

The Writing of *The Secret Doctrine*

by Kirby Van Mater

There can be no separation between the writings of H. P. Blavatsky and the growth in comprehension of the work of The Theosophical Society by its adherents. As the first teachings of the ancient wisdom -- barely sketched in HPB's earliest major work, *Isis Unveiled*, were assimilated, a natural demand was made for a more complete exposition of the philosophy. Likewise the Society's objectives and principles, as enunciated from time to time, became more defined and inclusive of the work envisioned for the Society by those responsible for its beginnings. The true founders of the TS were HPB's teachers, and it was in large measure from them that the subject matter in *Isis Unveiled* and *The Secret Doctrine* was called forth.

Isis Unveiled was commenced in the summer of 1875, a few months before the formation of the TS, although at the time HPB did not know what was to become of the growing pile of manuscripts. Later, in September, as H. S. Olcott records, "She wrote me that it was to be a book on the history and philosophy of the Eastern Schools and their relations with those of our own times." (Old Diary Leaves, I: 203.)

In mid-December 1878, a year after the publication of *Isis*, H. P. Blavatsky and Colonel Olcott left New York for India where she carried on her work for the next six years. They soon made the acquaintance of A. P. Sinnett, editor of the Anglo-Indian newspaper, *The Pioneer*. Subsequent correspondence with HPB's teachers -- two Eastern Adepts known as M and KH -- had a profound effect on him. As a direct result of the inspiration and teaching he had received, and also because of certain phenomena he had personally witnessed, in 1881 Sinnett published *The Occult World* and two years later *Esoteric Buddhism*, two important books which were to produce a considerable stir in various parts of the world. However, in a few instances Sinnett's interpretation of the teachings was incorrect. He also had difficulty in understanding why there were apparent differences in the philosophical *expression* of theosophy as given by his Adept-correspondents and by HPB in *Isis*. He did not comprehend that in *Isis* HPB had been limited as to how much of the ancient wisdom she could give forth. That was in 1877 when the membership had little grasp of the magnitude of theosophy. Within the next five or six years, the time had come to reveal more of the esoteric philosophy and to devise a terminology suitable for Western understanding. KH wrote to Sinnett in 1882:

It [*Isis*] really ought to be *re-written* for the sake of the family honour. . . . Don't you see that everything you find in *Isis* is delineated, hardly sketched -- nothing completed or fully revealed. Well the time has come, but where are the workers for such a tremendous task? -- *The Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett*, letter XXc, 130-1

Nevertheless, starting with the January 1884 issue of the *Journal of The Theosophical Society* [Supplement to *The Theosophist*], monthly advertisements appeared describing *The Secret Doctrine* as being a new version of *Isis Unveiled*. That summer in England two students (Mohini M. Chatterjee and Laura C. Holloway) began writing *Man: Fragments of Forgotten History*. Even before it was published this exposition of theosophical philosophy proved unsatisfactory. On January 9, 1885, HPB was given the "plan" for the great work, *The Secret Doctrine*. Olcott writes:

On the following night -- as my Diary entry states -- "H. P. B. got from her Teacher the plan for her *Secret Doctrine*, and it is excellent. Oakley and I tried our hands at it [HPB's notes and papers on revision of *Isis*] yesterday, but this is much better." Meanwhile, the accumulation of materials for the book had long been going on. It will be news to some that this was not originally intended to be a new book, but only a recasting and amplification of *Isis Unveiled*, with the late T. Subba Row, B.A., B.L., as co-editor with H.P.B. As first advertised in the *Theosophist*, it was to have been issued in monthly parts of 77 pages each, and to have run to about twenty parts. This new scheme, given her by her Teacher, changed this programme, and the gradual building up of the present grand work was the result (One purpose of *The Secret Doctrine* was to correct errors in philosophy in *Esoteric Buddhism* and *Man: Fragments of Forgotten History*). -- ODL, III: 199-200

The previous year, in February 1884, HPB, Olcott, and four companions had left Bombay for Europe. While they were away a carefully planned attack was begun against HPB and indirectly the Theosophical Society by Alexis and Emma Coulomb (who had been taken into the headquarters at Adyar) and the editors of the *Christian College Magazine* in Madras. HPB was charged with forgery in producing letters from her teachers as well as trickery in the production of phenomena. The effect of this attack was immediate worldwide publicity and the return to India of both Olcott and Blavatsky by year's end. At this time the Society for Psychical Research sent to India a young man named Richard Hodgson to investigate and report on the situation.

In their efforts not to cause more publicity and expose the names of the Mahatmas to public eye, Olcott and the TS Council at Adyar left HPB undefended, and thus by their silence virtually implied her guilt. HPB strenuously objected; the honor of the Society and of her teachers was at stake. She had wished to go to court in order to vindicate her teachers and the work they had sent her to do. But Olcott threatened HPB with his resignation if she did not abide by the decision of the Special Judicial Committee (Annual Convention TS, Dec. 1884; cf. *Lucifer*, Aug. 15, 1891 [VIII: 447]). Eventually her already poor health broke down. On March 21 HPB tendered her resignation as Corresponding Secretary, and on the 31st on doctor's orders she left India, hopefully to recover sufficiently to finish her *Secret Doctrine*. As she was boarding the steamer, Subba Row asked HPB to continue writing and send him through Olcott every

week what she had written, as he would then "make notes and commentaries" (*The Theosophist*, March 1925, 784).

Even on the open sea, she received "pages of manuscript referring to *The Secret Doctrine*" (cf. Constance Wachtmeister, *Reminiscences of H. P. Blavatsky and "The Secret Doctrine,"* letter of F. Hartmann to Mrs. Vera Johnston, June 2nd, 1893, 109). She stayed about three months in Italy, at Torre del Greco and Rome, and later in Switzerland, finally settling at Wurzburg, Germany in early August. On October 28, 1885, HPB wrote Olcott that she had "not much time now . . . but shall in a month or two send you the first six sections." (*ODL*, III: 317).

But no real work was done until December when Countess Wachtmeister came to be a companion and helper to HPB. Saved now from continual interruptions which had plagued her previously, HPB was able to keep a schedule of writing day after day through the long hours. In the months that followed only three times was the Countess able to prevail upon her to leave the apartment.

But December was hardly over when HPB received the *Proceedings* of the Society for Psychical Research based on Hodgson's investigations in India. This account was as unfair to her as was the earlier attack by the Coulombs and the *Christian College Magazine*. (The April 1986 *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* printed an article entitled "J'ACCUSE: An Examination of the Hodgson Report of 1885" by Vernon Harrison, a senior member of the SPR and an acknowledged expert on handwriting and forgery. Dr. Harrison's critique concludes (p. 309):

"[Richard Hodgson's] report is riddled with slanted statements, conjecture advanced as fact or probable fact, uncorroborated testimony of unnamed witnesses, selection of evidence and downright falsity. . . . His case against Madame H. P. Blavatsky is not proven.")

It is difficult to imagine the impact of this report upon HPB. Countess Wachtmeister relates:

"This," she cried, "is the Karma of the Theosophical Society, and it falls upon me. I am the scapegoat. I am made to bear all the sins of the Society, and now that I am dubbed the greatest impostor of the age, and a Russian spy into the bargain, who will listen to me or read *The Secret Doctrine*?" -- *Wachtmeister, Reminiscences*, 26

On January 6, 1886, HPB wrote to Olcott that *The Secret Doctrine* would be the vindication of herself and her teachers.

For *Secret Doctrine* is *entirely* new. There will not be there 20 pages quoted by bits from *Isis*. . . . In *four* Parts -- Archaic, Ancient, Mediaeval and Modern

Periods. Each Part 12 chapters, with Appendices and a Glossary of terms at the end. Countess here, and she sees I have almost *no books*. Master and Kashmiri (M and KH) dictating in turn. She copies all. -- *Theos.*, Aug. 1931, 667

HPB stayed at Wurzburg from August 1885 till May 1886. About the end of April she decided to spend the summer months at Ostende, Belgium, with her sister and niece. However, en route Gustav and Mary Gebhard persuaded her to visit their home at Elberfeld, Germany, and while there HPB injured her leg. It was not until July that she settled in Ostende where the Countess soon joined her, and once again the writing for the SD continued without interruption.

In the evening after her day's work, HPB was not averse to reading to visitors what she had written if she felt they would be interested. She also gave sections of the manuscript to different individuals to read. Eight pages were sent to Sinnett to share with Sir William Crookes, the most eminent chemist of his day in England and also a theosophist. On a number of occasions manuscripts were mailed to Adyar both from Wurzburg and Ostende. At one time HPB sent a large section to Olcott, warning him and Subba Row not to lose it.

Do, however, as you please, . . . and if you want to add write the addition on page and pin it to the page you add to. Remember, this is my last great work. I could not rewrite it if lost to save my life or that of the Society which is more. -- *Theos.*, March 1925, 790

In *Old Diary Leaves* (III: 385), Olcott writes that the SD manuscript of Volume I arrived in December 1886, but that Subba Row would not work on it as originally agreed upon because, as he said, there were so many errors he would have to rewrite it. HPB, much distressed, carefully went over the material again making many corrections.

Earlier, on October 21, she had written Olcott that in the spring she would go to London because of the availability of books at the Museum for checking, and also she would have proofreaders among the members there. Later, when Subba Row flatly refused to look at the material, HPB asks what should she do now without his help for the second volume, "where I have any number of Sanskrit words and sentences, and the esoteric meaning of any number of exoteric Hindu allegories from their Cosmogony and Theogony . . ."

Please answer immediately. The whole almost is given by the "old gentleman" and Master and there are wonderful things there I tell you. But someone must see to the Sanskrit and the corrections of the *exoteric* renderings. -- *Ibid.*, 787

In England at this time, a number of members of Sinnett's London Lodge were not satisfied with the existing state of affairs. They felt that a new impulse was needed for public work (Bertram Keightley, *Reminiscences of H.P.B.*, 1931, and Archibald Keightley, "From Ostende To London," *The Path*, November 1892,

245), and they decided to write HPB individually about the problem. Each received a long letter in return in which, among other things, she explained the urgency for her to finish *The Secret Doctrine* before taking up other activities. Nevertheless, early in 1887 Bertram Keightley went to Ostende to see HPB, who asked him "to took over parts of the MSS." She agreed to come to London at the end of April, provided lodging and other matters could be arranged. Soon after, Dr. Archibald Keightley (Uncle of Bertram, although one year younger) went to Ostende to visit HPB, who likewise gave him some of the *SD* to read. But hardly had he returned to England when news came of HPB's grave illness. Her physician and friends thought this time she would surely die but, as she had done in India in February 1885, she again miraculously recovered. Almost immediately thereafter she announced that the next phase of her work was to be carried on in England, both as regards *The Secret Doctrine* and the Theosophical Society. Learning of this, the Keightleys went to Ostende in the last weeks of April to prepare for the move. She was to stay at the small home of Mrs. Mabel Cook (Mabel Collins), Maycot, Upper Norwood, London.

HPB, describes her move in a card to William Q. Judge:

Maycot, Crownhill. Upper Norwood. London C. S. May 7th.

"Oh *thy* prophetic Soul!" Didn't know old HPB was for 17 days hovering between life & death; drawn irresistibly, by the charm *beyond* the latter & held by her coat-tails by the Countess & some London Lodges? Nice intuitional friend. Anyhow, *saved* once more, & once more stuck into the mud of life right with my classical nose. Two Keightleys & Thornton (a dear, *real* new Theosophist) came to Ostende, packed me up, books, kidneys & gouty legs & carried me across the water partially in steamer, partially in invalid chair & the rest in train to Norwood in one of the cottages of which here I am, living (rather *vegetating*) in it till the Countess returns. Write here "1000 words for the Path"? I'll TRY, old man. Very, very seedy & weak; but rather better after the mortal disease *which cleansed* me if it did not carry me off. Love & sincere, as usual, & for ever. Yours in heaven & hell. "O.L." HPB. -- Archives, Theosophical Society, Pasadena.

As soon as possible she was at her desk and work went on as usual. The task of readying the *SD* for publication fell mainly to the Keightleys. Bertram Keightley wrote that on arriving in England HPB asked them what they wished to do and after hearing their replies remarked, "All right, then, . . . here you are -- get to work right away" (BK, *Reminiscences*, 7). With that she gave them the entire manuscript to go through and advise her about arranging it. It made a pile over three feet high and was, as Archibald Keightley relates, "in detached sections, . . . with no definite arrangement, much of which had been patiently and industriously copied by the Countess Wachtmeister." After prolonged consultations the plan submitted to HPB became the present division of the volumes and contents. Other material having no place in the order and plan was to be saved for the future. They worked through the summer "reading, re-reading, copying, and correcting" (Wachtmeister, *Reminiscences*, 97, 91, 98). There were

many quotations to be verified at the British Museum or wherever else they might be located.

It should be mentioned that the Stanzas of Dzyan, on which *The Secret Doctrine* is based, had little commentary in the first drafts of the book. To HPB they were perfectly understandable, but for the student explanations were needed. A plan was arrived at whereby a Stanza was written out on a blank sheet of paper, and questions pinned to it, to which HPB would write answers. Often she demanded clarifications of the questions before attempting her comments. Yet with all this work on the *SD* going on, HPB founded a new magazine, *Lucifer*, the first issue of which appeared in September 1887. That same month she moved to larger quarters at 17 Lansdowne Road. The spirit and enthusiasm of those working with her show up clearly in the following extract from a letter dated May 28, 1887, from Bertram Keightley to W. Q. Judge:

H. P. B. is fairly well & working away right hard at the Secret Doctrine; which is *awfully good* & I am sure you will be immensely pleased with it. Tho' I date this from Linden Gardens, I am staying with HPB at Maycot, Crown Hill, Upper Norwood. S.E. where I expect she will be for the next two or three months. We have got a scheme on foot for establishing HPB in *winter* quarters near London where she can live in peace & gather the real workers in the Society around her. But whether it will succeed or even ever be really begun I cannot tell. All I know is that we shall do our level best to bring it about. Still do *not mention* anything about it; as "there's many a slip twixt the cup & the lip" & these things are best kept quiet till actually done. Anyway we mean a real effort to put new life into this dull L.L. [London Lodge] & the new Magazine, is the first step. The title at present in favour is "*Lucifer: the Lightbearer*," but no final decision has yet been come to. At any rate we *mean to do two things*: to make HPB as comfortable as we can & to prove to her that there are some at least who really appreciate her ceaseless self-sacrifice & untiring exertions for the Cause. -- Archives, TS, Pasadena.

After much cutting, pasting, and typing of clear copies of most of Volumes I and II, the manuscript finally was sent to press. Then came the task of proofreading, and this too had its challenges, as Archibald Keightley recalled:

The Secret Doctrine began to be printed and in this and in *Lucifer* Mme. Blavatsky's idiosyncrasy of regarding page-proof as being equivalent to manuscript, led to much argument and expense. It was not merely that she would divide a page after the type was all locked in the forms and insert a quantity of fresh matter, but she would with much care and precision of scissors cut out and then paste in a single sentence in an entirely different place. Woe betide the zealous sub-editor who protested on behalf of the printers and the provision of funds. "Off with his head" or his metaphysical scalp were the orders of the Queen of our wonderland. Nevertheless the account for corrections of the *Secret Doctrine* came to more than the original cost of setting up! -- "Reminiscences of H. P. Blavatsky," *Theosophical Quarterly* (VIII: 30), 115

HPB had long been disappointed with her financial arrangements with J. W. Bouton of New York for the publication of *Isis Unveiled* and, in consequence, she was determined to have financial control of *The Secret Doctrine* in both the United States and England. In May 1888 she asked W. Q. Judge to secure copyright in her name in the United States for her book, and to publish it in the U.S. either from "stereo plates, or only the moulds" sent from England (Letter, Bertram Keightley to W. Q. Judge, May 29, 1888, countersigned by HPB [Archives, TS, Pasadena]). Judge, after consultation with J. W. Lovell (of John W. Lovell Co. of New York), wrote Bert Keightley that the best method to follow for 1,000 sheets or more was for London to ship printed sheets, to be folded, collated, and bound in the U.S. (Letter, J. W. Lovell to W. Q. Judge, June 12, 1888, and Letter, WQJ to BK, June 22, 1888 [Archives, TS, Pasadena]). Copyright could be obtained in HPB's name as she was an American citizen, if all particulars about the book were furnished as requested. However, HPB was to understand "that the emission of the American and English editions should be simultaneous" (Letter, WQJ to BK, June 22, 1888 [Archives, TS, Pasadena]). After delays in England the sheets, folded and collated, for 1,000 copies of the first volume of the SD arrived in New York City on the steamer *Britannia*, Friday, October 19th. Judge wrote that the deadline of October 27th for "publishing" probably could not be met by him (Letter, WQJ to BK, October 19, 1888 [Archives, TS, Pasadena]). Finally, on October 31st H. P. Blavatsky cabled Judge asking "Have you published?" Judge cabled back "Yes, Book Out Nov 1" (Archives, TS, Pasadena). Volume II was published December 28th.

Questions as to who wrote *The Secret Doctrine* and how it was written have been asked ever since the book appeared. HPB made no claim for the entire production. As she explained to Sinnett in her letter of March 3, 1886:

There's a new development and scenery, every morning. I *live two lives again*. Master finds that it is too difficult for me to be looking consciously into the astral light for my S.D. and so, it is now about a fortnight, I am made to see all I have to as though in my dream. I see large and long rolls of paper on which things are written and I recollect them. -- *The Letters of H. P. Blavatsky to A. P. Sinnett*, 194

The Master KH gives further insight into the writing of the SD in his letter to Olcott, August 1888:

I have also noted, your thoughts about the "Secret Doctrine". Be assured that what she has not *annotated* from scientific and other works, we have given or *suggested* to her. Every mistake or erroneous notion, corrected and explained by her from the works of other theosophists *was corrected by me, or under my instruction*. It is a more valuable work than its predecessor [*Isis*], an epitome of occult truths that will make it a source of information and instruction for the earnest student for long years to come. -- *Letters from the Masters of the Wisdom*, No. 19, 1:47, 5th ed.

The co-authorship of *The Secret Doctrine* is also made plain in joint letters from the Mahatmas M and KH to Dr. Hubbe-Schleiden, received by him in Germany in early January 1886. Copies of these letters in Masters' handwriting were sent by HPB to Judge in America for his future use. He printed them with explanations in the April 1893 issue of *The Path*. The letters are reproduced on the following pages.

Any work, of course, must stand on its merit rather than on the means by which it was produced. Every reader must judge for himself how well HPB carried out her purposes. As she states in her Preface, *The Secret Doctrine* was "written in the service of humanity, and by humanity and the future generations it must be judged."

As the last sentences of Volume II indicate, HPB had two further volumes in preparation to be issued if the reception of the first volumes warranted it. These were never published and one can only surmise that more time was needed to comprehend the material already given out. She did, however, produce *The Voice of the Silence*, a small book of precepts drawn from "the same series as that from which the 'Stanzas' of the *Book of Dzyan* were taken, on which the *Secret Doctrine* is based." These present a noble conduct of life for those who would make themselves of greater service to mankind, and it was hoped that perhaps some few might find access to that inner knowledge to which she had pointed the way. As to Volumes III and IV, who is to say they will ever be issued.

Today, a century after the publication of *The Secret Doctrine*, other egos are creating a new world. The teachings they call forth for the next century will be in answer to their karma and the karma of their times. If HPB's writings have produced any effect, it may be found in the deeper spiritual yearning among an ever greater number to bring about the Universal Brotherhood for which she so labored and sacrificed.