

## COLONEL HENRY STEEL OLCOTT

By Annie Besant

H. S. Olcott, who came from an old English Puritan family settled for many generations in the United States, and whose grandmother was a descendant of one of the early members of the Dutch East India Company, was born in Orange, New Jersey, on August 2, 1832. He was only twenty-three when his success in the model farm of Scientific Agriculture, near Newark, led the Greek Government to offer him the Chair of Agriculture in the University of Athens. The young man declined the honor, and in the same year he founded, with Mr. Vail of New Jersey, "The Westchester Farm School," near Mount Vernon, New York, a school regarded in the States as one of the pioneers of the present system of national agricultural education. He there interested himself in the cultivation of sorghum, just brought to the United States, and produced his first book, *Sorgho and Imphee, the Chinese and African Sugar-canes*, which ran through seven editions and was placed by the State of Illinois in its school libraries. This book brought him the offer of the Directorship of the Agricultural Bureau at Washington, an offer which he declined, as he also declined offers of the managership of two immense properties.

In 1858 Mr. Olcott paid his first visit to Europe, still bent on the improvement of agriculture, and his report of what he saw was published in Appleton's *American Cyclopaedia*. Recognized as an expert, he became the American correspondent of the well-known *Mark Lane Express* (London), Associate Agricultural Editor of the famous *New York Tribune*, and published two more books on agriculture.

This phase of his life concluded with the outbreak of the American Civil War, when his passion for liberty drove him to enlist in the Northern Army, and he went through the whole of the North Carolina Campaign under General Burnside, and was invalided to New York, stricken with fever. As soon as he recovered, he prepared to start again for the front, but the Government, noting his ability and courage, chose him to conduct an enquiry into some suspected frauds at the New York Mustering and Disbursing Office. Every means was adopted to stop his resolute investigation, but neither bribes nor threats could check the determined young officer in his conduct of a campaign more dangerous than the facing of Southern bullets in the field. His physical courage had shone out in the North Carolina Expedition; his moral courage shone out yet more brightly as he fought for four years through a storm of opposition and calumny, till he sent the worst criminal to Sing Sing Prison for ten years, and received from the Government a telegram declaring that this conviction was as "important to Government as the winning of a great battle." Secretary Stanton declared that he had

given him unlimited authority because he "found that he had made no mistakes that called for correction." Assistant Secretary Fox wrote that he wished to "bear testimony to the great zeal and fidelity which have characterized your conduct under circumstances very trying to the integrity of an officer." The Assistant Secretary of War wrote: "You will have from your fellow-citizens the respect which is due to your patriotism and honourable service to the Government during the rebellion." The Judge Advocate-General of the Army wrote: "I cannot permit the occasion to pass without frankly expressing to you my high appreciation of the services which you have rendered while holding the difficult and responsible position from which you are about to retire. These services were signally marked by zeal, ability and uncompromising faithfulness to duty." These words signalize the qualities most characteristic of H. S. Olcott's life.

Mr. Olcott now became Colonel Olcott, and Special Commissioner of the War Department. After two years, the Secretary of the Navy begged for the loan of his services to crush out the abuses of the Navy Yards, and he was made Special Commissioner of the Navy Department. With resolute and unsparing zeal, he plunged into his work, purified the Department, reformed the system of accounts, and at the end received the following official testimony: "I wish to say that I have never met with a gentleman entrusted with important duties, of more capacity, rapidity and reliability than have been exhibited by you throughout. More than all, I desire to bear testimony to your entire uprightness and integrity of character, which I am sure have characterized your whole career, and which to my knowledge have never been assailed. That you have thus escaped with no stain upon your reputation, when we consider the corruption, audacity and power of the many villains in high position whom you have prosecuted and punished, is a tribute of which you may well be proud, and which no other man occupying a similar position and performing similar services in this country has ever achieved."

This was the man to whom Madame Blavatsky was sent by her Master to the United States to find, chosen by Them to found with her the Theosophical Society, and then to spend the remainder of his life in organizing it all over the world. He brought to his task his unsullied record of public services rendered to his country, his keen capacity, his enormous powers of work, and an unselfishness which, his colleague declared, she had never seen equaled outside the Āśrama of the Masters.

He was found by Madame Blavatsky at the Eddy Farm, whither he had been sent by the *New York Sun* and the *New York Graphic*, to report on the extraordinary spiritualistic manifestations which were taking place there. So valuable were his articles that no less than seven different publishers contended for the right to publish them in book form. So keen was the interest aroused that the papers sold at a dollar a

copy, and he was said to divide public attention with the second election of General Grant to the Presidency. The two brave hearts recognized each other, and the two clasped hands in a lifelong union, terminated on earth when H. P. Blavatsky left in 1891, but not terminated, so they both believed, by the trivial incident of death, but to be carried on upon the other side, and when returned again to birth in this world.

Colonel Olcott, who had resigned from the War Department, and had been admitted to the Bar, was earning a large income as Counsel in customs and revenue cases when the call came. He abandoned his practice, and in the following year founded the Theosophical Society, of which he was appointed by the Masters President for life, and of which he delivered the inaugural address on November 17, 1875 in New York. He studied with Madame Blavatsky, and largely Englished for her her great work *Isis Unveiled*, one of the classics of the Society.

In 1878 the colleagues left for India, and for a time fixed their residence in Bombay. There Colonel Olcott inspired the first exhibition of Indian products, urging on Indians the use of their own goods in preference to those of foreign manufacture. At the first Convention of the Theosophical Society in India, Svadeshism was first proclaimed, as at a later Convention the Congress was begotten. A vigorous propaganda was now carried on all over India, much hindered by Government hostility, but welcomed by the masses of Hindus and Parsees.

In 1880 began the great Buddhist revival in Ceylon, which has now three colleges and 205 schools, 177 of which received Government grants this year [1907]; 25,856 children were in attendance in these schools on June 30, 1906. This work is due to the whole-hearted energy and devotion of Colonel Olcott, himself a professed Buddhist. Another great service to Buddhism was rendered by his visit to Japan in 1889, during which he addressed 25,000 persons, and succeeded in drawing up fourteen fundamental propositions, which form the basis of union between the long divided Northern and Southern Churches of Buddhism.

In 1882 the Founders bought, almost entirely with their own money, the beautiful estate of Adyar, near Madras, which they established as the Headquarters of the Theosophical Society. The work done from 1875 to 1906 may be best judged by the fact that up to the year 1906 the President had issued 893 charters to branches all over the world, the majority grouped in eleven Territorial Sections, and the rest scattered over counties in which the branches are not yet sufficiently numerous to form a Section. The most northerly branch is in the Arctic Circle, and the southernmost in Dunedin, New Zealand.

His time, his thoughts, his money, were all given to his beloved Society. One day I said to him: "Henry, I believe you would cut off your right hand for the Society." "Cut

off my right hand!" he cried; "I'd cut myself into little pieces if it would do the Society any good." And so, verily, would he have done.

He traveled all the world over with ceaseless and strenuous activity, and the doctors impute the heart-failure, while his body was still splendidly vigorous, to the overstrain put on the heart by the exertion of too many lectures crowded into too short a time. "You will die as I am dying," he said to me lately; "they drive you just as hard." To the furthest north, to the furthest south, he went, cheering, encouraging, advising, organizing. And ever joyously he returned to his beloved Adyar, to rest and recuperate.

Many difficulties have confronted this lion-hearted man, during these thirty-one years. He stood unflinchingly through the discreditable attack on Madame Blavatsky by the Society for Psychical Research, and has lived to see Dr. Hodson accept more marvels than he then denounced. He steered the Society through the crisis which rent from it for a time nearly the whole American Section, to see that Section welcome him to his native land with pride and exultation. He saw his colleague pass away from his side, and bore the burden alone, steadfastly and bravely for another sixteen years, knitting hands with Annie Besant, her favorite pupil, as loyally and firmly as with herself. Through good report and evil report he has worked unwaveringly, until his Master's voice has called him home. At that same order, he appointed his colleague Annie Besant as his successor, to bear the burden H. P. Blavatsky and he had borne. He endured his last prolonged sufferings bravely and patiently, facing death as steadfastly as he had faced life, and cheered in the last weeks of his illness by the visits of the great Indian Sages, to whom he had given the strength of his manhood, the devotion of his life. He has passed away from earth, and left behind him a splendid monument of noble work, and on the other side he still will work, till the time comes for his return.

India has had no more faithful helper in the revival of her religions than this noble American, and she may well send her blessing to the man who loved and served her.

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Him [Olcott] we can trust under all circumstances, and his faithful service is pledged to us come well, come ill.

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