

THE IDOL WITH FEET OF CLAY: G.R.S. MEAD IN THE THEOSOPHICAL SOCIETY

By: Robert A. Gilbert

After taking an honours degree in Classics at St. John's College, Cambridge, in 1884, G.R.S. Mead went on to read philosophy - and specifically oriental philosophy - at Oxford, inspired by reading A.P. Sinnett's ESOTERIC BUDDHISM and by meeting the prominent theosophists Bertram Keightley and Mohini Chatterji. Then in 1887 he met Madame Blavatsky, was duly captivated and decided to devote his whole life to the theosophical cause.

At first he worked at 17 Lansdowne Road (the headquarters of the Theosophical Society in London) only during his vacations and "it was not until the beginning of August, 1889, that [he] came to work permanently with H.P.B." His task was ostensibly to assist her in editing LUCIFER, but this was no easy task. "[I] soon had my hands full," he noted, "with transmission of directions, alterations and counter-directions to Bertram Keightley, who was then Sub-editor, for in those days H.P.B. would not let one word go into LUCIFER until she had seen and reread it, and she added to and cut up proofs until the last moment." And there was always a rush, "for she generally wrote her leader the last thing and, having been used to it, considered the printers, if anybody, were to blame if it did not appear in time." [1]

Mead also acted as H.P.B.'s private secretary and, although he was young and unknown, she trusted him absolutely. "She handed over to me the charge of all her keys, of her mss, her writing desk and the nests of drawers in which she kept her most private papers. She further, "absolutely refused to be bothered with her letters, and made me take over her voluminous correspondence and that too without opening it first herself. She not only metaphorically, but sometimes actually, flung the offending missives at my head! I accordingly had not only to read them but to answer them as best I could; for ... she would wax most wrathful and drive me out, whenever I pestered her to answer the most pressing correspondence or even to give me some idea of what to reply in her name." [2]

He had contributed to LUCIFER from the first volume onwards, although all his work was anonymous until his first signed piece - "The Vivisectors. A story of Black Magic, founded on fact" - appeared in December 1889 (Vol. 5, No. 28), and it was in writing that he found his metier. His ability as an author and his gifts as a scholar were both important to the Theosophical Society which, whatever its public stance, was eager to gain academic credibility. None of its Hindu scholars was accepted as such in the west and however successful its popular writers (A.P. Sinnett; Mabel Collins; and later, Annie Besant) might be, they had no academic pretensions. Mead was the only real scholar whom the Society

possessed.

Max Muller, the editor of the Sacred Books of the East series, once told Mead that he was "surprised that I should waste, as he thought, what he was good enough to call my abilities on 'Theosophy', when the whole field of Oriental Studies lay before me, in which he was kind enough to think I could do useful work." [3] And Col. Olcott, the Founder-President of the T.S. enthused over Mead's ability as a scholar, specifically over his important and original research in the fields of Gnosticism and the Hermetic texts: "However prejudiced orthodox Christians may be against the name Theosophy, nothing is more certain than that, long after his death, the name of Mr. Mead will be cited as one of the most trustworthy authorities with regard to the Christian origins." [4] This prophecy, as it happened, proved to be quite wrong - not because of Mead's scholarship but precisely because of academic prejudice against the T.S.

Mead himself sought to combine objective scholarship with a sympathetic approach to spiritual reality and a genuine tolerance of dissenting beliefs. This admirable combination is visible in virtually all of his work, whether written during his theosophical days or during the years that followed. The exceptions are the printed letters and other comments relating to the crises that were to bedevil the T.S. in general and Mead in particular, during his twenty-five years of membership.

Throughout his time as a theosophist Mead worked tirelessly for the benefit of the Society. In July 1890 Madame Blavatsky had accepted "the duty of exercising the Presidential authority for the whole of Europe" and had, to use Olcott's words, "irregularly formed" the "tentative European Section" [5] The new Section established its headquarters at 19 Avenue Road, Regent's Park, where it came to formal birth a year later, at the Society's first European Convention. Mead, already appointed as the Section's General Secretary in recognition of his linguistic talents, was officially confirmed in his post and because the old British and European Sections were now officially amalgamated he also took up the task of editing THE VAHAN, the society's monthly "Vehicle for the interchange of Theosophical Opinions and News."

He was now one of the Society's foremost members. He had officiated at H.P.B.'s funeral in May 1891 (she had died on May 7th, in the arms of Laura Cooper who would later become Mead's wife), impressing Theosophists and non-theosophists alike. W.S. Ross (Saladin, of The Agnostic Journal) reported that Mead - "a young gentleman of refined features and much spirituelle of expression" - "read an impressive address impressively" in a "silvery voice [that] rose and fell in melancholy cadence." [6] The Theosophists, however, paid too little attention to Mead's words:

"Much as we love and reverence our leader, our devotion to the work must not rest on the transient basis of affection for a personality, but on the solid foundation of a conviction that in Theosophy itself, and in it alone, are to be found those eternal spiritual principles of right thought, right speech and right action which are essential to the progress and harmony of mankind."

It was to be the cult of personality that led to the most damaging feuds within the society and that ultimately drove Mead from it.

In the immediate aftermath of H.P.B.'s death, however, all went smoothly. Mead's contributions to LUCIFER increased in number; THE VAHAN flourished; he edited H.P.B.'s Theosophical Glossary (1892); published his first book, Simon Magus (1892); and for two years edited the European Section's 'Oriental Papers' His writing was carried on in tandem with his administrative work, a full lecture programme and his acting as an unofficial translator for European delegates to Conventions in England. Inevitably his health suffered, and in May 1894 he suffered "an attack of influenza ... followed by complete prostration" [8] which lasted for three months. On his return to health he was faced with a severe metaphorical headache.

William Quan Judge had been one of the original founders of the Theosophical Society at New York in 1875 and as such he commanded a reverential following, especially in America. But unlike Olcott he had not been favoured with Mahatmic revelations, and after H.P.B.'s death he viewed the closeness between Olcott and Annie Besant, the society's new rising star, with alarm. He determined that if the Mahatmas would write neither to him (as they had done for Sinnett) nor for him (as with Olcott), then he would write on their behalf.

Judge's fake Mahatma letters (not that ANY of them are of anything other than purely human origin) were "precipitated" among Annie Besant's papers during Judge's visit to London in 1891. Accepting them as genuine Mrs. Besant followed their advice and permitted Judge to become, with herself, joint Outer Head of the Eastern Section of the T.S. (a secret inner group of favoured theosophists who studied advanced occultism in a highly disciplined manner) Eventually Judge's dubious behaviour - he had sent Mahatma letters to other theosophists also and claimed to be receiving private revelations and instructions from them which were hostile to Olcott - led to his being summoned to London to face a Judicial Committee of fellow theosophists.

The committee, which included Mead, met in July 1894 but although Judge was clearly at fault he evaded official condemnation through a technicality: he argued that if he was guilty of any offence it was as an individual and not as an officer of the society. His extremely devious defence was accepted, albeit reluctantly,

conciliatory statements were made on both sides and there the matter might have rested, but the charges of fraud against Judge were repeated and made public in a series of satirical articles about the T.S. published in the Westminster Gazette. The ensuing uproar over these attacks upon the Society ensured that the Judge affair would remain in the public eye and there were increasing signs that the squabble between the pro- and anti-Judge factions [in Europe; most of the American T.S. members were already solidly behind Judge] would eventually escalate into civil war. In due course it did, and Mead played a central role in the battles that raged.

Much of the fighting was by way of printed circulars and other published letters. The first of these, issued in November 1894 by Laura Cooper and Herbert Burrows, urged T.S. members to press the Executive Committee of the European Section to call upon Judge to reply to the charges of fraud made in The Westminster Gazette. The second, circulated by Archibald Keightley, was more vituperative; it attacked Burrows and Miss Cooper as being biased against Judge, argued that he couldn't be 'tried' when the Judicial Committee had declined to rule on the matter and suggested that the articles be ignored and that the whole issue be dropped.

In his role as General Secretary Mead tried to remain impartial but made clear where his sympathies lay in his own letter to the Committee:

"We cannot disguise from ourselves that we have here a natural protest against stifling the whole matter publicly on technical grounds. The memorialists do not demand a trial they simply ask whether or not the Lodges wish to invite Mr. Judge in the interests of the Society to make some reply or state why he cannot. If the Lodges do not wish it, the matter can then drop. If the Lodges wish it, then their voice is paramount and the officials of the Section must give ear to it."

He added that "My own view is that we owe a duty to our members, whatever their opinions may be, and that when their voice is so strong we should carry out their wishes, at the same time, of course, pointing out the technical difficulties that follow." [9] The first decision of the Committee was to publish its 'full correspondence ... for the information of all members' This it did, in the pages of THE VAHAN and LUCIFER, to the disadvantage of Judge as letters in his favour tended to be more hysterical and to contain personal attacks from which the anti-Judge faction largely abstained. Those in favour of Judge then stooped to highly dubious actions. Henry Edge, who was Assistant Secretary of the European Section, surreptitiously copied the entire register of names and addresses of European Section members (in order, as he said, that he "should secure the means of letting the Section know what Mr. Judge's friends have to say") and although he eventually returned the copied lists Mead dismissed him from his post. Then the pro-Judge printer of THE VAHAN, James Pryse, who ran the

H.P.B. Press at Henry Street, Regent's Park, refused to print the January issue unless all the names of those supporting a pro-Judge circular from Dublin were included. There then followed what Mead called 'a curious coincidence':

"I received a code cablegram from Mrs. Besant and Mr. Bertram Keightley, the proprietors of the Publishing Office and Press, for their manager, Mr. A.J. Faulding, with directions to immediately close the Press. This was a curious coincidence, for certainly no one had wired out to India either the refusal of Mr. Pryse to publish THE VAHAN or any word in connection with the matter. The Press, which is an entirely private undertaking, was closed for quite other reasons." [10] It was, however, a very convenient coincidence, and although Mead dutifully printed all the increasingly ill-tempered (but, alas, also rather boring) correspondence between himself, Edge, Pryse and others, the two camps were now irremediably divided. Among his comments Mead made the tart and somewhat smug remark that "I can print THE VAHAN where I like, and get anyone I choose to assist me in the task of editing" [11] Such is not the stuff of reconciliation, and the anti-Judge faction, who now held the field in England, called upon all members of the European Section to support a resolution calling upon Judge to resign as Vice-President of the T.S. [In this capacity the alleged fraud affected members of the Section; they had no concern with his doings as general Secretary of the American Section] The arguments pro- and con-continued, but when the result of the vote was announced (on April 1 !) there was a substantial majority in favour of the anti-Judge resolution [the figures were 578 in favour of the Resolution, and 117 against]

The members were undoubtedly influenced by the opinions of Mead. On February 1st, 1895 he issued a private circular, 'A Letter to the European Section', that was sent out with THE VAHAN and later printed in LUCIFER (Vol. 15, No. 90, Feb. 15, 1895, pp 500 - 505) In the course of the letter Judge was utterly damned. After stating that he had "considered it my duty to keep silence on the present condition of affairs in the Theosophical Society" so that "all members might state their views independently and free from influence as far as I was concerned," Mead felt that these views having been expressed he would no longer hold back his personal opinion, but "state it frankly." (p 1) He set out the history of the affair in an impartial manner but went on to give his reasons for now mistrusting Judge. He especially condemned Judge for issuing "a private attack upon Mrs. Besant of a most disgraceful nature", which "decided me as to the great danger with which the Society was threatened at Mr. Judge's hands. It proved conclusively the main burden of the charges against him, that he had used the names of the Masters for his own purposes and advancement in the Society." (p3). Mrs. Besant, he said, deserved the praise that was wrongly accorded to Judge. "I now publicly state," he added, "that but for her the Headquarters of the European Section of the Theosophical Society would many a time have ceased to exist." There was also a danger to the Society if Judge remained in office: "If Mr. Judge's party should by any chance get the upper hand

in the Society, then we shall be within measurable distance of a spiritual papacy and an official tyranny." (p4)

The letter also emphasises the generous treatment of Judge up to that time and compares his behaviour unfavourably with all the other prominent Theosophists involved in the case. What he did not print was the gist of his private conversation with Judge in the previous July. As a consequence he was attacked for bias by the Judge faction, to which he retorted: "Abuse and misrepresentation are easy to forgive, and if Mr. Judge and others prefer to think that I am animated by a personal enmity instead of by a sense of duty and a love for truth and honour, it can really make no difference except to themselves." [12] His final comments on the Judge affair were made in 1927 when he again set out his version of the affair, this time giving more private and personal details:

"Judge was not a man whose opinion on literary subjects I could anyhow dream of taking, while his views on 'occultism' as revealed to me personally in the matter of the 'case' I had incontinently and decisively to reject. I would believe no word against him till he came over to London to meet the very grave charges brought against him and I could question him face to face. This I did in a two hours' painful interview. His private defence to me as, that his forging of the numerous 'Mahatmic' messages on letters written by himself, after H.P.B.'s decease, to devoted and prominent members of the Society, in the familiar red and blue chalk scripts, with the occasional impression of the 'M' seal, which contained the flaw in the copy of it which Olcott had had made in Lahore, was permissible, in order to 'economise power', provided that the 'messages' had first been psychically received. He also more than hinted that it was entirely in keeping with precedent, and that this was his authority for what he had done." [13]

Given Mead's high opinion of Madame Blavatsky - whom he had stated "was assuredly not a cheat and a trickster, certainly not while I knew her; and in every probability was not in the past when I did not know her" [14] - this would have been the last straw in the weight of opinion against Judge. But it mattered little, for in May 1895 Judge broke away from the parent T.S. taking most of the American membership with him, although his triumph in that respect was destined to be short-lived, for on 22 March 1896 he died at New York, after, in Olcott's words, "three hundred and twenty-nine days as the Secession leader" during which he had "barter[ed] all he had gained in Theosophy for such a mess of pottage!" [15]

After the ending of the Judge affair Mead looked forward to more peaceful times. His career as a writer was blossoming; in 1895 and 1896 the TPS published *The World Mystery*; *Plotinus*; *Orpheus*; and his first major work, *Pistis Sophia*. In 1897 he determined to concentrate on his literary work and he resigned as General

Secretary of the European Section (although he still maintained his lecture programme - traveling to Sweden and Holland as well as around Britain) He had no desire for 'place' in the society and had stated clearly at the time of the Judge affair that "I have never, even in thought, assumed the role of a leader in the Theosophical Society; I have never looked upon the position of General Secretary in any other light than that of a field for work and service." [16]

Giving up this post entailed giving up the editorship of THE VAHAN, but in its place he took up LUCIFER, which he already co-edited with Annie Besant, and instantly changed its tone by giving it a new name: The Theosophical Review. Mead had already "in varying degrees borne editorial responsibility for upwards of eight years"; now he felt able to dispense with the unhappy title, so prone to misinterpretation. "It is," he said, "unwise any longer to put a stumbling block in the way of the great majority, especially when we are convinced that no question of principle is involved. We therefore make this most desirable change." [17]

Nor was it the only change. In the same year the long awaited third volume of The Secret Doctrine, H.P.B.'s largest and most ambitious work, appeared - to the delight of most theosophists and the disapproval of Blavatsky fundamentalists. Mead and Annie Besant had issued the revised Third Edition of The Secret Doctrine in 1893, but Mead "refused to have anything to do whatever" with the third volume. He thought that the fragments of which it was composed were much inferior to the first two volumes, but did improve it by persuading Mrs. Besant to incorporate the Instructions of the Esoteric Section of the T.S. Revision of volumes I and II had been another matter; the text already existed and all that was needed was : "to correct minor

points of detail in literary form, without touching at all more important matters," while "Awkward phrases, due to imperfect knowledge of English, have been corrected; most of the

quotations have been verified, and exact references given ... a uniform system of transliteration for Sanskrit words has been adopted." [18]

Many years later there were persistent allegations that the supposed third and fourth volumes had been suppressed by vested interests within the Society. The evidence for this was simply Madame Blavatsky's claims at various times to have completed, or nearly completed, the extra volumes - but no-one ever saw any finished text and none was ever found. Mead's comment on the allegations was uncompromising: "On H.P.B.'s decease there remained over no manuscript or typescript S.D. material other than is now found in Vol. III. These pieces, or chapters, were omitted from the two volumes of the first edition, either because they were thought, by Mme. Blavatsky herself, not good enough or not sufficiently appropriate to be included."

Mead also pointed out that "for the last three years of her life, I had Englished, corrected or edited everything H.P.B. wrote for publication, including the MS. of The Voice of the Silence, and that, too, with her entire assent and approval."

As for the revision of The Secret Doctrine, he pointed out that he had corrected some of the misquotations not because of typographical error, but because they "had been 'pulled' to favour the relevant argument or contention." [19]

What was important for Mead was that the truth should be presented; not even H.P.B. was allowed to be an exception to that rule. And he found deceit and falsity in others - especially in those who professed to be seeking and expounding spiritual truths.

NOTES

1 HPB In Memory of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, by Some of her Pupils. 1891, pp 31 - 33

2 Mead,G.R.S., Concerning H.P.B. (Stray Thoughts on Theosophy), Adyar Pamphlets No.111, 1920 pp 8-9; first printed in Theosophical Review Vol. XXXIV

3 *ibid.* p14

4 Olcott, Col. H.S., Old Diary Leaves. Fourth Series. 1910, p512

5 Olcott, *op. cit.* p306

6 HPB In Memory, pp 49-50

7 *ibid.* p9

8 Vahan, Vol. 3, No. 11, p6, June 1894

9 Vahan, Vol. 4, No. 6, Jan. 1895, pp 3-4

10 The Vahan, Vol. 4, No. 7, January 1895, p5

11 *ibid.* p6

12 Vahan, Vol. 4, No. 9, April 1895, p2

13 Facts about 'The Secret Doctrine', in The Occult Review, Vol. 45, No. 4, April 1927, p251

14 Mead, Concerning HPB, p10

15 Olcott, Old Diary Leaves: Fifth Series, 1932, p491

16 Lucifer, Vol. 15, No. 88, December 15, 1894, p267

17 Theosophical Review, Vol. 21, No. 121, September 15, 1897, pp 3, 5

18 Blavatsky, H.P., The Secret Doctrine. Third and revised edition. 1893 Vol. 1, p xxiii 19 Facts about 'The Secret Doctrine', *op. cit.*, pp 247, 249