

## HPB'S EARLY LIFE

### BACKGROUND ESSAY A

# HPB's Early Life

[The following account is based primarily on the biographical sketch of HPB's early life by Boris de Zirkoff, "Helena Petrovna Blavatsky: General Outline of Her Life Prior to Her Public Work," in *Collected Writings* 1:xxv–lii, supplemented by other sources, such as A. P. Sinnett's *Incidents*.]

Much of H. P. Blavatsky's early life is poorly documented, and reports of it are sometimes contradictory (with different reports even by Blavatsky herself). The following sketch presents some of the surest or at least likely facts about her life before the first known letter, and subsequent essays give background for other letters. These essays are not a biography of HPB (as Blavatsky preferred to be called by those who knew her), but supplementary material to help explain her correspondence.

### BIRTH AND ANCESTRY

Ekaterinoslav (since 1926 called Dnepropetrovsk) is a town on the bank of the Dnieper River toward the southeast of the Ukraine, which was formerly part of the Russian Empire. Shortly after its founding in 1783, Ekaterinoslav became a provincial center, where trade was carried on by people from the surrounding region. There, probably in the early morning hours of August 12 (which was July 31 by the Julian calendar then used in Russia) in the year 1831, a baby girl was born to Helena Andreyevna and Artillery Captain Peter Alexeyevich von Hahn.

A cholera epidemic was sweeping the land, and the baby girl was premature, so she was baptized immediately and given her mother's Christian name, Helena. (A Russian has as a second name a patronymic, that is, a name based on the father's first name, so the baby was Helena Petrovna, "daughter of Peter.") The ceremony of her baptism was a small disaster. Throughout the lengthy Russian Orthodox ritual, participants stood with candles in their hands. One of them in the very front of all the assembled relatives, the

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infant's aunt but herself only a little child, grew weary and slumped down on the floor. The godparents were in the process, on behalf of the infant Helena, of renouncing the devil and all his works. At that point the little girl on the floor, toying with the lighted candle she was holding, accidentally set fire to the long flowing robes of the officiating priest. The result was a great blaze that severely burned him and several others who tried to put out the fire. People said it was a sign that the infant Helena's life would be full of trials and troubles.

Helena's father, Peter Alexeyevich von Hahn (1798–1873) was the son of Lieutenant General Alexis Gustavovich von Hahn and Countess Elizabeth Maksimovna von Pröbsen. The family was from Mecklenburg, a branch of the Counts Hahn von Rottenstern-Hahn, who a century or so earlier had emigrated to Russia, where their last name was Russianized as "Gan." Vera de Zhelihovsky, HPB's sister, says that Helena inherited her curly hair and her vivaciousness from her paternal grandmother. Helena was her parents' first child, and at the time of her birth, her father was in Poland, fighting in the Russo-Polish War of 1830–1.

Helena's mother was Helena Andreyevna (1814–42), the oldest daughter of Andrey Mihailovich de Fadeyev and Helena Pavlovna.

Helena's maternal grandfather was a civil officer of some distinction, at various times a Privy Councillor, Civil Governor of the Province of Saratov, Director of the Department of State Lands in the Caucasus, and a member of the Council of the Viceroy of the Caucasus. Helena's maternal grandmother was the daughter of Prince Paul Vassilyevich Dolgorukov and Henrietta Adolfovna de Bandré-du-Plessis, of French descent. Because the maternal grandmother, Helena Pavlovna, had been born as Princess Dolgorukova, her parents objected to her marriage with a commoner. She was an accomplished woman, with proficiency in botany, history, archeology, and numismatics. She corresponded with scientists from various countries of Europe, including Alexander von Humboldt. Lady Hester Lucy Stanhope called Helena Pavlovna "an outstanding woman-scientist, who would have been famous in Europe, but who is completely underestimated due to her misfortune of being born on the shores of the Volga river, where there was none to recognize her scientific value."

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The de Fadeyevs had several other daughters who survived infancy, in addition to HPB's mother. They included Nadyezhda Andreyevna (1828-1919), HPB's aunt who was only three years older than she, who never married, and who was to be for some years a member of the Council of the Theosophical Society; and Katherine Andreyevna, who married Yuliy F. de Witte and one of whose sons was Count Serguey Yulyevich de Witte, Russian Minister of Finance (1892-1903) and first constitutional Prime Minister of the Russian Empire (1905-6), who sought to Westernize Russia.

HPB's mother, Helena Andreyevna, was also an accomplished woman. She became a published novelist at the age of twenty-three. When just sixteen, she married Peter Alexeyevich, who was nearly twice her age. Her marriage exemplified the truth of the opening line of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*: "All happy families are alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." Helena Andreyevna's cultured background did not fit the tenor of military camps. Her novels depicted the plight of women in nineteenth-century Russia and were early examples of feminist protest. She died of tuberculosis at the age of twenty-eight, when her first child, Helena Petrovna (HPB) was eleven. She had borne three other children as well: a son, Alexander, who died in infancy; a daughter, Vera, four years younger than HPB and a frequent correspondent of hers; and another son, Leonid, born two years before his mother's death.

## FROM CHILDHOOD TO WIFEHOOD

During her first ten years, Helena Petrovna moved repeatedly, partly because, like all military men, her father had frequent changes of post and partly because her mother's health led her to travel to various places in search of cures or relief from the rigors of military life. In 1834, her grandfather, Andrey Mihailovich de Fadeyev, was appointed to a post in Odessa, on the shore of the Black Sea. His daughter, recovering from the birth and infant death of a son, Alexander, brought young Helena to live with her grandparents. The next year, Helena's sister, Vera, was born in Odessa.

The following years saw Helena traveling with her mother in the Ukraine, to St. Petersburg, and to Astrakhan, a city and province at the delta of the Volga River into the Caspian Sea. In 1836, Helena's

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grandfather was appointed Trustee for the nomadic Kalmuck tribes in Astrakhan. Her mother took Helena and Vera to live there for about a year. Then Helena's mother, with the two girls, resumed her travels—to a spa in the Caucasus; to Poltava, where Antonya Christianovna Kühlwein joined them as the girls' governess; and to Odessa, for more mineral water treatments. In 1839, a Yorkshire English governess, Augusta Sophia Jeffers, joined the family. Late that year, they moved to Saratov on the Volga River, where Helena's grandfather had been appointed as governor of the province. Helena's brother Leonid was born there in 1840.

In 1841, Helena went with her mother, sister, and brother to join their father in the Ukraine, moving again the following year back to Odessa. In July 1842, Helena's mother died, and her children returned to Saratov to live with their grandparents for about three years. But Helena continued her travels, visiting the Ural Mountains, which divide European Russia from Siberia, and beyond.

In 1846, Helena, Vera, and Leonid moved with their aunt Katherine de Witte and her family to a house in the country, but at the end of the year they returned to Saratov. The following year they journeyed to Tiflis (now called Tbilisi) in Russian Georgia, on the eastern shore of the Black Sea, where their grandparents had settled. The journey, an arduous one by boat and horse carriage, took nearly two months. The years 1847–8 saw further travels around Tiflis.

During the winter of 1848–9 Helena was engaged to Nikifor Vassilyevich Blavatsky. There are several explanations of how and why the engagement came about, but the most widely cited and perhaps most probable is that given by her aunt, Nadyezhda Fadeyev (*Incidents* 54):

She cared not whether she should get married or not. She had been simply defied one day by her governess to find any man who would be her husband, in view of her temper and disposition. The governess, to emphasize the taunt, said that even the old man she had found so ugly, and had laughed at so much, calling him “a plumeless raven”—that even he would decline her for a wife! That was enough: three days after she made him propose, and then, frightened at

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what she had done, sought to escape from her joking acceptance of his offer. But it was too late.

Nikifor Blavatsky had held various civil posts in the Russian provincial governments in the Ukraine and Georgia (in the Caucasus) and was to be appointed vice governor of a newly organized Province of Yerivan (Yerevan) in Armenia, near the eastern border of Turkey. He was an undistinguished but competent civil servant.

In the following spring 1849, Helena seems to have run away from home, perhaps in an effort to avoid her approaching marriage. In July 1849, however, Helena married Nikifor and went with him to a resort near Yerevan in Armenia. She again tried unsuccessfully to run away during this trip. The Blavatskys stayed at the resort, however, until late August, when they were briefly visited by her family, after which they all went to Yerevan.

In October 1849, HPB left her husband to return to Tiflis, where her grandparents were. They sent her to St. Petersburg to join her father, who had remarried and was to meet his daughter at the Black Sea port of Odessa. With two servants, she traveled overland from Tiflis to Poti, a port in Caucasian Georgia on the eastern shore of the Black Sea, where she was to take passage to Odessa. However, either accidentally or purposefully, HPB missed the ship she was supposed to take to Odessa and instead got passage on an English vessel, the SS *Commodore*. On it she sailed northwestward on the Black Sea to the city of Kerch at the eastern tip of the Crimea. Helena sent her servants ashore to arrange for her arrival in Kerch the next morning, but instead of debarking herself, she remained on board when the ship sailed that night for the city of Taganrog, on the north shore of the Sea of Azov, and then back across the Black Sea to Constantinople. Thus at the age of eighteen, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky began her long wanderings around the world.

## EARLY TRAVELS

From Constantinople, HPB may have traveled during 1849–50 in Greece, eastern Europe, Asia Minor, and Egypt, meeting Paulos Metamon, a Coptic occultist in Cairo. During 1850–51, she was in western Europe, particularly Paris and London, where she met a

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family friend, Princess Bagration-Muhransky. During her London stay, she lived variously in a flat on Cecil Street, in a hotel called Mivart's (now Claridge's), and in another hotel between the City and the Strand.

According to Countess Constance Wachtmeister, HPB said that she first met Master Morya face to face in Hyde Park, London. She identified the time to A. P. Sinnett as "the year of the first Nepal Embassy," which was 1850. Both the date and place, however, are problematical. HPB wrote in her Sketchbook that she met her teacher at Ramsgate on her twentieth birthday (August 12, 1851), but also told Constance Wachtmeister that "Ramsgate" was a blind. HPB also told the Countess that her father was in London at the time and she consulted him about the Master's offer for her to cooperate "in a work which he was about to undertake."

It is, according to Boris de Zirkoff (*CW* 1:xxxix, citing Sinnett, *Incidents* 62-6), "fairly certain or at least probable" that HPB traveled to Canada in fall 1851 and stayed at Quebec, going from there to New Orleans to study the practice of voodoo. But being warned in a vision of the dangers of voodooism, she continued through Texas to Mexico. During 1852, she seems to have traveled through Central and South America to visit the ancient ruins there. She also went to the West Indies, where she arranged with "a certain Englishman" she had met in Germany two years before and a Hindu chela she had met in Honduras to sail by way of the Cape of Good Hope to Ceylon and Bombay.

HPB made an unsuccessful attempt by herself to enter Tibet through Nepal. She traveled around north India, as far east as Dinajpur (in what is now Bangladesh). In a letter of December 5, 1881, to Prince Dondukov-Korsakov, she says she "stayed there nearly two years, traveling about and receiving money each month—from whom I have no idea." Thereafter, HPB seems to have traveled back to England by way of Java and Singapore. In *From the Caves and Jungles of Hindostan* (272), HPB says of her Master, "Long ago, very long ago, more than twenty-seven years, I met him in the house of a stranger in England, where he had come in the company of a dethroned native prince." The latter was presumably young Prince Dhuleep Singh of Lahore, who sailed from India on April 19, 1854, and arrived at Southampton on June 18, 1854.

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Later in 1854, HPB again traveled to America, landing in New York and passing through Chicago on her way across the Rockies to San Francisco with a caravan of emigrants, probably in a covered wagon (Sinnott, *Incidents* 66–7). Her precise whereabouts thereafter are unknown, but she probably stayed in the Western Hemisphere until fall 1855. At that time, she left for Calcutta, India, by way of Japan.

In India, HPB traveled widely, at Lahore meeting a German ex-Lutheran minister named Kühlwein, an acquaintance of her father's and perhaps a relative of her old governess, who was accompanied by his two brothers. The four laid plans to enter Tibet. They traveled through Ladakh in eastern Kashmir to Leh, one of the highest permanently inhabited towns in the world, in the company of a Tartar Shaman on his way home to Siberia. HPB may at this time have crossed the border into Tibet with the aid of the Shaman, who also helped her out of a difficult situation by mentally summoning the help of native horsemen. Her adventures on this occasion are described, with some artistic license, in *Isis Unveiled* (2:598–602, 626–8). She may also have traveled in Burma, Thailand, and Assam at this time, leaving India by summer 1857.

## RETURN HOME

By early 1858, HPB was apparently back in Europe, traveling through France and Germany and then returning to Russia in fall 1858, for her first visit home in nine years. The approximate time of her return to Russia is fixed by a letter from her husband, Nikifor Blavatsky to HPB's aunt and confidant, Nadyezhda de Fadeyev (the Russian original of which is in the Archives of the Theosophical Society, Adyar, and has been translated in the *Theosophist* 80 [Aug. 1959]: 295–6). The letter, which is dated from Erevan, November 13, 1858, reads in part:

Until now I knew nothing of H. P.'s [Helena Petrovna's] return to Russia. To tell you the truth, this ceased to interest me long ago. Time smooths out everything, even every memory. You may assure H. P. on my word of honor that I will never pursue her. I wish ardently that our marriage be annulled, and that she may marry again. It is possible that

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I too may marry again, from calculation or inclination, feeling myself not yet unsuited to family life. So make every effort, by uniting your forces, and let her also do her best to annul the marriage. I did my best, but Exarch Isidor [the bishop who headed the Orthodox Church in Caucasian Georgia] refused to do it. Therefore I do not intend to start a new lawsuit any more, or even to obtain the divorce by applying to the Emperor [five illegible words] because I consider it entirely useless after having received your letter. I beg you instantly to endeavor to end the matter, to the satisfaction of both of you. Whether she finishes or reopens the subject, in any case, I repeat, I shall not attempt to pursue her or make inquiries in order to find out where she is living. You know that a man loses less, in public opinion, than a woman, in whatever circumstances he may happen to be. In whatever manner I might behave morally, I would be justified sooner than a woman.

In this way I have been living since the time of my misfortune [his marriage to HPB]. And in consequence of it I have been working on my character in order that I may become unaffected by anything. Very often I even laugh at the stupidities which I committed, and I comfort myself by realizing that not only I but other people too make the same mistakes in this strange world.

One can become accustomed to anything. So I have got used to a joyless life in Erivan. Whatsoever may happen I shall remain unaffected. My plan is to retire entirely from active service. I would then go to my estate, in that hidden corner which nobody knows of, and live there surrounded by the delights of a lonely life.

Your always devoted, N. Blavatsky

At Christmas 1858, HPB visited her sister Vera, whose husband, Nikolay de Yahontov, had recently died and who was therefore living temporarily with her father-in-law in Pskov, in northwest Russia near southeast Estonia. During her short stay there, HPB became an object of considerable local interest because of reports of her parapsychological abilities. In spring 1859 HPB visited St. Peters-

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burg with her father and her half sister Liza, a child of his second marriage, before they traveled on to the house Vera had inherited from her late husband in the province of Pskov. There HPB had an attack of a recurring illness, involving the reopening of a wound near her heart. These attacks involved a deathlike trance and spontaneous recoveries.

HPB and Vera traveled to Tiflis to visit their grandparents in spring or summer 1860, and HPB remained there for about a year. While she was there, in August 1860, her grandmother, Helena Pavlovna de Fadeyev, died. About this time HPB was reconciled with Nikifor Blavatsky and they lived in the same house for about a year, but then HPB once again left.

At some point during this period, or shortly before, HPB—and apparently Nikifor—acquired a ward, a young boy named Yury, at a time and under circumstances that are unknown, except that she says she took the child to protect the honor of another person. It has been proposed (Fuller, *Blavatsky and Her Teachers* 18, 54–6) that the other person was a Nathalia Blavatsky, perhaps a relative of Nikifor’s, but the facts are probably beyond recovery. The existence of the child is attested by a passport issued to HPB on August 23 (Julian calendar), 1862, in Tiflis and signed by the Civil Governor, Orlovsky. The passport was issued “in pursuance of a petition presented by her husband, to the effect that she, Mme. Blavatsky, accompanied by their infant ward Yury, proceeds to the provinces of Tauris, Cherson, and Pskoff for the term of one year.” Pskoff (Pskov) is the city and province in northwest Russia where the estate Vera inherited from her late husband was located, but nothing is known about the reason for this trip or even whether it was actually taken.



### *Introduction to Letter 1*

In 1863, before returning once more to Tiflis for about a year, HPB traveled widely in Caucasian Georgia, especially to mountainous and wild country, and apparently studied with native magicians called *kudyani*, becoming known for the healing and parapsychological powers she was developing. During this time, she began to

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experience a “double life,” which she described in a letter to her relatives. There are two recorded versions of the surviving extract from this letter. The notes give variants from the later version, which were apparently made by HPB herself when A. P. Sinnett was editing the letter for use in his book, *Incidents in the Life of Madame Blavatsky* (1886).

### Letter 1

To her relatives

[between 1861 and 1864]

Whenever I was called by name, I opened the eyes upon hearing it and was myself, in every particular. As soon as I was left alone, I relapsed into my usual, half dreamy condition and became *somebody else*.<sup>1</sup> . . . In cases when I was interrupted during a conversation in the latter capacity—say, at half a sentence either spoken by me or some of my *visitors*—invisible of course to any other, for I was alone to whom they were realities—no sooner I closed my eyes than the sentence which had been interrupted<sup>2</sup>—continued from the word<sup>3</sup> it had stopped at. When awake and *myself* I remembered well who I was in my second capacity<sup>4</sup> and what I was doing. When somebody else<sup>5</sup>—I had no idea of who was H. P. Blavatsky. I was in another far off country, quite another individuality, and had no connection at all with my actual life.

#### NOTES:

1. From the leader dots down to “no sooner,” *Incidents* has instead: “I had simply a mild fever that consumed me slowly but surely, day after day, with entire loss of appetite, and finally of hunger, as I would feel none for days, and often went a week without touching any food whatever, except a little water, so that in four months I was reduced to a living skeleton. In cases when I was interrupted, when in my other *self*, by the sound of my present name being pronounced, and while I was conversing in my dream-life,—say at half a sentence either spoken by me or those who were with my second *me* at the time,—and opened my eyes to answer the call, I used to

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answer very rationally, and understood all, for I was never delirious.  
But no sooner . . .”

2. *Incidents* adds: “was completed by my other self,”
3. *Incidents* adds: “or even half the word,”
4. *Incidents* adds: “and what I had been”
5. *Incidents* adds: “, i.e., the personage I had become, I know”

DATE: Unknown, but the events correspond to HPB’s experiences at this time and the letter is cited in “Mystical History” and *Incidents* in connection with her stay in the Caucasus.

SOURCE: Russian original unavailable. Copied from a translation in “Mystical History” 527n. Significant variations and additions in *Incidents* 147–8 (2nd ed. 116) are given in the notes.



### *Introduction to Letter 2*

The year 1865 was a watershed in HPB’s life. As a result of her experiences in the Caucasus during the preceding few years, her parapsychological powers, which had been active to varying degrees since her childhood, came increasingly under her conscious control, and her life took a new direction. In a letter of March 1, 1882, to Prince Dondukov-Korsakov, HPB says, “Between the Blavatsky of 1845–65 and the Blavatsky of the years 1865–82 there is an *unbridgeable gulf*.” When HPB finally left the Caucasus to go to Italy in 1865, she was never to return there again. Her sense of freedom and release is expressed in a letter to her relatives, probably written about the time she left the Caucasus.

### *Letter 2*

*To her relatives*

[1865]

Now I will never be subjected any longer to external influences. The last vestiges of my psycho-physiological weakness is gone to return no more. . . . I am cleansed and purified of that dreadful attraction to myself of stray spooks

and ethereal affinities (?). I am free, free, thanks to Them whom I now bless at every hour of my life.

DATE: As in “Mystical History”; in *Incidents*, the letter is dated 1866.

SOURCE: Russian original unavailable. Letter fragment copied from a translation in “Mystical History” 553. Also published in *Incidents* 152 (2nd ed. 120) with minor variations.



## BACKGROUND ESSAY B

# The Lost Years

HPB's whereabouts during the five or so years after she left the Caucasus are poorly documented; they are consequently sometimes referred to as the “veiled years.” Vera de Zhelihovsky, her sister, wrote (“Mystical History” 553): “From her letters we learned only that she was always travelling, rarely settling for any length of time in one place.” HPB seems to have traveled in the Balkans, Greece, Italy, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, and perhaps Persia. She had contact with the Druzes and other esoteric and mystic groups in the Near East.

Boris de Zirkoff (*CW* 1:xlvii) comments on the only certain information we have about HPB during this period:

To this period belong her travel-notes written in French and contained in a small Notebook now in the Adyar Archives. Although these notes are undated, H.P.B. mentions one or two historical facts which provide a key to the dating of the trip she describes. It appears that she was at Belgrade when the Turkish garrison yielded the Fort and the commander, Al Rezi Pasha, withdrew from the territory. This was April 13, 1867. H.P.B. travelled by boat on the Danube, and by coach between various towns of Hungary and Transylvania; she visited, among others, Brassó, Szeben, Féhervár, Kolozsvár, Nagyvárad, Temesvár, Belgrade, Neusatz,

## INTRODUCTION TO LETTER 3

Esék, etc. These travel-notes are the only definite information concerning her whereabouts during a period which presents a great deal of uncertainty.

In 1867, HPB was in Bologna, with young Yury, who had apparently been with her all this time. The child was sickly, and HPB's efforts to keep him alive did not succeed. She returned to Russia briefly to bury her ward, but did not contact her relatives on that trip, instead returning immediately to Italy. She was at Mentana in November 1867, when the popular hero and nationalist Guieseppe Garibaldi led his volunteer forces against the French. She is said to have participated in the battle, which ended in defeat for the Italian patriots and during which she was wounded five times.

In early 1868, HPB traveled from Florence, through Constantinople, to India. On this trip she entered Tibet, meeting for the first time the Master KH and staying for a while in his sister's house in Shigatse, a city in south central Tibet near the Tashilhunpo Monastery, the seat of the Panchen Lama. During this period HPB was out of contact with her relatives, but on November 11, 1870, her aunt Nadyezhda de Fadeyev, received a letter from the Master KH saying that HPB was well and would return to the family before "18 moons."

HPB returned from India through the newly opened Suez Canal in late 1870, traveling to Cyprus and Greece, where she met the Master Hilarion. Subsequently she boarded the SS *Eunomia* at Piraeus (the port of Athens) to travel to Egypt. It carried a supply of gunpowder as protection against pirates, but as the ship sailed southward, its powder magazine exploded with great loss of life and property. HPB was not injured and eventually reached Alexandria, but with only meager resources. By the end of 1871 she was in Cairo, where she met Emma Cutting (later Mme. Alexis Coulomb) who provided her temporary financial assistance.



### *Introduction to Letter 3*

In Egypt, HPB became interested in the phenomenon of Spiritualism. Although HPB rejected the notion that the spirits of the departed communicate through mediums, she did not doubt that what she called "spooks," the postmortem remains of a

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personality, could manifest in various ways, as shown in the following account from a letter to her sister, Vera de Zhelihovsky, who introduces the account:

During the latter years many were the changes that had taken place in our family: our grandfather and aunt's husband (who had both occupied very high official positions in Tiflis) had died and the whole family had left Caucasus to settle permanently in Odessa. H. P. Blavatsky had not visited the country for nearly seven years, and there remained in Tiflis but her younger sister with her family, and a number of old servants, ancient serfs of the late General Fadeyeff's, who, once liberated, could not be kept without wages in the house they had been born in and had been gradually all sent away. These people, some of whom were unable owing to old age to work for their living, came constantly for help to Mme Jelihovsky. Unable to pension so many she did what she could for them. Among other things she had obtained a permanent home at the City Refuge Home for two old men, late servants of her family: a cook called Maxim and his brother Piotre—once upon a time a very decent footman, but at the time of the event—an incorrigible drunkard who had lost his arm in consequence.

On that summer Madame Yahontoff (who had during the interval married her second husband V. Jelihovsky) had gone to reside during the hot months of the year at Manglis, the headquarters of the Regiment of Erivan—some thirty miles from town. She had just received the news that her sister had returned from India and was going to remain for some time in Egypt. The two sisters corresponded very rarely, at long intervals, and their letters were generally short. But after a prolonged silence Mme Jelihovsky (Yahontoff) received from HPB a very long and interesting letter. A portion of it consisted of flying sheets torn out from a note-book and these were all covered with pencil writing. The strange events they recorded had been all put down on the spot, some under the shadow of the great Pyramid of Cheops, and some of them inside Pharaoh's Chamber. It

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appears that Mme B. had gone there several times, once with a large company, some of whom were Spiritualists. Some most wonderful phenomena were described by some of her companions as having taken place in broad daylight in the desert when they were sitting under a tent; while other notes in Mme Blavatsky's writing recorded the strange sights she saw in the cimmerian darkness of the King's Chamber when she had been left alone in the Pyramid comfortably seated inside the sarcophagus. But as her narrative in the notes is very broken, consisting as it does of rough notes, we leave a description of what she saw to herself when she is ready to give it out. We rather narrate the strangest case of clairvoyance that ever came under our personal notice. It is a striking case of what Spiritualists generally call "spirit identity". We give a fragment of Mme Blavatsky's letter.

#### *Letter 3*

*To V. de Zhelibovsky*

*[early 1872]*

Let me know, Vera, whether it is true that the old Piotre is dead? He must have died last night or at some time yesterday?<sup>1</sup> Just fancy what happened! A friend of mine, a young English lady and medium,<sup>2</sup> stood writing mechanically on bits of paper, leaning upon an old Egyptian tomb. The pencil had begun tracing perfect gibberish—in characters that had never existed nowhere as a philologist told us—when suddenly, and as I was looking from behind her back, they changed into what I thought was Russian letters. My attention having been called elsewhere, I had just left her when I heard people saying that what she had written was now evidently in some existing characters, but neither she nor any one else could read them. I came back just in time to prevent her from destroying that slip of paper as she had done with the rest, and was rewarded. Possessing myself of the rejected slip, fancy my astonishment on finding it contained in Russian an evident apostrophe to myself!

“*Barishnya*” (little or “young miss”), “dear *baryshnya!*” said the writing. “Help, oh help me, miserable sinner! . . . I suffer: *drink, drink, give me a drink!* . . . I suffer, suffer!” From this term *baryshnya*—a title our old servants will, I see, use with us two even after our hair will have grown white with age—I understood immediately that the appeal came from one of our old servants and took therefore the matter in hand by arming myself with a pencil to *record what I would myself see*. I found the name Piotre Koutcherof echoed in my mind quite distinctly, and before me an undistinguishable mass, a formless pillar of grey smoke, and thought I heard it repeat the same words. Furthermore I saw that he had died in Dr Gorolevitch’s hospital attached to the City Refuge—the Tiflis Work House I suppose. Moreover, as I made out, it is you who had placed him in company with his old brother, our old Maxim, who had died a few days before him. You had never written me about poor Maxim’s death. Do tell me whether it is so or not.

## NOTES:

1. Vera adds a parenthesis at this point: “the date on the stamp of the envelope showed that it had left Egypt ten days previous to the one it was received.”
2. More information about the young lady, including her possession by an astral “spook” desirous of wine and her subsequent sickness for several weeks, is given in Sinnett’s *Incidents* 167n and CW 14:488–9.

Vera concludes her comment on the episode with these remarks:

Further on followed her description of the whole vision as she had it, later on in the evening, when alone, and the authentic words pronounced by “Piotre’s spook” as she called it. The “spirit” (?) was bitterly complaining of thirst and was becoming quite desperate. It was a punishment it said—and the spook seemed to know it well—for his drunkenness during the lifetime of that personality! . . . “An agony of thirst, that nothing could quench . . . an ever living fire!” as she explained it.

## INTRODUCTION TO LETTER 4

Mme Blavatsky's letter ended with a postscript in which she notified her sister that her doubts had all been settled. She saw the astral "spooks" of both the brothers—one harmless and passive, the other active and dangerous.

Upon the receipt of this letter, her sister was struck with surprise. Ignorant herself of the death of the parties mentioned, she telegraphed immediately to town and the answer received from doctor Gorolevitch corroborated the news announced by Mme Blavatsky in every particular. Piotre had died on the very same day and date as given in HPB's letter, and his brother two days earlier.

DATE: According to Boris de Zirkoff, HPB was in Cairo between October or November 1871 and April 1872. This letter must have been written during that time; it shows none of the disillusionment with Spiritualist manifestations and mediums that ended HPB's efforts to form a society for their investigation toward the end of her time in Cairo. Consequently a date sometime in early 1872 seems probable.

SOURCE: Russian original unavailable. Copied from a translation in "Mystical History" 558–9. Russian text published in *Blue Hills* ix–x and in *Rebus* 2 (Nov. 27, 1883): 419. English translation in *Incidents* 165–6 (2nd ed. 129–30) with minor variations.



### *Introduction to Letter 4*

In Cairo, HPB attempted unsuccessfully to organize a "Société Spirite" for the investigation of the phenomena of Spiritualism, her first effort at organizing a group. Because she felt the need of practical demonstrations, HPB decided to seek mediums who might come to Cairo and therefore wrote to a London Spiritualist journal, *The Medium and Daybreak: A Weekly Journal Devoted to the History, Phenomena, Philosophy, and Teachings of Spiritualism*, requesting it to announce her search. *Medium and Daybreak* did not publish her letter, but years later, after HPB had become something of a celebrity, the journal (March 15, 1889, 20:165) recalled having received it: "As far as we can remember, her letter was accompanied by a printed circular, stating the objects of the society she was then attempting to promote. Her communication would be received by us early in

## INTRODUCTION TO LETTER 4

1872.” The journal did publish a short description of the society in its issue of February 9, 1872 (3:55), which was probably derived from the “printed circular”:

### THE CAIRO SOCIETY OF SPIRITUALISTS.

A society of Spiritualists has been formed in Cairo, Egypt, under the direction of Madame Blavatsky, a Russian lady, assisted by several mediums. Seances are held twice a week, namely on Tuesday and Friday evenings, to which members alone are admissible. It is intended to establish, in connection with the society, a lecture room, and a library of spiritualistic and other works, as well as a journal under the title, *La Revue Spirite du Caire* [*Fr. The Spiritualist Review of Cairo*], to appear on the 1st and 15th of each month. The following is a synopsis of the general rules of the society:—

1. Each annual member will have the right to a seance on his private affairs.
2. Both sexes are admissible to membership.
3. No member is allowed to introduce a stranger on pain of paying the price of an annual ticket, or of being excluded from the society.
4. All members provoking, by misconduct, the manifestation of evil spirits, or otherwise disturbing the tranquillity of the seance, will be subject to exclusion for the rest of the evening.
5. All frivolous or personal questions, not interesting to the society, must be submitted to the president. Lastly, All questions concerning the Government are strictly forbidden.

Later in the year, however, *Medium and Daybreak* (April 26, 1872, 3:150) did publish an announcement of the sort HPB wanted:

D. K. C. writing from Egypt, sends his kind regards to Mrs. Berry and others whom he used to meet at Mr. Herne’s seances at the Spiritualist Institution, 15, Southampton Row. Mediums visiting the East would do well to pay a visit to Cairo. Madame Blavatsky has lately formed a society of Spiritualists, now numbering thirty-seven members. She offers board and lodging to any good mediums as long as they please to stop. Her address is Madame Blavatsky, Société Spirite, Rue d’Abdin, near the Viceroy’s Palace, Cairo, Egypt.

## LETTER 4

That same month (April 1872), a sister London publication, *Human Nature: A Monthly Journal of Zoistic Science and Intelligence, Embodying Physiology, Phrenology, Psychology, Spiritualism, Psychology, the Laws of Health, and Sociology* (6:190), printed a paragraph “compiled from her letter and circular” (as later attested by *Medium and Daybreak*, March 15, 1889, 20:165):

CAIRO, EGYPT.—A Society of Spiritualists has recently been founded in this city by a Russian lady, from whom we have received a very kind and encouraging letter. In a country of ignorance and superstition, she is meeting with much difficulty and opposition, and it is not an easy matter to maintain an association in such a state of society. She expresses herself as greatly in want of mediums to demonstrate the existence of spiritual beings, and says that any physical medium, such as Messrs. Herne and Williams, would meet with a cordial reception. She would give such a medium board and lodging in her own house, free from all expense, as long as he might choose. This lady’s address is:—Madame Blawatsky, Société Spirite, Rue d’Abdin, Cairo, Egypt. A postscript contains the following:—

### Letter 4

To The Medium and Daybreak [ca. January 1872]

I should like to subscribe for your valuable publication, *The Medium*. Please to let me know what the price of subscription will be. If you should chance to see Mr. D. Home, medium, please tell him that a friend of his late wife “Sacha”<sup>1</sup>—a St. Petersburg friend of past years—sends him her best compliments, and wishes him prosperity.

NOTE:

1. “Sacha,” the nickname of Alexandrina de Kroll.

DATE: Estimated from the date (February 9, 1872) of the first announcement of the Cairo Société Spirite and the editor’s recollection that the letter was received “early in 1872.”

SOURCE: Original unavailable. Copied from *Human Nature* 6 (April 1872): 190.



### *Introduction to Letter 5*

HPB's view of mediumship was not that of Spiritualists generally. Her private thoughts about Spiritualism are contained in fragments from a letter (or letters) to her relatives. In introducing these fragments, her sister, Vera de Zhelihovsky wrote:

Mediums she held in as little esteem as ever, for she considered them one and all as weak, passive creatures, sickly sensitives with no will of their own. But she was bound she said, to prove to the world of the Spiritualists that by no means all of the agents 'behind the veil'—the producers of those meaningless, brutal physical phenomena that so rejoice the hearts of our unphilosophical wonder-hunters—are 'spirits' of departed mortals; that mediums, the high-priests of the new religion of the day and their parishioners, the Spiritualists, were both in the wrong box:

### *Letter 5*

*To her relatives*

*[ca. March or early April 1872]*

[a] Their spirits are no spirits but spooks—rags, the cast off second skins of their personalities that the dead shed in the astral light as serpents shed theirs on earth, leaving no connection between the new reptile and his previous garments.

[b] They know no better and it does me no harm—for I will very soon show them the difference between a passive medium and an active *doer*.<sup>1</sup>

NOTE:

1. In fragment [b] from the same letter or from another written about the same time, HPB explained her reason for seeking to establish the *Société Spirite*. Vera comments:

In the meantime she determined to establish a *Société Spirite* for the investigation of mediums and phenomena according

## LETTER 6

to Allan Kardec's theories and philosophy, since there was no other; to give people a chance to see for themselves how mistaken they were. She would first give room to an already established and accepted teaching and then, when the public would see that nothing was coming out of it, she would then offer her own explanations. To accomplish this object, she said, she was ready to go to any amount of trouble—even to allowing herself to be regarded for a time as a helpless medium.

DATE: The subjects of these two fragments suggest the period when HPB was attempting to form her Société Spirite.

SOURCE: Russian original unavailable. Copied from a translation in "Mystical History" 554. The two fragments may be from the same or different letters.



### *Introduction to Letter 6*

The attempt to found the Société Spirite and to find appropriate mediums for investigation was unsuccessful. HPB reported the collapse of her efforts in a letter that Vera introduces with the following remarks:

A few weeks later we received a new letter. In this one she showed herself full of disgust for the enterprise which proved a perfect failure. She had written, it seems, to England and France for a medium and had no response. *En desespoir de cause* [Fr. as a desperate shift, as a last resort] she had surrounded herself with *amateur* mediums—French female spiritists, mostly beggarly tramps when not adventuresses in the rear end baggage of M. de Lesseps' army of engineers and workmen on the canal of Suez.

### *Letter 6*

*To her relatives*

[ca. late April 1872]

They steal the Society's money, they drink like sponges and I had caught them cheating most shamefully our members, who come to investigate the phenomena, by bogus

manifestations. I had very disagreeable scenes with several persons who held me alone responsible for all this. So I gave orders that their fees of membership (20 francs) should be returned to them and I will bear myself the costs and money laid out for hire of premises and furniture. My famous *Société Spirite* has not lasted one fortnight—it is a heap of ruins, less majestic but as suggestive as those of Pharaoh’s tombs. . . . To wind up the comedy with a drama I got nearly shot by a madman—a Greek clerk who had been present at the only two public seances we held and got possessed, I suppose, by some vile spook. He premised by running about the bazaars and streets of Cairo with a cocked revolver, screaming that I had sent to him during three nights running a host of she-demons, of *Spirits* who were attempting to choke him!! He rushed into my house with his revolver, and finding me in the breakfast room, declared that he had come to shoot me and would wait till I had done with my meal. It was very kind of him, for in the meanwhile I *forced* him to drop his pistol and to rush out once more out of the house. He is now shut up in the lunatic asylum and I swear to put an end forever to such public seances—they are too dangerous *and I am not practised and strong enough* to control the wicked spooks that may approach my friends during such sittings. . . . I had told you before: how that this kind of promiscuous seances with mediums in the circle are a regular whirlpool—a maelstrom of bad magnetism during which time the so-called spirits (vile *Kikimora!*) feed upon us, suck in, sponge-like our vital powers and draw us down to their own plane of being. But you will never understand this without “going over a portion, at least, if not the whole range of writings that exist upon this subject.”

## INTRODUCTION TO LETTER 7

DATE: As the letter refers to the collapse of the *Société Spirite*, it must have been written shortly before HPB left Cairo, which Boris de Zirkoff dates as about April 1872.

SOURCE: Russian original unavailable. Copied from a translation in “Mystical History” 554–5. Abridged version in *Incidents* 159 (2nd ed. 125) with minor variations; cf. CW 14:487–8.



### *Introduction to Letter 7*

When she left Cairo after the collapse of the *Société Spirite*, HPB traveled through Palestine, Lebanon, Syria (where she visited Palmyra), and Constantinople. In Lebanon, she met Countess Lydia Alexandrovna de Pashkov and traveled with her for a while. She returned to her family in Odessa in July 1872 (close to the predicted “18 moons” mentioned in background essay B), but left again in April 1873.

While in Odessa, contemplating renewed foreign travels, she may have written the following letter, addressed to the Director of the Third Section or Department, which had been formed by Tsar Nicholas I in 1826 as a secret police force responsible for political security but was closed in 1880 largely because of a proliferation of false reports. The genuineness of this letter has been questioned by a number of researchers. Several attempts to obtain a photocopy of the original, in order to compare the handwriting, have not been successful.

This letter was referred by the Third Department to the Police Department of the City of Odessa, which replied on January 27, 1873, that “Mme. Blavatsky’s request has been left without consequences,” meaning that no action was to be taken. The file on this application is labeled “Case of the Third Department of His Imperial Majesty’s own office of the Third Dispatch Office Regarding the wife of the Councilor of State, Helena Blavatsky. Commenced January 9, 1873. Completed January 27, 1873 on 14 folios.” The 14 folios are presumably the number of pages of the letter.

LETTER 7

*Letter 7*

*To the Director of the Third Department*      *December 26, 1872*  
*Odessa*

Your Excellency!

I am the wife of Councilor of State Blavatsky. I was married at the age of 16 but, by mutual agreement, we separated several weeks after the wedding. Since then I have been living abroad almost continuously. During those 20 years I became well acquainted with the whole of western Europe. I zealously watched current politics, not with any specific aim, but because of an inborn passion arising from the habit of entering into the minutest details of a case in order to understand events better and to be able to foretell them. For this purpose I endeavored to make the acquaintance of all outstanding personalities among the politicians of the different powers, both on the Government side, as well as on the extreme Left. A whole sequence of events, intrigues, and revolutions took place before my eyes. . . . Many times I had the opportunity to be useful to Russia with my findings, but in the past, I kept quiet out of fear, due to my youthful stupidity. Later on, family misfortunes distracted me somewhat from such a task.

I am a direct niece of General Fadeyev,<sup>1</sup> a writer on military subjects, who is known to Your Excellency. Being involved in Spiritualism, I acquired the reputation, in many places, of being a powerful medium. Hundreds of people believe absolutely and will continue to believe in spirits. But I, who am writing this letter to offer my services to Your Excellency and to the Motherland, am obliged to tell you the whole truth, without any concealment. Therefore I confess that, on three-quarters of the occasions, the spirits spoke and answered in my own words and out of consideration for the success of my own plans. Rarely, very rarely, was I unsuccessful, by using this trap, in eliciting from the

most secretive and serious people, their hopes, plans, and secrets. Being carried away little by little, they tried to find out from the spirits the future and the secrets of others, but in so doing they unwittingly betrayed to me their own. However, I acted cautiously, and rarely used my knowledge for my own benefit.

The whole of the last winter I spent in Egypt, in Cairo, and through the late Lavison,<sup>2</sup> our Vice Consul, I knew all that was happening at the Khedive's, of his plans, the cause of intrigues and so on. Lavison was so carried away with spirits, that in spite of all his cunning, he continuously divulged information. Thus I found out about the secret acquisition of a huge quantity of arms left behind by the Turkish Government; I found out about all the intrigues of Nubar-Pasha,<sup>3</sup> and of his talks with the German Consul General. I found out about all the ramifications of the exploitation by our agents and consuls of the estate of Raphael Abet, worth millions, and about much else. I founded the Spiritualist Society, and the whole country came into commotion. Some 400-500 people, the whole of society, Pashas and others, daily hurled themselves at me. Lavison was continuously at my place. Secretly he daily sent for me, and at his place I saw the Khedive, imagining that I would not recognize him in a different guise, obtaining information of the secret plans of Russia. He did not find any secret plans, but disclosed much to me. Several times I wanted to get into contact with Mr. de Lecs,<sup>4</sup> our Consul General. I wanted to offer him a plan, according to which so much could become known in Petersburg. All the consuls visited me, but whether it was because I was friendly with Mr. Pashkovsky and his wife,<sup>5</sup> while Mme. de Lecs was hostile to them for one reason or another, all my attempts remained in vain. Lecs forbade the whole Consulate to belong to the Spiritualist Society, and even insisted that all this was nonsense and charlatanism, which was unpolitic of him.

To put it briefly, the Society, deprived of government assistance, collapsed within three months.

It was then that Father Grégoire, of the Papal Mission in Cairo, who visited me every day, began insisting that I should get in touch with the Papal Government. In the name of Cardinal Barnabo,<sup>6</sup> he offered me 20 to 30 thousand francs yearly, for me to act through spirits, using my own discretion in view of Catholic propaganda, and so on. I listened and kept silent, since I have an inborn hatred of the whole Catholic clergy. Father Grégoire brought me a letter from the Cardinal, offering me all the blessings in future, saying: *Il est temps que l'ange des ténèbres devienne l'ange de la lumière* [*Fr.* It is time that the angel of darkness should become the angel of light], and offering me a place without equal in Catholic Rome, urging me to turn my back on heretical Russia. The result was that after I had taken 5 thousand francs from the Papal envoy for the time spent with him, I made many promises for the future, and then turned my back, not on heretical Russia, but on them, and departed. At the same time I informed the Consulate about this, but they only laughed at me, saying how stupid I had acted by not agreeing to accept such a favorable offer, and that patriotism and religion were a matter of taste, of stupidity, and so on.

I have now decided to turn to Your Excellency, fully certain that I will be more than useful to my Motherland, which I love more than anything in the world, and to our Emperor, whom we all deify. I can speak French, English, Italian, as well as Russian, I easily understand German and Hungarian and a little bit of Turkish. By birth, if not by my position, I am descended from the best aristocratic families of Russia, and can therefore move as easily in the highest circles as in the lowest strata of society. My whole life was spent in such leaps up and down. I have played all the parts and can turn myself into any sort of person; this is

not a flattering portrait, but I am obliged to reveal the whole truth to Your Excellency, and to present myself as I have been molded by people, circumstances, and the eternal struggle of my whole life, which has exacerbated my cunning to equal that of a Red Indian. Seldom have I failed to achieve the desired result in any objective that I have pursued. I have experienced all temptations, and I repeat, that I have played parts in all strata of society. I can find out everything through spirits and by other means, and can extract the truth from the most secretive person. Until now all this achieved nothing and was wasted. If my abilities had been applied to the practical advantage of the State, the greatest results in governmental and political relations could have brought a not insignificant profit. Instead the results were microscopically limited for my own use.

My aim is not profit, but rather protection and help that is more *moral than material*. Although I have limited means of livelihood, and subsist by translations and commercial correspondence, I have, until now, consistently rejected all offers that could place me indirectly against the interests of Russia. In 1867 an agent of Beyst offered me various blessings, because I am a Russian and the niece of General Fadeyev, who is hated by them. This occurred in Pest;<sup>7</sup> I rejected the offer, and was subjected to most severe annoyances. The same year, in Bucharest, General Tiur, a Hungarian in the service of Italy, also pleaded with me—before the very conclusion of peace between Austria and Hungary<sup>8</sup>—to serve them. I refused. Last year in Constantinople, Mustafa Pasha,<sup>9</sup> the brother of the Egyptian Khedive, offered me a large sum of money through his secretary, Wilkinson, and once even by himself—after making my acquaintance through his French governess—asking that I should return to Egypt and supply him all information on the activities and intentions of his brother, the

Vice-King. Not knowing well how Russia would be looking at this business, and being afraid to tell General Ignatieff<sup>10</sup> about it, I declined this assignment, although I could have carried it out admirably.

In 1853, after losing a game of roulette in Baden Baden, I accepted an offer from a gentleman unknown to me—a Russian who had been watching me for some time. He offered me two thousand Francs if I could, by some means, get hold of two letters written in German (the contents of which remained unknown to me), and which had been very cunningly concealed by Count Kvilecky, a Pole in the service of the King of Prussia. The Russian was a military man, and every Russian had my sympathy. I had no money, I could not at that time return to Russia and was very upset by this. I agreed to the offer, and within three days, and with the greatest difficulties and subject to greatest danger, I obtained those letters. Then this gentleman told me that I have enough *talent* to be of use to the Motherland, and that it would be better for me to return to Russia. And if I should decide to change my way of life and to engage in serious work, then I need only apply to the Third Department and leave there my address and name. Unfortunately, at the time, I did not avail myself of this suggestion.

All this gives me the right to believe that I can be of use to Russia. I am alone in the world, although I have many relatives. Nobody knows that I am writing this letter.

I am completely independent, and feel that it is not simply a boast or an illusion if I say that I am not afraid of the most difficult and dangerous assignments. Life does not offer me anything either pleasant or good. Love of struggle and perhaps for intrigues is in my character. I am stubborn, and will go through fire or water to achieve an objective. I did not bring much benefit to myself; let me bring benefit at least to the Government of my Motherland. I am a woman

without prejudice, and if I see the benefit of some cause, I look only on its bright side. Perhaps after finding out about this letter my relatives will curse me, blinded by their pride. But they will not find out, and it doesn't matter to me if they do. They never did anything for me. I had to serve them as a domestic *medium*, them, as well as their society.

Forgive me, Your Excellency, if I have dragged unnecessary domestic squabbles into a business letter. But this letter is my confession. I am not afraid of a secret investigation of my life. Whatever evil I have done, in whatever circumstances of life I have found myself, I have always been true to Russia, true to her interests. In sixteen years I committed only one illegal act, I left Poti<sup>11</sup> for abroad without a passport and dressed in male attire. But I was escaping not from Russia, but from an old hated husband, who had been imposed on me by Countess Vorontsova.<sup>12</sup> But in 1860 I was forgiven, and Baron Bruno,<sup>13</sup> the London Ambassador, gave me a passport. I had many incidents abroad defending the honor of the Motherland. I had arguments more than once during the Crimean War.<sup>14</sup> I don't know how I have not been assassinated, or how I have not been put into jail.

I repeat, I love Russia and am prepared to devote all my remaining life to her interests. Having revealed to Your Excellency the whole truth, I ask you respectfully to take notice of all this, and if necessary, to try me out. At present I live in Odessa with my aunt, the wife of General Witte,<sup>15</sup> on Polizeyskaya Street, house of Haas, No. 36. My name is Helena Petrovna Blavatskaya. If I do not hear from you within a month, I shall leave for France, since I am seeking a position as a correspondent in some business office. Your Excellency, please accept assurances of boundless respect and complete devotion, and of the readiness to be of service to you of Elena Blavatskaya.

## LETTER 7

### NOTES:

Those introduced by [Mildon:] are translated from the Russian of V. I. Mildon, editor of the letter in *Literaturnoe Obozrenie*.

1. Rostislav Andreyevich de Fadeyev, HPB's maternal uncle.
2. [Mildon:] Eduard Lavison (? -1872), Russian Vice-Consul in Cairo, 1856-72.
3. [Mildon:] Nubar Pasha, the prime minister in the government of the Khedive Ismail.
4. [Mildon:] Ivan Mikhailovich Leks (1834-83), Russian Consul General in Cairo, 1868-83.
5. Perhaps Lydia Alexandrovna de Pashkov (Carlson, *Theosophical History* 5 [1995]: 228n).
6. [Mildon:] Alexander Barnabo (1801-?), Cardinal from 1856; he brought about a link between the Papal throne and foreign missions.
7. Pest, the Hungarian city on the left bank of the Danube River that was united with Buda, on the right bank, in 1872 to form Budapest.
8. The peace between Austria and Hungary of 1867 formed the Hapsburg Kingdom of Austria-Hungary, which lasted until 1918.
9. [Mildon:] Mustafa Pasha, military governor of Egypt under the Khedive Ismail.
10. [Mildon:] Nikolay Pavlovich Ignatieff, Count (1832-1908), Russian ambassador in Turkey, 1867-77.
11. Poti, the port on the Black Sea where HPB eluded the servants escorting her to meet her father after she had left her husband and instead sailed on an English ship bound for Constantinople to begin her world travels and independent life.
12. Perhaps the wife of Prince Mikhail Semyonovich Vorontsov (1782-1856), Viceroy of the Caucasus, 1844-56 (Carlson, *Theosophical History* 5 [1995]: 230-1n; *CW* 1:371). No connection between Countess Vorontsova and HPB's marriage is otherwise known.
13. [Mildon:] Baron Bruno, in Russian transliteration Philipp Ivanovich Brunnov (Brunov) (1796-1875), Russian ambassador in Great Britain, 1860-74.

## EARLY DAYS IN NEW YORK

14. Crimean War, fought by Russia against Britain, France, and Turkey from October 1853 to February 1856, during part of which time HPB was in England and India.
15. HPB's maternal aunt Katherine. [Mildon:] Wife of General Witte—presumably Ekaterina Andreyevna Fadeyeva, mother of S. Y. Witte.

SOURCE: Russian original in TsGAOR, the Central State Archive of the October Revolution, MS no. 109.3.22. Published in *Literaturnoe Obozrenie* 6 (1988): 111–2, from which translated here by Anatol Kagan. Also translated by Maria Carlson in *Theosophical History* 5 (July 1995): 227–31 and partially quoted in her *No Religion* 214.



### BACKGROUND ESSAY C

## Early Days in New York

When HPB left Odessa in April 1873, she went by way of Bucharest to Paris, where she stayed with her cousin, Nikolay Gustavovich von Hahn, the son of her paternal uncle Gustav Alexeyevich. While in Paris, she became friendly with Monsieur and Mme. Leymarie, who were active in French Spiritualism. HPB had not been in Paris long when she was instructed by the “Brothers” to go to New York. Years later, she wrote a letter (undated and otherwise unknown) to her relatives about her sudden departure for America, a fragment of which is preserved in “Mystical History” 28; cf. CW 14:488:

In June of the same year [1873] she was in Paris where she had intended to reside for sometime, when suddenly she received a letter—“an advice I have neither the desire, or possibility of resisting” as she explained it to us in her correspondence—from one of her Teachers in the far East. Hardly after two month’s rest she had to pack up her trunks once more and cross over to the U.S. of America. She did this, as we all know it, unhesitatingly and at two days’ notice. She arrived at New York on July 7th 1873 . . . .

## EARLY DAYS IN NEW YORK

As usual, HPB was short of cash. In New York, consequently, she resided in a cooperative-living arrangement with about forty working women, some of whom got her employment producing illustrated advertising cards, ornamental leather work, artificial flowers, and neckties. Later she resided in a widow's house, with whom she began to hold Sunday gatherings.

HPB's father Peter von Hahn died on July 27, 1873, but because the family did not know where she was at the time, she did not hear the news until several months later, after which she also received some money as her share of the estate. With that, she moved into quarters of her own, residing in several locations in New York City: a furnished top-floor room in a house on the northeast corner of Fourteenth Street and Fourth Avenue, and also on Union Square and on East Sixteenth Street. She visited Saugus, Massachusetts, and Buffalo, New York.

On June 22, 1874, HPB contracted a business arrangement with a French woman named Clementine Gerebko. As partners, they bought a tract of farmland on Long Island, to which HPB moved in July. The partnership ended with a quarrel and a lawsuit, eventually tried by jury on April 26, 1875, with judgment in HPB's favor filed on June 15, 1875 (background essay H).

Shortly after HPB's ill-starred business venture, events were set into motion that were to result in her meeting Henry Steel Olcott and the formation of the Theosophical Society. Olcott had earlier been interested in Spiritualism, but had turned his attention to other matters. However, one day in July 1874, while working in his New York law office, Olcott felt the urge to see what new developments there might be in Spiritualism. So he bought a copy of the Boston Spiritualist journal, the *Banner of Light*, and found in it a description of some remarkable phenomena at a Chittenden, Vermont, farmhouse belonging to a pair of brothers, Horatio and William Eddy. His curiosity aroused, Olcott went to investigate. Following a visit of several days, he came back to New York and wrote a description of his observations that was published in the *New York Sun*. As a result of that article, another New York newspaper, the *Daily Graphic*, asked him to go to Chittenden again so that he might investigate more thoroughly and write a series of articles

on the subject. On September 17, 1874, Olcott returned to the Eddy farmhouse with an artist to do sketches, intending to stay about twelve weeks.

On September 22, HPB applied to be naturalized as an American citizen. Then, having read some of Olcott's newspaper articles, on October 14 HPB went to Chittenden to view the phenomena herself and to meet Olcott. HPB's presence at the Eddy séances considerably affected the manifestations. A number of apparitions—she called them “portrait-pictures”—of persons connected with her began to appear (*People* 310–38, 355–60; *ODL* 1:8–9). The first of these was Mihalko, a servant of her aunt, Katherine A. de Witte. On her first day at the farm, HPB met Olcott at the mid-day meal (*ODL* 1:1–5; *People* 293–306). After about ten days at Chittenden, during which HPB experienced a recurrence of her chronic illness—the reopening of the wound below her heart—she returned to New York City, where she was living at 124 East Sixteenth Street.



### *Introduction to Letter 8*

Having returned to New York, HPB wrote an account of her experiences at the Eddy farm in refutation of a skeptical article by Dr. George M. Beard; this was her first published article, “Marvellous Spirit Manifestations,” appearing in the *Daily Graphic* on October 30 (*CW* 1: 30–4). Between its composition and publication, she wrote the following letter to the Russian author and Spiritualist researcher Alexander Aksakoff.

### *Letter 8*

To A. N. Aksakoff

October 28, 1874  
New York

Pardon the liberty I take in so unceremoniously addressing one to whom I am entirely unknown. . . . This is what I have in mind: I have been living in America for about a year and a half, and have no intention of leaving. All my life is

centered here, that is, of course, my inner life, as I am too old to take much interest in the outer life. . . . An attempt should be made to explain at home what is now going on in America, England, and France. Spiritism here is no laughing matter. The eleven million spiritists in the United States, according to the latest report, have grown to eighteen million, almost fifty percent, since the moment when pamphlets appeared in defense of spiritism, by men such as Alfred Wallace, Crookes, Varley, etc. . . . The entire press has begun to talk all at once. Attempts at ridicule, condemnation, and censure are rarer and rarer. Last year it was barely possible to find in any so-called respectable newspaper any article on the facts of spiritism; but now hardly a day passes without the papers being full of hundreds of facts, proofs, and so on. The papers send reporters and artists to mediums in every direction. Only last week I returned from the Eddy brothers, well-known mediums in Rutland, Vermont, where I spent two weeks. The house and the neighboring lodgings were full of correspondents. At the Eddy's the spirits of the departed walk about almost in full daylight. Several times they have appeared without the help of the medium, and in the evening during the *séance* from fifteen to twenty spirits appear as though in the flesh before the eyes of the spectators. I talked for five minutes on the platform in Russian with my *father*, my *uncle*, and other relations, as though they were alive. Seven persons of my acquaintance, long dead, of different nations, appeared and talked to me, each in his own language, and walked away. Would it not be possible for me to send you, or, rather, to keep sending from here translations of articles on the facts of spiritism, not by unknown people, but by persons such as Robert Dale Owen, Colonel Olcott, and the best writers here? I know many of them and they gladly give me the right of translating their pro-

## INTRODUCTION TO LETTER 9

ductions. Olcott is a correspondent sent expressly to the Eddy brothers in Vermont by one of the best illustrated journals of New York, the *Graphic*. He has already spent more than two months there, and his illustrated articles are creating a *furor*. I am myself working for the *Graphic*, and can send my articles regularly, translated and fair-copied, with copies of the illustrations drawn in pen and India ink. You have probably also heard about the posthumous work of Dickens—the second part of his novel *Edwin Drood*, which was left unfinished at his death. I have translated this second part, and it is lying ready before me. . . . Whether the spirit of Dickens wrote it, or the medium James himself, this second part is accepted by the whole American and European press (with few exceptions) as a perfect *facsimile* of Dickens's style and his inimitable humor. . . . I again apologize for the unceremonious character of my letter. I hope you may perhaps find a spare moment to send me a few words in reply. I should very much like to see the completion of Dickens's novel, mentioned above, published in Russia. I have worked hard at it, translating it from James's manuscript, which he wrote under the dictation of Dickens's spirit.

SOURCE: Russian original unavailable. Translated by Boris de Zirkoff from Solovyov's *Sovremennaya* 255–6. Another English translation by Walter Leaf in *Modern Priestess* 225–7.



### *Introduction to Letter 9*

After their meeting at Chittenden, HPB wrote to Olcott several times. The letters do not survive, but were referred to and quoted from in *Old Diary Leaves*, from which the following account is taken:

## Letter 9

To H. S. Olcott

[ca. October 31 and November 6, 1874]

[Olcott summarizes and quotes:] In her very first letter to me, written from New York within a week after she left me at Chittenden (October, 1874) addressing me as “Dear Friend” and signing herself “Jack,” and in her second one, dated six days later and signed “Jack Blavatsky,” she entreats me not to praise the mediumistic musical performance of one Jesse Sheppard, whose pretence to having sung before the Czar, and other boasts she had discovered to be absolutely false; as such a course on my part would “injure Spiritualism more than anything else in the world.”<sup>1</sup> “I speak to you,” she tells me, “as a true friend to yourself and (as a) Spiritualist anxious to save Spiritualism from a danger.” In the same letter, referring to a promise given her by “Mayflower” and “George Dix,” two of the alleged spirit-controls of Horatio Eddy, that they would help her by influencing the judge before whom was pending her lawsuit to recover the money put into the Long Island market-garden co-partnership—she says: “Mayflower was right, Judge——came in with another decision in my favour.”<sup>2</sup>

## NOTES:

1. H. S. Olcott adds a footnote: “Led by his unlucky star, Sheppard—she writes—had brought her a lot of his St. Petersburg credentials, in Russian, to translate. Among them she found a Police license to sing at the Salle Koch, a low lager-bier saloon and dance hall, resorted to by dissipated characters of both sexes, and a music-master’s bills for 32 roubles, for teaching him certain Russian songs—which we heard him sing at Eddy’s, *in a dark séance when he was ostensibly under the control of Grisi and Lablache!* I give the facts on her authority without prejudice.”
2. See background essay H, “HPB’s Lawsuit in America.”

DATE: HPB left Chittenden about October 25, according to Boris de Zirkoff’s Chronology (CW 1:liii), so the first letter written “within

## INTRODUCTION TO LETTER 10

a week” would be before November 1, and the second was “six days later.”

SOURCE: Original unavailable. Copied from *Old Diary Leaves* 1: 68–9.

HPB also entered into correspondence with the younger of the two Eddy brothers, Horatio, who was at the time about 32 and semiliterate. Her letters to him have apparently not survived, but one of his replying to her is in the Archives of the Theosophical Society, Adyar:

Chittenden Vt Nov 4<sup>th</sup> 1874

Dear Friend Madam I just reseived your letter and will Hasten to answer it it found us all well and glad to hear from you. I did not see your Don't in the Graffic But trust you will give that contemptle puppy, all he wants—Before you git threw with him hoping you will Be sustained and know you will by the Spirit world, don't mind the Babbone monkey nor the Rabits [?] as it will be to much trouble for you the Spirits all Send Love to you and all the rest hoping ear long we Shall See you and your Law Suit—will all Be Seteld up

From your trew friend Horatio  
[Horatio B. Eddy]



### *Introduction to Letter 10*

Early in November 1874, HPB moved to 16 Irving Place, where Olcott visited her when he came back from Chittenden (*ODL* 1:10), and then to 23 Irving Place. HPB's first article, “Marvellous Spirit Manifestations” (*Daily Graphic*, October 30, 1874, in *CW* 1:30–4) was quickly followed by a second, “About Spiritualism” (*Daily Graphic*, November 13, 1874, in *CW* 1:36–44). Both were directed against Dr. George M. Beard, a critic of Spiritualism.

On November 12, HPB went to the office of the *Daily Graphic* newspaper to deliver her second article on the Eddy phenomena (*CW* 1:36–44). There she was interviewed by a reporter, and the interview was published as “About Spiritualism: Mme. Blavatsky's Visit to *The Daily Graphic* Office” in the paper's November 13 issue.

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Olcott (*ODL* 1:31) quotes a letter from HPB relating to this event, with the following introduction:

In November, 1874, signing her letter ‘Jack the Pappoose,’ she wrote to ask me to get her an engagement to write weird stories for a certain journal, as she would soon be ‘hard up,’ and gave me a rollicking account of her family pedigree and connexions on both sides; talking like a democrat, yet showing but too plainly that she felt that she, if anyone, had reason to be proud of her lineage. She writes me how the *Daily Graphic* people had interviewed her about her travels and asked for her portrait. Considering how many thousand copies of her likeness have since been circulated, the world over, it will amuse if I quote a sentence or two about this first experience of the sort:

### Letter 10

To H. S. Olcott

November [ca. 12,] 1874

Don’t you know, the fellows of the *Graphic* bored my life out of me to give them my portrait? Mr. F. was sent to get me into conversation after I came out [HSO comments: “for the Eddys, she means”], and wanted them to insert my article against . . . Beard. I suppose they wanted to create a sensation and so got hold of my beautiful nostrils and splendid mouth. . . . I told them that nature has endowed and gifted me with a potato nose, but I did not mean to allow them to make fun of it, vegetable though it is. They very seriously denied the fact, and so made me laugh, and you know “*celui qui rit est désarmé*” [*Fr.* The one who laughs is disarmed].

SOURCE: Original unavailable. Copied from *ODL* 1:31–2.

HPB’s views on Spiritualism published in the *Daily Graphic* elicited a response from Elbridge Gerry Brown, the editor of the *Spiritual Scientist* of Boston, written on November 14, 1874 (*CW* 1:45–6):

I have read your article in the *Daily Graphic*, and am so much pleased with the statements therein, and the powerful

refutations of Dr. Beard's so-called "arguments," that I hasten to acknowledge to you, as editor of the *Scientist*, my gratitude for the service you have done Spiritualism in re-opening the eyes of the skeptical world.

Should you ever be in Boston, I beg that you will grant me permission, to call on you that I may learn more of the Eddy Family from one who has had so wonderful an experience and presents it in so interesting and attractive style.

I have taken the liberty, to send you a copy of the *Scientist*.

Hoping you will pardon my enthusiasm, which thus seeks expression, I have the honor to subscribe myself, with respect, truly yours, Gerry Brown.

*The Spiritual Scientist: A Weekly Journal Devoted to the Science, History, Philosophy, and Teachings of Spiritualism*, published in Boston, was patronized by HPB and Olcott, who hoped to use it as a journal devoted to the philosophical aspects of Spiritualism, rather than merely to the phenomena. For that purpose, HPB set about raising support for the journal, in both subscriptions and contributions by writers of repute, and she and Olcott both contributed to the journal themselves.

As a Christmas present in 1875 and doubtless in acknowledgment of HPB's past support, the editor, E. Gerry Brown, presented her a bound volume of the first issues of the journal, from September 10, 1874, through the supplement of July and August, 1875 (the first two numbered volumes). On the recto of the flyleaf, he inscribed the gift:

Mdme Helen P Blavatsky  
Compliments of  
December 25 75 E Gerry Brown

HPB later made a gift of the volume, inscribing the flyleaf, just below Gerry Brown's inscription to her, as follows:

presented to the National Association of Spiritualists  
with the good wishes of  
H. P Blavatsky.  
October 1877  
New York.

The volume eventually came into the possession of the London book dealer John Watkins, who in turn made a gift of the book, with the following inscription at the bottom of the inside front cover, opposite the earlier inscriptions:

Presented to the L.S.A. [London Spiritualist Alliance]  
Library  
by John M Watkins  
June 30th 1920.

The volume is still in the archives of that body, in 1970 renamed the College of Psychic Studies. Of interest in this particular volume, in addition to its peregrinations from the editor of the *Spiritual Scientist* through HPB to its present resting place, is the fact that HPB annotated one of its articles, whose subject was herself, with marginalia. The article (*Spiritual Scientist*, November 19, 1874, 121-2) reported HPB's visit to the office of the New York *Daily Graphic* newspaper, which resulted in a biographical sketch of the Russian woman who was attracting attention among Spiritualists and the general public. The article took liberties with some of the facts it reported, thus eliciting HPB's self-deprecating scorn upon some of its inaccuracies, although there are other specific ones that she might also have pilloried, but did not. The article, as reprinted in the *Spiritual Scientist* from the *Daily Graphic* of November 13, and HPB's marginal comments on it (here reproduced in notes) are as follows:

#### MORE ABOUT MATERIALIZATION.

AN INTELLIGENT AND LOGICAL SPIRITUALIST.—

A MEDAL BROUGHT FROM A GRAVE IN RUSSIA BY A SPIRIT.—

HOW THE EMPEROR OF RUSSIA WAS CONVERTED.

ME. [*i.e.*, Mme.] BLAVATSKY visited the Daily Graphic office Thursday, and excited a great deal of interest. She exhibited the silver jewel of the Order of St. Ann, which was buried with her father at Stavropol, and which the spirit of George Dix conveyed to her during her recent seance at the Eddy homestead in Vermont. Her object in visiting them was to hand to the chief editor a letter *apropos* of the Olcott-Beard

discussion. The lady expressed herself with great vivacity in favor of the Eddy brothers, and seemed very much exercised about the Beard letter. Mme. Blavatsky has traveled in almost every quarter of the world, has met with many romantic adventures, and is a remarkably good natured and sprightly woman.<sup>1</sup> She is handsome, with full voluptuous figure, large eyes, well-formed nose, and rich, sensuous mouth and chin. She dresses with remarkable elegance, is *bien gantee* [*Fr.* well-gloved], and her clothing is redolent of some subtle and delicious perfume, which she has gathered in her wanderings in the far East.

“I was born in 1834, at Ekaterinoslav,” she said, “of which my father, Col. Hahn-hahn was Governor. It is about two hundred versts from Odessa. Yes, he was a cousin of the Countess Ida Hahn-hahn, the authoress. My mother was a daughter of Gen. Fadeef, and I am a granddaughter of the Princess Dolgorouki. My mother was an authoress, and used to write under the *nom de plume* of Zenaida R \* \* \* va.<sup>2</sup>

“When my father died,”<sup>3</sup> she proceeded, “I went to Tiflis, in Georgia, where my grandfather was one of the three Councillors of the Viceroy Woronzoff. When I was sixteen years of age, they married me to M. Blavatsky, he was the Governor of Erivan. Fancy! he was seventy-three and I sixteen. But mind, I don’t blame anybody,—not my friends, not in the least. However, at the end of the year we separated. His habits were not agreeable to me. As I had a fortune of my own I determined to travel. I went first of all to Egypt. I spent three nights in the Pyramid of Cheops. Oh, I had most marvelous experiences. Then I went to England. And in 1853, I came to this country. I was recalled to Russia by the death of my grandmother, Mme. Brajation. She left me a fortune, but if I had been with her before her death I should have had much more. She left eight millions of roubles to the convents and monasteries in Moldavia,—she was a Moldavian herself. I went back to Egypt, and penetrated into the Soudan. I made a great deal of money on that journey.”

“How?”

“Why, by buying ostrich feathers. I did not go there for that purpose, but as I found I could do it I did it. Oh! ostrich feathers that would sell for five or six guineas you could buy there for a cent. Then I went to Athens, Palestine, Syria, Arabia, and back again to Paris. Then I went to Homburg and Baden Baden, and lost a good deal of money at gambling, I am sorry to say. [From here to the end of the paragraph, HPB underlined the text.] In 1858, I returned to Paris, and made the acquaintance of Daniel Home, the Spiritualist. He had married the Countess Kroble, a sister of the Countess Koucheleff Bezborrodke, a lady with whom I had been very intimate in my girlhood. Home converted me to Spiritualism.”<sup>4</sup>

“Did you ever see any of his ‘levitations,’ as they are called?”

“Yes, I have seen Home carried out of a four-story window, let down very gently to the ground, and put into his carriage. After this I went to Russia. I converted my father to Spiritualism. He was a Voltairean before that. I made a great number of other converts.”

“Are there many Spiritualists in your country?”

“Yes. You would be surprised to know how large a number of Spiritualists there are in Russia. Why, the Emperor Alexander is a Spiritualist. Would you actually believe it?—the emancipation of the serfs was caused by the appearance of the Emperor Nicholas to the Emperor Alexander.”

“This is a very remarkable statement.”

“It’s true. The Cæsarewitch was one day telling Prince Bariatinsky of it. He said, ‘Oh, your Imperial Highness, I cannot believe it.’ The Emperor came forward and asked what they were talking about. Prince Bariatinsky told him what the Cæsarewitch had said about the appearance of the spirit of the Emperor Nicholas. The Emperor Alexander turned as pale as a ghost himself, and said, ‘It is true.’”

“That is very remarkable. Where did you travel subsequently?”

“I went to Italy and then to Greece. As I was returning from the Piræus to Napoli, when we were off Spezzia, the

## LETTER 10

boat in which I was making the voyage, the *Evmonia*, blew up, and of four hundred persons on board only seventeen were saved. I was one of the fortunate ones. As I laid on my back I saw limbs, heads and trunks all falling around me. This was the 21st of June, 1871. I lost all my money and everything I had. I telegraphed to my friends for money. As soon as I got it I went to Egypt again, and to the Soudan. I never saw a white face for four months. I translated Darwin into Russian while I was in Africa. I have also translated Buckle into Russian. I have contributed to the *Revue des deux Mondes* and several Parisian journals, and have acted as correspondent of the *Independance Belge*. I am a member of the order of Eastern Masonry, the most ancient in the world. I was initiated in Malta.” Here Mme Blavatsky showed the writer the jewel of one of the most celebrated orders in existence, the name of which, however, he is not at liberty to give. “There are not more than six or seven women in the world who have been admitted to this order. I shall probably stay in American a long time. I like the country very much.”<sup>5</sup>

### NOTES:

1. [HPB added a footnote to the bottom of the page:] A *lie* Number 1°. H.P.B.
2. [HPB’s footnote:] Lie Number 2. Stolen from C. Olcott’s “People from it. [*i.e.*, the Other World”]
3. [HPB underlined the words “my father died” and added this footnote:] Lie Number 3. My father died three years ago.
4. [HPB’s footnote:] The biggest lie of all. *I never saw in my whole life* either D. D. Home or his wife; I never was in the same city with him for half an hour in my life. From 1851 to 1859 I was in California, Egypt and India. In 1856–58 I was in Kashmere and elsewhere.
5. [In the right margin of the first page of the article, HPB wrote the following annotation, which seems to apply to the whole article:] These lies were circulated by American reporters with which this land of “canards” and unwarrantable exaggeration so freely abounds. H. P Blavatsky.