attempts which, all through its history, have consistently been made (and are still

being made to-day) by the enemies of Theosophy to discredit its teaching by fabricating the most incredibly wicked slanders against those who try to spread abroad its truths in the world. Our President went home and read that Report, and at once decided to throw in her lot with Madame Blavatsky, whose faithful disciple she remained until the hour of her death; and, indeed, she remains so still.

When she joined the Society in 1889 I had already been working for Theosophy for five years in India and Ceylon, and I did not meet her as a Theosophist until I returned to England at the end of that year. In fact, my first encounter with her was in Mr. Sinnett's drawing-room in Ladbrooke Gardens at a meeting of the London Lodge, to which somewhere about that period I became Secretary. From that time onward I met our Leader frequently at such meetings, and from the first I felt the strongest possible attraction to her—due, no doubt, to the fact that we had met in many previous lives, and had tried at various times and in various ways to serve our Masters together. The Theosophical Headquarters was soon moved to our President's house at 19 Avenue Road, St. John's Wood; but it was not until 1895 that at her invitation I went and took up my abode in that house, remaining there with her until it was sold to the adherents of Mrs. Tingley at the end of the century. From then until now I have been in constant communication with our beloved Leader, and she has ever shown herself the kindest and most gracious of friends and the most loyal of comrades.

Her occult progress was amazingly rapid, for from the very first she did work for the Theosophical Society which no one else could have done. As practically her first introduction to it was through reviewing the *Secret Doctrine*, she made the study of that her speciality, and she interpreted it, systematized it, solved many of its

problems, and reconciled its apparent contradictions as none but she could do. Well may we who are members of her Society celebrate her birthday and thank God for it, for the world would have been infinitely poorer if she had remained out of incarnation. We owe our Theosophy to our great Founder, Madame Blavatsky, but it is Dr. Besant who has arranged it, interpreted it, and made it comprehensible to us. At intervals since then, when the exigencies of other duties have allowed it, I have had the very great honour and privilege of working with her along various lines of occult investigation.

Our labours have been directed not so much towards the discovery of anything new as to the verification and the corroboration, the expansion and explanation of what had already been told to us; so that we are now able to say with utter certainty that we know from our own personal experience that the main Theosophical teachings are absolutely true. Having worked so much with her in this way, I can bear testimony that our dear President is a most careful and painstaking investigator, and that she has at the same time an unerring intuition and a splendid sweep of vision which enable her to arrive at accurate conclusions while I am still plodding far behind and building my way up step by step from below to a result upon which she had already descended with an eagle-like swoop.

Her magnificent enthusiasm in the cause of those who are oppressed, and her frank outspokenness in defence of what she knows to be the truth have, not unnaturally made her a certain number of enemies. She has again and again been bitterly assailed, and the foulest falsehoods have been told about her by those to whom her strength and greatness were an offence. We know that in other lives as Hypatia and Giordano Bruno she faced martyrdom in order that she might proclaim the truth, and the same fate

has followed her in this incarnation, though the martyrdom has stopped short of actual bloodshed, and employed, instead, the ignoble weapons of slander and persecution.

In no part of her work has this been more conspicuous than in regard to her brave and long-continued attempt to obtain Dominion status for India. For many years she has energized in various directions for the helping and betterment of that Motherland of so many of our Masters, but through all that time she has never receded an inch from what she feels to be the right position, and has steadfastly maintained the necessity for the future of the world that India should remain an integral part of the British Empire, though attaining the fullest system of self-government possible under the circumstances. Many Indians have misunderstood her position in this matter, and have even abandoned her wise and statesmanlike leadership to follow others who are less far-seeing. Nevertheless, she has gone on her way undisturbed, and I think it will not be long now before we shall see her action justified and her purpose achieved.

Another and a very wonderful department of her work has been to train and to take care of the vehicle of the World-Teacher. Many years ago now it was confided to her care, and she has been unremitting in her attention to that duty. Now, she is reaping the reward of that care, and is watching with joy the unfoldment of the bud which she has nurtured, the blossoming of the flower whose fragrance shall fill the worlds.

And we, members of her Society, who owe her so much more than others do, what can we do to mark this auspicious occasion, to show to some small extent the overflowing gratitude which we all feel? There is little that we can give to one so much greater than ourselves, but if we pour out at her feet our loving homage and devotion we shall thereby generate force which she can use for the helping of the world she loves so well. Above all, let us show our devotion to her by doing our best to pass on to others all the many benefits which we have received from her; let us do all we can to support the movements which at the instance of her Master she has initiated. Her one object in all that she does is to serve her fellowmen; if we can, to some small extent, co-operate with her in that never-ending labour. I think that that will be the most acceptable of all possible expressions of our gratitude.

Since the above lecture was delivered, our great Leader has once again been chosen by the Hierarchy as the herald of a movement of paramount importance to the world. Through her was given forth the beautiful and touching Call of the World-Mother which has made so vivid an appeal to every woman who has had the privilege of hearing or reading it. In this line of work also we shall gladly and lovingly support her; we shall range ourselves under her banner, and follow her whithersoever she leads us, knowing that she is ever the servant and the representative of the holy Masters of Love and of Wisdom.