

# Helena Blavatsky, Psychic Pioneer

*Thrilling History of a Woman Who for Many Years  
Mystified Scientists and Occultists All Over the World*

By **DOROTHY CANFIELD**

**I**N the last century arose a woman, who with inspired certainty turned aside from worn out sources of excitement, and blazed a new trail into a new world where excitement is to be had for the asking—excitement that never palls; that in her case grew keener and intenser during all the years of a long and infinitely varied life. Leaving on one side the too well known and constantly narrowing bonds of the material world, Helena Blavatsky, by stepping into the as yet almost wholly unexplored world of psychic phenomena, succeeded in living a life of sixty years in which there was not one dull moment. The true and disinterested lover of risk and excitement must feel a bitter envy in reading the life of Madam Blavatsky. She had more than her share; with every breath she drew she lived through a crisis in her life—which most of us can manage only two or three times.

Her worshipers insist that she was animated solely by a love of humanity and a pure desire to give it a new and true religion. Her detractors cry that she was a cheap impostor, dealing in coarse tricks of jugglery to deceive her credulous disciples.

Long before her special and wonderful powers as a soldier of fortune in the world of the unseen were developed, she showed the same craving for risk and excitement that she later grew to be able to satisfy in so complete a manner. She was born, in 1831, in Russia, a daughter of a family of good though not noble descent. A wild, undisciplined girl, fond of dark corners and paroxysms of adventurous exploits, she was the despair of her family. She rode any horse on a man's saddle, and defied any and all orders or requests with dashing and unflinching rebellion, keeping her family in the wildest turmoil of apprehension of her next crazy notion. But more than this, she surrounded herself constantly with a throng of invisible companions, playfellows or frightful enemies, until she frightened the younger children almost into convulsions. She insisted that everything had a personality, even to her shoes and chest of drawers, some kindly, some terrifying. She disappeared at times wholly, and could be found only after long search in out of the way, remote locality, and she had a strange power over birds and animals.

Of course, like all imaginative children, she made up "pretend" playmates, many and diverse, and was often found talking and playing with them. One such vision of early childhood she claimed to have met in later life, and to have known him as though she had been brought up with him. At seventeen she married a man old enough to be her grandfather, because her governess laid her a wager that she couldn't make him propose—another striking proof of the sporting instinct carried to the 27th power. After three months of the cat and dog battle that would naturally result from such a marriage, she ran away from her husband, her family, her country, and for ten years indulged to its fullest extent her passion for adventure by world wide wanderings.

Her father supplied her with money; and there are a few hints to be gained through his connection with her. We see her in Paris, arousing the enthusiasm of an old mesmerist, who sees in her the possibility of great development as a medium; we catch a glimpse of her in London; we see her rushing to



New York Was Astounded.

Canada to try to meet a real James Fenimore Cooper Indian, and then, disgusted with the contrast between the real and her ideal, descending to New Orleans and studying the voodoo Negro experts in the black arts, and continuing through Texas to Mexico. About this time she received a large legacy from a godmother, which she dissipated in a short time, throwing the money, as she always did when she had any, to the winds with both hands. She thought that she had bought some large tracts of land in America, but soon forgot where they were located, and thought no more of them, as the project of going to India to study the Oriental mystic science took possession of her.

Around the Cape she went to Ceylon, and thence to Bombay. It is to be remembered that all this took place in 1852, when globe trotting was not the domestic pastime it has since become. For the first time, just before this expedition, she joined forces with others and went with two companions, an English occultist and a Hindu adept in occult science; but the party broke up soon after their arrival in India, in the complete inharmony which always followed Madam Blavatsky's attempt at cooperation. She left India and returned to England; thence to New York and to Chicago, at that time the crudest of Western boom cities. There were no railways to the far West, a circumstance which allured one of her temperaments, and she made the trip to San Francisco in an emigrant's caravan.

#### A Himalayan Retreat

**F**ROM there she went back again to India, where she was lost to sight for two years, during which she always said she was making a "Himalayan retreat" and laying the foundations for her system of philosophy. In 1858, when she returned to Russia, the world knew of her. Vaguely, with curious, distorted versions, the story of her eccentric wanderings and strange powers began to be known.

For ten or twelve years she lived with various members of her family in Russia and in the Caucasus Mountains. During this time her remarkable powers as a medium showed themselves more and more clearly. No disinterested person, reading of the psychic phenomena which took place about her, can doubt that she had strange powers in this direction, any more than he can doubt the intense delight she took in exercising them to the mystification of her observers, a passion which grew upon her as the years passed; until there can be little doubt of the fact that when she failed to control these powers, or they were not complete enough to satisfy her, she pieced them out with various tricks and devices.

For a period of years she lived thus, reveling in the excitement produced by her gifts as a medium. There was not one of the familiar phenomena which she did not spring on her amazed and long suffering family; who, unless they shared her sublimely robust taste for excitement, must have grown heartily weary of so disconcerting a visitor. She surrounded the most simple operations of every day life with mystery. Arm chairs glided about like house cats. Tables became alternately as light as a feather or impossible to move, according as she could most thoroughly dismay her skeptical brother, and she played pranks on her father, a rugged old unbeliever in the occult, until she frightened the poor man into the most abject credulity.

#### Involved with the Police

**O**NCE indeed she nearly involved the whole family in an alarming fracas with the police, by her suspiciously complete knowledge of the details of a murder which had been committed near them. The hard hearted police officials pooh-pooed at the idea of supernatural powers, and Colonel Hahn (Blavatsky's father) had all the difficulty in the world to assure them that there was no foul play in the matter.

When family life grew dull, Helena would liven things with a few phenomena calculated to drive any housekeeper mad. She waved her hand, and all the lamps and candles in the room went out, and in the ensuing darkness her invisible forces turned all the furniture topsyturvy, even the heavy sideboard. It is related to her credit that this was gently done so that none of the carving was injured; but it is not stated that she set them up on their feet again or lighted the lights. One imagines it difficult to

keep housemaids under such conditions. Some of the phenomena sound like the cheapest of claptrap mediumistic tricks, and others foreshadow the amazing and inexplicable powers that were displayed in her later life.

After a time, this lover of change felt the need of making more than a few people shake in agitated shivers, and the early '70's saw her launched upon a new sea, as tumultuous and gratefully productive



The Hindus Worshipped Her.

of tempests as any she had known. The next twenty years, the last of her life, are a veritable kaleidoscope of every imaginable and unimaginable variety of spice. She allied herself with the spiritualists when they were throwing all America into convulsions of wonder. She withdrew from them when they were discredited by a series of detected impostures.

She made one of the most remarkable examples of conversions known in religious history, in attaching Colonel Olcott to her. She was at this time a monstrously fat, middle aged woman, excessively ugly, with a taste in dress both barbaric and slovenly. She smoked incessantly, she swore like a trooper, she was subject to ungovernable fits of passion over the slightest incident of every day life; she was notoriously unwise in her judgment of people, taking up with the most fervid eager creatures who turned out unscrupulous sharpers; she was regarded by the world in general as a prodigiously entertaining charlatan. Yet she attached to her Colonel Olcott, well known man of letters, gallant ex-soldier in the Civil War, refined gentleman, and a prominent figure in the best circles of New York intellectual society. From that time to the day of her death, he lived on terms of great though respectful, not to say venerating, intimacy with her, and never failed to regard her as a Heaven sent teacher to impart pure and uplifting spiritual truths to suffering humanity. It is noteworthy of the patent purity of their relations that, in spite of the closeness and intimacy of their daily life together, there never was a breath of scandal about them; nor indeed ever about Madam Blavatsky, notwithstanding the amazing amount of talk which centered on her, and the wild eccentricities of her life.

With Colonel Olcott she founded the Theosophical Society in 1875, in New York, after a lamentable failure of a beginning she had made in Cairo a few years before. At this time she was immensely talked of in the American press; and the stories that are told of her remarkable psychic powers are startling. All during the second half of her life she performed every day feats, or tricks, or illusions—whatever one may choose to call them—that sound incredible. From time to time she was exposed in some juggling of secret cabinets, with sliding doors, absent confederates, and the like; but she continued to do things that seemed impossible to suspect of fraud. People who did not believe in her at all, were constantly forced to amazement by her powers.

One skeptic was told to think of something that he wished. In a stuffy little room in a city flat, he wished for a fresh plucked rose; and, looking up, saw one descend toward him, all dewy and fresh. He put it in his buttonhole, where it wilted and died like any rose, and he always kept the leaves as a souvenir. Another time she took a ring, which some-