

THEOSOPHY

Lafcadio Hearn

Table of Contents

<u>THEOSOPHY</u>	1
<u>Lafcadio Hearn</u>	1

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The work and literature of the Theosophical Society in India and England have been subjects of much favorable and unfavorable comment in those countries; but it was not until quite recently that they attracted attention in the very capital of materialism and scepticism, Paris. In fact, a new branch of the Society was lately established there; and to judge from the powerful article upon it in the *Nouvelle Revue*, it promises to flourish luxuriantly. There is much of novelty, mystery and romance in the theories of the brotherhood; their purpose is nothing less than the realization of the dream of a universal religion; their theories have all the strange attractiveness of witchcraft, alchemy and occult literature. Yet their philosophy is not without some sound foundation; and they have constructed quite a remarkable range of scientific buttresses to brace up the slender structures of Alchemical hypothesis and Rosicrucian idealism. Like Margrave in Bulwer Lytton's story, they have sought their learning in the Orient "out of the East the lightning cometh!" they have made pilgrimages to Himalayan wildernesses in search of that knowledge so rigidly forbidden to man by all forms of religion which have recognized the existence of magic or the possibility of conjuration. To the rigidly orthodox of even our own day such knowledge must appear of infernal origin, even like that tree described in Sura xxxvii of the Koran, "the fruits of whose branches are the heads of demons"; but the agnostics of the period have a right to hold that howsoever puerile such researches seem, they may ultimately result in discoveries of large value to humanity.

The Paris "Theosophical Society of the Orient and Occident" is founded upon precisely the same programme as that of the Theosophical Society of Madras, India, the aim of which is to establish a universal brotherhood of mankind, without distinction of caste, color, race or belief; to favor the study of the literature of Oriental religions and sciences, and make manifest the importance thereof; and to study the Unknown laws of Nature and the latent psychical powers of man. Here the positivist is tempted to smile. But the Paris society expressly adds that the brotherhood "do not hold to any particular explanation of psychical phenomena, much less to any belief in the existence, in this physical world, of any forces outside of those recognized by physical science." Psychical, therefore, is only a term used by the society to qualify phenomena of a special character, although these be in themselves necessarily material; for to the theosophist the "immaterial" necessarily means the "non-existent."

But while the theosophists expressly declare their non-adherence to any form of religion, and their hope of being able to unite members of all religions under their infinitely liberal programme, their own practice has not in all instances tallied with their professions. Did not Madame Blavatsky and Colonel Alcott go to India in 1879 expressly for the purpose of preaching to the people of the glory of the ancient religions and "to warn them against the substitution of any new faith for the doctrines of the Vedas, the Tripi-takas, or the Zend-Avesta?" This, indeed, they may have had a perfect right to do; but if the Theosophists sincerely desire to bring about a union between Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Parsees, Buddhists, Mohammedans, Brahmanists, Jainists, etc., their denunciation of the work of Christian missionaries is a poor step toward the universal conciliation. Furthermore, Colonel Alcott, after decrying the Catholic and Evangelical missionaries in India, undertakes himself to preach Buddhism in Paris. Buddhism, he says, is the religion most in conformity with nature and law, and is destined to become the future religion of the world; therefore he publishes and distributes a Buddhist catechism "according to the canon of the Church of the South," by Sumangala, High-priest of Sripada, and Principal of the Theological College of Widyodaya-Paravena, in Ceylon. The book, however, is acknowledged to be highly interesting; and the eccentricities of certain members of the Theosophic confraternity do not, perhaps, represent the general spirit of all. What is much more curious than the Buddhist preaching of Col. Alcott, or the theories of Sumangala, are

THEOSOPHY

the researches being made into the Buddhist spiritualism of Thibet. The Thibetans are said to have been the first to inspire the idea of the Theosophical Society. They have certain schools, occult universities, colleges of Magic, if you will, whose graduates are said to accomplish with ease all the prodigies of all thaumaturgists from Apollonius of Tyana to the present day. They claim powers akin to those ascribed to Buddha himself in the legends; and according to tolerably good testimony they are really able to do very wonderful things. It must be remembered that Indian yogis have performed before English officers feats of a seemingly impossible kind, which the witnesses could not explain at all by commonly understood laws. The Thibetan neophyte has to serve a severe novitiate of seven years before he is allowed to study the higher art; and much of what he learns then is not known. But the powers of communicating mysteriously with each other at great distances, of controlling wild beasts and serpents, of creating visions, even of appearing simultaneously in two different places, are commonly claimed by the Thibetan adepts. In fact, they assume the possession of the same knowledge which Bulwer Lytton gave to his Margrave; and the Thibetan mystic's luminous projection of himself is precisely like the apparition of the Scin-Lœca. It is also worthy of observation that the tests of initiation in Thibet are much like those demanded by wizard-teachers since the beginning of the history of magic: abstinence from flesh and wine, constant application of the mind to an unselfish end, conquest of desire, self-denial in all things, and especially love. The Theosophical Society proposes to investigate all these mysteries, and, if possible, to explain them. It has also renewed public interest at home in the researches of Crookes and other eminent psychologists, and has published many curious and even valuable works. Aside from mere theories, its objects are in some respects worthy of the interest and support of thinking men; and it is quite possible that its researches may bring about discoveries which will prove scientifically and irrefutably that thought is not ephemeral. This is what it hopes to do. The production of books like those of Adolphe d'Assier, who published in 1883 the singular treatise *L'Humanité Posthume* certainly tend to divert minds from the grosser materialism, and to elevate our conception of humanity. D'Assier argues upon strictly scientific grounds that what is called "psychic force" is not necessarily interrupted by death, that no force ever ceases to act, that as the sunbeam emitted from our day-star never ceases to be, so the thought flashed from the brain of man never dies, but preserves its radiant energy through all cycles of time and beyond, into the Night of eternities. Is it not curious to find a scientific theorist in 1883 developing a serious theme upon the beautiful fancy which Theophile Gautier uttered in his *Arria Marcella*, so many years before? the poet has often an intuition that seems to border upon prophecy:—

. . . "In effect, nothing dies, all things exist forever: no power may annihilate that which once had being. Every action, every word, every form, every thought, that falls into the universal ocean of existence, therein produces circles which travel, ever enlarging as they go, to the very confines of eternity...."