

MRS ANNIE BESANT

A Modern Prophet

Theodore Besterman

ROUTLEDGE LIBRARY EDITIONS:
WOMEN'S HISTORY



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Mrs Annie Besant

A Modern Prophet

By

Theodore Besterman

London

Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., Ltd.

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1934

To
GERALD HEARD

O friend with the philosophic eye,
While cannons—and the politicians—thunder,
Still you gaze with scientific wonder
At ape and proton, moon and butterfly,
Still you transmit in watchful tones
The latest truth about sea-urchins' bones!
They say the pen is mightier than the sword:
Mightier than either is the microphonic word.

PLATE I



MRS BESANT IN 1878

Preface

THE reader will see that practically no references to authorities are given in the following pages. This is a practice which, as a general rule, I decidedly deprecate. In the present instance, however, having already published *A Bibliography of Annie Besant*, I have ventured to assume that the reader will credit me with knowledge of the sources.

While this book was passing through the press, the news of Mr C. W. Leadbeater's death reached England. In view of various passages in this book, and especially the appeal to Mr Krishnamurti, I learned of this event with real regret; but I eventually decided to leave the text as it stood.

I am indebted to the Council of the Society for Psychical Research for permission to quote from a long, interesting, and previously unpublished letter by Colonel Olcott about Mme Blavatsky; and to Mr A. D. Besant for permission to reproduce plates 2 and 3.

TH. B.

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Mrs Annie Besant : A Modern Prophet

I

BRIEF CHRONICLE

ANNIE WOOD was born in London on Friday, the 1st of October 1847. She was able afterwards to remember the Great Exhibition of 1851, though she did not actually visit it. In the following year her father died, and in 1854 her mother moved to Harrow, where she founded a house for boys from the School. Annie, however, did not live there for long at that time, being temporarily adopted by Miss Marryat to be educated by her special system. During the first five of the seven years that she spent in Miss Marryat's care, Annie Wood lived with her at Fern Hill, a house near Charmouth, in Dorset. In the spring of 1861, when she was over 13, she was taken abroad by Miss Marryat to Antwerp, Aix-la-Chapelle and Bonn, and later on to Paris. The summer of 1862 she spent at Sidmouth and the winter in London. Miss Marryat now felt that her work was done and her pupil returned to her mother in Harrow, where she remained until the summer of 1866, with intervals in London and at St Leonards.

MRS ANNIE BESANT

Early in 1866 Annie first met the Rev. Frank Besant, in whose company she spent much time during the following summer, at the end of which she found herself engaged to him. In the autumn Annie went to Switzerland with friends, and in the following autumn to Manchester with her mother. The intervening year she spent in the usual social activities and in preparation for her marriage, which took place on the 28th of December 1867, when she was just over twenty years of age.

The quiet life of a clergyman-schoolmaster's wife, in strong contrast to that she had led hitherto, led her to seek an outlet for her energies in writing. And as Annie Besant's outstanding characteristic at this time was an intense piousness, it is not surprising to find as her first effort a work, which never saw the light, on the lives of the Black Letter Saints. She followed this up with several stories in *The Family Herald*, together with a novel which the Editor of that periodical rejected, finding it too political: the first hint of what was to come. Any developments of that sort were interrupted, however, by the birth in January 1869 of her son Arthur Digby, and of her daughter Mabel Emily in August 1870, as well as by the sudden financial distress of her mother. But an illness resulting from nursing her children through the whooping cough brought matters to a crisis.

For some time Mrs Besant had begun to question the truths of revealed religion, and under the influence of Charles Voysey and Thomas Scott she began to write pamphlets in which she gave expression to her

BRIEF CHRONICLE

doubts. These activities led to angry dissensions with her husband, with whom she had not succeeded in finding happiness. She would not consent to conform, even outwardly, to the conduct required of a clergyman's wife, and in the summer of 1873, at the age of nearly 26, she parted from her husband.

At first Annie Besant tried to earn her own living and that of her children by fancy needlework and by taking a post as a governess. In May 1874 Mrs Wood died and Annie Besant now felt free to follow her conscience wherever it might lead her. She continued to write pamphlets for Thomas Scott, eventually becoming, after making the acquaintance of Charles Bradlaugh, an uncompromising atheist. Her association with Bradlaugh led Mrs Besant into the field of politics and into that of social reform. The two colleagues took a stand, for instance, on their right to publish information regarding birth-control, their action leading to a sensational trial and to the writing by Annie Besant of a text-book on the subject, of which several hundred thousand copies were sold. These wider activities led her to the conclusion that her educational equipment was inadequate for her work, and she accordingly matriculated in the University of London and took first class certificates in various scientific subjects, as well as the preliminary B.Sc. examination.

Her political activities in support of Bradlaugh brought Mrs Besant into contact with socialist thought, to which she had become converted by the

MRS ANNIE BESANT

middle of 1884. She continued her atheist activities, but socialist propaganda took up more and more of her time. During the course of this work she made the acquaintance of W. T. Stead, by whom she was asked to review a book called *The Secret Doctrine*, by a Mme Blavatsky. This book converted Mrs Besant to Theosophy, and in May 1889 she joined the Theosophical Society. Bradlaugh, though strongly opposed to Socialism, tolerated his partner's activities in that sphere, but Theosophy he was unable to stomach, and after many months of patient waiting, fifteen years of close co-operation, years which had made Mrs Besant a brilliant orator, a fluent writer, an experienced propagandist, and an educated and experienced woman of the world, were brought to an end in December 1890.

Gradually Mrs Besant withdrew more and more into theosophical activities. She left the Fabian Society, withdrew the book on birth-control for which she had suffered so much, retired from the London School Board, and in 1893 left for India. She had irrevocably broken with the past. Henceforth her face was turned to the east.

After protracted and bitter controversies Mrs Besant became President of the Theosophical Society in 1907, being regularly re-elected thereafter. As soon as she became official leader of the theosophical movement Annie Besant began again to extend her activities. She fostered the notion that a young Indian was to incarnate the coming World-teacher, attempted to introduce Theosophy into the Roman

BRIEF CHRONICLE

Church, tried to join forces with Masonry, and generally sought to extend the influence of Theosophy. At the same time she passionately took up the causes of Indian independence and Indian education. These activities were crowned in 1917, when Mrs Besant was interned by the Government and elected President of the National Congress, and in 1921, when her Central Hindu College was merged with the Hindu University of Benares.

Mrs Besant was now 74 years of age, and, though her energy remained unimpaired for some years, her influence gradually waned. Many disciples fell away, including the World-teacher himself, and her last few years cannot have been very happy. She died on 20 September 1933.