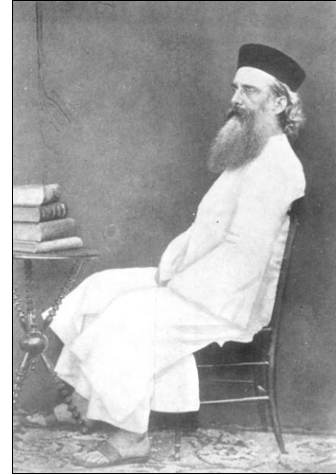


A HOUSEBOAT JOURNEY WITH H. P. B.

By Henry Steel Olcott

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In all our years of intercourse H. P. B. and I had never been so closely drawn together as on this boat-journey on the Buckingham Canal—a famine-relief work that fed thousands of starving peasants during a tragic epoch of the Duke of Buckingham’s Governorship of Madras. Hitherto we had lived and worked in the company of third parties, whereas now we two were alone in a *budgerow*, or small houseboat, with our servant Babula and the coolie crew as our sole companions while the craft was in motion. Our quarters were cramped enough, to be sure. At either side of the small cabin was a locker covered with a mattress the lid arranged to lift on hinges, the inside forming a huge chest for storage of one’s effects. Between the two lockers—each



Olcott in India

A bed by night, a chest of drawers by day—

was a portable table which, when not in use, could be folded up and hung from the ceiling. A lavatory, a small pantry with shelves, a cooking platform outside, behind, with a broken earthen pot-bottom, laid on sand, for fireplace, and some few indispensable cooking utensils, a large jar for drinking water, and our camp table furniture completed our domestic arrangements and sufficed for our wants. When a fair wind blew, a sail was raised and we glided before it; when adverse, the coolies jumped ashore, and, with the tow-line passed over their shoulders, dragged us along at the rate of perhaps three miles an hour. In another boat followed some of our best and kindest Madras colleagues, among them that golden-hearted old man, P. Iyaloo Naidu, Retired Deputy Collector, whose acquaintanceship was a privilege, whose friendship an honor. Our destination was the town of Nellore, a two-days’ journey by water.

As we had not started until 7 p.m. (3rd May 1882), and the moon was almost full, it was a sort of fairy voyage we were making on the waveless silvery water. No

sound broke the silence, after once leaving the city limits, save the occasional yelps of a pack of jackals, the low murmur of our boat-coolies' voices, talking together, and the lap-lap-lapping of the water against the boat. In place of glass sashes, there were hinged Venetian blinds, with hooks to fasten them to the overhead deck-beams at pleasure, and through these a gentle night breeze blew cool, and brought us the smell of wet rice-fields. My colleague and I sat, enchanted with the scene and refreshed by the grateful and unaccustomed rest from our life of excitement and publicity. We talked but little, being under the witchery of the night, and went to our beds with the certainty of a refreshing sleep.

Wafted along by the breeze of the monsoon, our boat sailed steadily throughout the night, and morning found us well on our way. At an early hour we tied up at the bank, for the coolies to build their fire and cook their curry and rice; our people in the other boat joined us, I went for a swim, and Babula cooked us a capital breakfast, which our colleagues, because of their caste prohibitions, could not share.

Then on once more, the boats as noiseless as specters. H. P. B. and I occupied the whole day with arrears of correspondence and editorial writing for the *Theosophist*, with occasional breaks for conversation. Of course, the one theme for us was the condition and prospects of our Society, and the probable ultimate effect on contemporary public opinion of the Eastern ideas we were spreading. In this respect we were optimists in the same degree, no shadow of doubt or difference crossing either of our minds. It was this ever-potent, overmastering feeling of confidence that made us so indifferent to calamities and obstacles which might have otherwise brought us to a standstill fifty times during our career.

It may not be gratifying to some of our present colleagues, yet it is strictly true, that our forecasts dealt with the coloring of modern thought with Theosophical ideas far more than with the possible extension of the Society throughout the world; of that, we had practically no expectation. As, when leaving New York for Bombay, we did not even dream that the Society might cover India and Ceylon with Branches, so now, on that silently moving boat, we gave no thought to the possibility of its creating a popular agitation that would plant its branches and create its centers of propaganda throughout America and Europe, to say nothing of Australia, Africa, and the Far East. Why should we? To whom could we look then? Where were the giants fit to carry such a heavy load on their shoulders? This was but in 1882, and outside Asia there were but three Branches of the T. S. in existence (not counting the

New York center, which had not been reorganized). The London Lodge and the Corfu (Ionian) Branch were inert bodies. Mr. Judge was away in South America for a Silver-Mining Company (I believe I am right about the date), and nothing like an active publicity campaign had been organized in the United States. We two old people in the boat were practically managing the thing alone, and our field was the East; and as H. P. B. showed no more prophetic gift than myself at the time, we talked and worked and built our foundations for the great future that neither of us foresaw.

How many of the present multitude of Fellows of the Society would give almost anything to have had the close intimacy I enjoyed with my friend on that boat journey! What made it all the pleasanter and more profitable was that she was in good health and spirits, and there was nothing to mar the charm of our companionship. Otherwise, I might almost as well have been a cage-companion of a hungry lioness at the Zoo. One of us must certainly have gone ashore and walked, or shifted into Iyaloo Naidoo's tender! Dear lamented friend, companion, colleague, teacher, chum: none could be more exasperating at her worst times, none more lovable and admirable at her best. I believe we have worked in lives before, I believe we shall work in lives to come, for the good of mankind.

This open page of my Diary, with its but few fragmentary notes, brings back to memory one of the most delightful episodes of the Theosophical movement, and I see a picture of H. P. B. in her shabby wrapper, sitting on her locker opposite me, smoking cigarettes, her huge head with its brown crinkled hair bent over the page she was writing on, her forehead full of wrinkles, a look of introverted thought in her light blue eyes, her aristocratic hand driving the pen swiftly over the lines, and no sound to be heard save the liquid music of ripples against the boat's sides, or the occasional rub of a coolie's naked foot on the roof above us, as he moved to tighten a rope or obey some order of the helmsman.

The next evening at 5 o'clock we reached a place called Muttukur, where we landed to go overland to Nellore, a distance of fifteen miles. Our round of bustle recommenced. A large delegation was waiting for us: we were conducted to a tent where refreshments were offered, and our hands and necks were soon full of fragrant flowers. An Address of Welcome was responded to, and in due time we found ourselves in a light phaeton with coolies for horses. Lithe, active fellows, they ran us along so as to cover the distance within three hours. A certain weird interest attaches

to them, as they are a tribe of ancient origin called "Anadhis," who are hereditary serpent-charmers and extirpaters. People who wish to sleep safe in their beds without the thought of snakes getting into their rooms, call an Anadhi and he walks around and around the house, repeating charms and setting up some enchanted stick or other fetish, after which no serpent will venture to trouble the inmates. Our friends declared this to be a well-known fact, and on their authority alone I give it record. I was told a thing worth knowing by travelers and hunters who have to camp out in snaky localities. It was this, that a serpent *will not pass over a rope of horsehair*, and that perfect immunity may be obtained from their visits by laying such a horsehair rope around one's house, tent, or whole camp. My informants did not know whether this is attributable to the roughness of the prickly rope hurting the snake's tender skin, or to some magnetic (auric) or other occult property of the hair being antipathetic to the reptile. However, that doesn't so much matter as the fact itself, if true.

We got to Nellore at 11 p.m., and received an ovation. A splendid house had been fitted up for our party. There were many flowers, and decorative greenery, and, late as was the hour, I had to reply to two addresses—one in Sanskrit, the other in English, after which we were allowed to go to our beds, tired out. A lecture was given the next day; the following one was devoted to editorial work and admissions to membership. In the evening a delegation of the most learned Pandits of the district came and put us questions; and at 11 p.m. we formally organized the Nellore T. S. A second lecture on the 9th May, more admissions of candidates, and more writing finished up our business at Nellore, and we then moved on to a canal station called Mypaud, whither the boat had been taken to save eighteen miles of canal traveling. Our writing and talks were now resumed and in due course we got to Padaganjam, the limit of canal navigation in the hot season, and the place whence, to proceed on to Guntur, our Ultima Thule, we had to take palanquins and *jampan*s, or carried chairs. They did not turn up until the following day, and as the coolies had to rest, we did not start until just before sunset.

Our caravan consisted of four palanquins and one *jampan*, which, added to the baggage-porters, made our coolies number fifty-three persons. We soon came to a ford where a river had to be crossed, and the performance made me laugh heartily and H. P. B. to swear. The water was so deep that, to keep our palanquin floors dry, the bearers had to balance the thick poles on their heads, to lift us high enough. Before entering the water they stripped naked, all but their *langooti*, or breech-clout.

Picking their steps with greatest caution and sounding with their staves, they went in deeper and deeper until the water came up to their armpits. I politely led the way so that H. P. B. might know if I was drowned, and turn back. It was a ticklish experience to sit there motionless, so as not to destroy the balance of the round pole resting on my six coolies' heads, and, fancy what a mess I and my papers would be in if one of the men made a misstep; however, one travels to gain experience, so I lay on my back as still as possible. When in midstream I began to hear the sound of a familiar voice from the next palanquin, and presently H. P. B. began shouting at me that these men would surely upset her. I shouted back that it didn't matter, as she was too fat to sink and I should fish her out. Then she began to use weighty objurgations at me, with occasional diversions at the coolies, who, not understanding a word, kept on their way as before. At last we reached the opposite shore and my colleague rested herself by getting out and walking about, and, after a few cigarettes, had forgotten her recent troubles.

The journey was very tedious and hot, the thermometer standing at 98° F. in the shade, and the coolies keeping up night and day, during the three days we were on the road, a monotonous refrain which at last became terribly trying to the nerves. Then at night they carried large torches made of a mop of cotton twist, saturated with cocoanut oil, which burnt with a cloud of smoke that almost choked us in the palanquins, and made a most villainous smell. They were carried at either side of each palanquin so that the coolies might see any snakes that might be coiled in the path. As the wind blew across our path there was no escaping the smoke from the torch on the windward side, and when we had the chance to look at each other at the next halt we found that we and our clothes were smutted almost black. It was compensation enough, however, to see the jemadar, or head coolie, kill a big cobra on which the forward bearers would almost certainly have trodden but for the torch-light.

Guntur was reached at sunset on the third day, and we were plunged at once into a scene of tumultuous welcome. The whole population, they told us, saving those too old, young, or infirm to be about at night, had come outside the town to meet us. They numbered thousands, and every one of them seemed determined to come close enough to have a good look at us. The result may be imagined: our progress was like forcing one's way through a compact wall of flesh. We were first taken to a tent where we had refreshments and introductions to the notables of the place; but the crowd became so importunate that this business was cut short, and

H. P. B. and I had to mount on chairs to show ourselves. Then a short speech had to be made, and only then were we put into some sort of conveyance jampans, I believe—and moved on in the procession. The streets were jammed with people, from house to house, and we could only move at a snail's pace. Limelights and Bengal colored fires blazed about us at every step, and it was really curious to watch the lighting up of H. P. B.'s massive head and shoulders with the different glares. As she preceded me I had a capital chance to observe the artistic effects. A more truly popular ovation could not be imagined, for all the elements were there, including the continuous roar of cheering that ran along with us, a river of sound, all the way to our destination. Of torches there was no end, and Guntur was as light as by day. Two triumphal arches spanned the principal streets. Arrived at the house, we had to receive and reply to two addresses in English and two in Telegu, the tone of exaggerated compliment in all of them making us feel like a pair of fools, and putting me to a strain to find words to answer them with proper reserve. After this ordeal came more introductions, prolonged conversations, and the initiation of one candidate, who was obliged to leave town before morning.

The next day's lecture was on "The Soul: arguments of Science in favor of its Existence and Transmigrations"; the subject having been given me because of the prevailing tone of skepticism among the educated young men of the place. The chief of the local Lutheran Mission, Rev. L. L. Uhl, and a number of his friends were present and took notes. If I recollect aright I stated in my discourse that the hold of theological Christianity on the educated minds of the West was weakening and a decided reaction had set in: a wave of free thought was sweeping over Europe and America. My reverend friend gave notice that he should answer me at his chapel on the next morning, and invited me and my friends to be present. We went, and were much disappointed; his discourse being of a character which I noted as "weak and sloppy," in my Diary. As his manner towards me was friendly, I proposed that we should issue a joint pamphlet on the *pro* and *con* of Christianity, which he agreed to. I promised to send him my MS. "as soon as I could find the time to prepare it"; being careful to tell Mr. Uhl that my attention was so constantly demanded by current official business that I could not promise to be ready at any specified date. In point of fact Mr. Uhl, after waiting for me a long while—perhaps eighteen months or two years—brought out his side of the argument in a separate pamphlet, which was widely circulated by him as a campaign document, so to call it, and proof of my inability to make good my assertions. The fact is, however, that within six months

from the time of the agreement I had gathered together and sent on to the President of the Guntur T. S., a large batch of cuttings and notes suitable for the purpose, and requested him to make up from them the pamphlet and send it me for revision, as I was absolutely unable to give the needed time to the affair. I also wrote Mr. Uhl about my difficulties. But my friend waited upon other friends, and they individually and collectively did nothing, and at last, after Mr. Uhl's blast had been blown, I got back my bundle of notes: and threw it into a wastepaper basket, and so dropped the matter: it being cheaper to leave my reverend critic to enjoy his triumph than to attempt the impossible of writing my pamphlet, when I had much more important and congenial matters to attend to. By the time that his treatise appeared, I had organized seventy new Branches of the Society, and traveled over all India and Ceylon.

On the day of our departure from Guntur, H. P. B. and I enjoyed our first experience with one of those marvels of mental training, a Brahmin *Ashtavadhani*. There exist in India many men who have, by a course of training during many years, cultivated the memory to a degree incredible to those who have not witnessed their feats personally. Some can keep up fifty, and even more, separate mental processes simultaneously; in comparison with which phenomena the most marvelous stories about our Western chess-players seem commonplace. The proceeding is as follows: As many persons as are to take part in the test, seat themselves near by, and the Pandit begins with the first on the right. Let us say, with a game of chess. He names the first move, looks a minute at the board, and moves on to the next man, with whom, perhaps, he plays some other game. Here, again, he names his play and passes to the third man, for whom he may be asked to compose an original poem in Sanskrit on a given subject, the initial or terminal letter of each line to be one selected by the other person. He ponders deeply and then dictates a line fulfilling the conditions. From the next man he is to take, word by word, and the words out of their order at the choice of the dictator, a verse in any language whatsoever, known or unknown to the Pandit, he receiving one word at a time, repeating it until the sound becomes familiar to his ear, and laying it away in his memory until, the sitting finished, he must repeat the whole verse with each word restored to its proper sequence. The next man, perhaps, taps on a bell as many times as he chooses, and the Pandit is to recollect the whole and name the total when he makes his last round of the circle. Then may come the making of a "magic square" of figures in so many columns, each column and each cross line to figure up the same. Then, with the next

man, a dispute on any one proposition in either of the six schools of Hindu Philosophy, the argument and demonstration to proceed by stages as he comes around to that person. Then the next neighbor may give him a gigantic sum in multiplication or division or some other part of arithmetic, say a sum in which multiplier and multiplicand shall each be of a dozen figures. And so on to a most bewildering extent, until one just sits amazed and wondering if the human brain is capable of such multiplex activity. On the occasion in question H. P. B. dictated to our Pandit the celebrated Russian poem on the Volga, and I, several sentences in Spanish which I learned when a boy, but he rendered them accurately at the close of the entertainment, every word in its place. At 10 that evening we started in our palanquins on our return journey.

By morning we had covered thirty-one miles, with three changes of bearers, coming to the small village of Baput, where our baggage-coolies should have met us, but as they did not turn up until 7 p.m., we had to pass the day as best we could, and did not move on until 8:30 p.m. That night we made a stretch of twenty-three miles, which brought us to Padaganjam and the Canal. A very esteemed friend, the late Mr. Ramaswamy Naidu, Assistant Salt Inspector, had sent his servants to get ready for us a comfortable house, in which we spent the day waiting for his own houseboat, which was placed at our disposal. It arrived at 2 p.m., with our friends Messrs. P. Iyaloo Naidu and L. V. V. Nayadu ("Doraswamy," to his intimates), and we embarked at sunset.

The monsoon wind being now contrary, our boat had to be dragged by the coolies. Poor devils! They had a hard time of it, for the mercury stood at 109° in the shade the next day, and neither of us felt the energy to do any work; we could only sit idle and swelter. Fortunately for the coolies, we were kept waiting nearly all the day at Râmâpâtnam for some candidates for membership and did not go on until midnight. Another fearfully hot day followed. At night we were detained several hours by the obstinate boatmen, who refused to cross an inlet of the sea until the end of the ebb. At 3 a.m. I went outside to see how things were getting on, and found the boat noiselessly moving through the water, the coolies pulling the line on the tow-path, and the *serang* (captain) steering and singing to himself a droning chant. At 6 we reached Mypaud, where Nellore friends awaited us with carriages, but as we were to return by land to Madras, it took time to get our luggage packed, and we did not start until 8 o'clock, by which time the heat was suffocating. The poor Yanadhis seemed fairly done up, and yet we reached Nellore by 11, thankful for the shelter of

the stately house, with its thick walls, brick terraced roof and wide verandahs, that keep the rooms darkened and comparatively cool.

A great Brahmin Pandit of the Vedantin school came to see us that evening, evidently with the sole object of showing up our ignorance; but in us two old campaigners, especially in H. P. B., with her wit and sarcasm, he got more than he bargained for, and in a couple of hours we were able to expose to the company present his intense selfishness, vanity, and bigoted prejudices. Our victory cost us something, however, for I see a Postscriptum note in my Diary that he subsequently showed himself "our active enemy." Good luck to him and to all the noble army of our "enemies"; their hatred never did them the least good nor the Society the least harm. Our ship does not sail on the wind of favor.

Seventeen letters, three articles for the *Theosophist*, and the reading of a pile of exchanges kept me fairly busy the next day until evening, when I lectured on "Aryan Wisdom." The next day was like it, and the next, until we—at 5 p.m. — took bullock carriages for Tiruppati, seventy-eight miles away, and the nearest station on the Madras Railway. In that scorching weather it was a hot and tedious journey, but it ended at last, and so did our waiting time of twelve hours for a train, and the train journey to Madras, which we reached in due course and were met and escorted by friends to our former bungalow.

In my travels over India and Ceylon I had been observing places, people, and climates, with a view to selecting the best place for a permanent headquarters for the Society. Liberal offers of houses, free of rent, had been made us in Ceylon, and, certainly, the Island presented a most charming appearance to one seeking an Asian home; but several considerations, such as its isolation from India, the cost of postage, and the backward intellectual state of the people as a whole, overweighed its loveliness and led us to choose India in preference.

Up to the present time, however, no good property had been offered us, and we had made no definite plans. On the 31st May, however, we two were begged by Judge Muttusawmy's sons to go and look at a property that was to be had cheap. We were driven to Adyar, and at the first glance knew that our future home was found. The palatial building, its two riverside smaller bungalows, its brick-and-mortar stables, coach-house, storerooms, and swimming-bath; its avenue of ancient mango and banyan trees, and its large plantation of casuarinas (one of the cone-bearing trees) made up an enchanting country residence, while the price asked—Rs. 9000

odd, or about £600—was so modest, in fact, merely nominal, as to make the project of its purchase seem feasible even for us. We accordingly decided to take it, and in due course this was effected by the noble help of P. Iyaloo Naidu and Judge Muttusawmy Chetty, the first of whom advanced part of the money and the other secured a loan of the rest, on very easy terms. An appeal was at once issued for subscriptions, and within the next year I had the satisfaction of being able to pay it all off, and receive the title-deeds.

The cheapness of the price is accounted for by the fact that the opening of the railway to the foot of the Nilgiri Hills brought the lovely sanitarium of Ootacamund within a day's ride of Madras, caused the high officials to spend half the year there, and threw their grand Madras bungalows on a market without bidders. What I paid for "Huddleston's Gardens" was about the price of the old materials if the buildings should be torn down. In fact, that was what was to have happened if we had not turned up as buyers just when we did. We stopped a week longer at Madras, during which I lectured twice, and more new members were admitted, and on the 6th of June we took train for Bombay. More than fifty friends, with flower gifts, saw us off, and prayed us to hasten our return to take up our permanent residence among them. At 11 a.m., on the 8th, we reached Bombay, and found many friends assembled to meet us and see us home.

People glibly speak of Madras as "the Benighted Presidency": and as being insufferably hot. The fact is, however, that as regards climate I prefer it above the others, and as to Sanskrit Literature and Aryan Philosophy, it is the most enlightened of the Indian Presidencies; there are more learned Pandits in the villages, and the educated class, as a whole, have been less spoilt by Western education. In Bengal and Bombay there are more *litterateurs* of the class of Telang and Bhandarkar, but I cannot recall one equal to T. Subba Row, of Madras, in bright genius for grasping the spirit of the Ancient Wisdom. And his being at Madras was one of the causes of our fixing upon that Presidency town for our official residence. Although he is dead and gone, yet we have never regretted our choice, for Adyar is a sort of Paradise.

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