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and the West
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CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD
Keshab Sen

BRAHMACHARINI USHA
Glimpses of
Sister Nivedita

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KESHAB SEN

CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD

The thirteenth chapter of a forthcoming book on Ramakrishna

THE last chapter ended in March 1876, with the death of Chandra Devi. I intentionally left out of it one most important event which took place almost exactly a year earlier; the meeting between Ramakrishna and Keshab Chandra Sen. From a historical point of view, this meeting is so full of significance that it demands a whole chapter to itself. Keshab Sen has been briefly referred to as a prominent Hindu reformer of the nineteenth century. Now I must explain in detail what it was that he wanted to reform, and how his ideas were influenced by the teaching and example of Ramakrishna.

Something has already been said, in chapter four, about the influence of the British upon India. One of the many evils of foreign conquest is the tendency of the conquered to imitate their conquerors. This kind of imitation is evil because it is uncritical; it does not choose certain aspects of the alien culture and reject others, but accepts everything slavishly, with a superstitious belief that if you ape your conquerors you will acquire their superior power.

The British certainly had much to offer India that was valuable: medical science and engineering, the arts of the West, a clearly-defined legal code. Unfortunately, they brought with them also two creeds—scientific atheism and

missionary evangelism—diametrically opposed to each other yet equally narrow and dogmatic. These two creeds had done quite enough harm already in the West, where they were indigenous; exported to India, they had the added power of novelty and threatened to produce spiritual and cultural chaos. The young Indians who came into contact with them nearly all reacted violently. Either they lost belief in everything Hindu and got nothing from England in return but despair; or they were thrilled by the fanaticism and self-assurance of the missionaries and embraced a wretched version of Christianity which was both abject and self-seeking. (Since the missionaries had charge of most of the new educational facilities provided by the British, they got the opportunity to indoctrinate many of the most intelligent students of each generation.) Thus the young were growing up into cultural hybrids; laughed at and despised by the British because of their hopelessly silly efforts at imitation; condemned by orthodox Hindus of the old school as impious traitors to the religion and traditions of their race.

The English missionaries attacked Hinduism as a polytheistic religion; a primitive tangle of cults and idolatry. In this they showed their utter ignorance of the Vedas, which state, again and again, that the substratum of all the many divine forms is Brahman, the one and indivisible. As for the charge of idolatry—"the heathen in his blindness bows down to wood and stone"—it must be remembered that the great majority of missionaries, in Bengal at least, were Protestant. The Catholics could not very well condemn the cult of holy images in theory, though they showed much zeal in destroying those which belonged to other creeds.

Stupid as these accusations were, there were some Hindus who accepted them as a challenge. In spite of their own better knowledge, they had been made by their con-

querors to feel that Hinduism was antiquated, and hence that it should be reformed—purged of superstitions and obsolete customs and thus brought into line with the other world-religions. It might well have been retorted that the other world-religions needed purging, every bit as badly; but here the inferiority complex of the conquered came into play and made the criticism one-sided. We may deplore this mistaken humility, but we must realize that the urge to reform Hinduism was also motivated by a not ignoble kind of patriotism. India—said the reformers to themselves—had been conquered politically, but that was no reason why she should be conquered spiritually as well. Spirituality had always been India's greatest strength; and now India had to assert herself spiritually—as a first step—some of these reformers undoubtedly added—to regaining her political freedom.

The first important reform movement of the nineteenth century was founded by Ram Mohan Roy, who was born in Bengal in 1774. Ram Mohan belonged to an orthodox Brahmin family which he offended by publishing, at the age of sixteen, a book against image worship. He then left home and traveled for some years—visiting, among other places, Tibet, where he studied Buddhist mysticism. He was also sympathetic to the teachings of Christianity and Islam. A distinguished scholar, he knew Sanskrit, Persian, Arabic, English and some other European languages.

In 1828, Ram Mohan founded what he called the *Brahmo Samaj*, dedicated to "the worship and adoration of the Eternal, the Unsearchable, the Immutable Being, who is the Author and Preserver of the Universe." (The title, Brahmo Samaj, cannot be translated succinctly into English; it means the Society of believers in a personal God without form.) The God of the Brahmo Samaj was not the imper-

sonal Brahman, but rather the Hindu Ishwara (see chapter five) or the Mohammedan Allah or the non-trinitarian Godhead of the Unitarians: a personal God without form but with father-attributes. Ram Mohan borrowed something from the teachings of Christianity but denied the divinity of Jesus, just as he denied the divinity of the Hindu avatars. At the same time, he quoted freely from the Hindu scriptures, choosing particularly certain passages from the Upanishads which could be interpreted according to his belief in a personal God without form. And he based his monotheistic philosophy partly on the sacred writings of Islam. The Brahmo Samaj was open to all, without regard to religion or race. Its international appeal was certainly a challenge to the critics of classical Hinduism, but perhaps, in trying to cover such a large area, it spread itself rather too thin. Its real strength was in its programme of social reform, for it demanded the abolition of those very customs to which the British most objected—child-marriage, the veto on the remarriage of widows, and the caste-system itself. The Brahmo Samaj refused to recognize any caste-differences among its own members. It also worked for the emancipation of women and their education along modern lines.

In 1830, Ram Mohan was created a raja by the Emperor of Delhi. (It must be remembered that the British did not claim the imperial title for Queen Victoria until 1877.) He was then sent to England to represent the Emperor and give evidence before a parliamentary committee on the judicial and revenue systems of India. The English politicians and scholars treated the Raja with great respect and admiration; and he had the satisfaction of being present in the House of Commons when the practice of *suttee*—the Hindu widow's voluntary cremation on her husband's funeral pyre —was finally outlawed. He had worked against suttee for

many years. In 1833, while still in England, he died suddenly of a brain fever and was buried at Bristol.

Ramakrishna therefore never had the opportunity of meeting Ram Mohan. He did, however, meet Ram Mohan's successor, Devendra Nath Tagore; as we have seen already in chapter eleven. Devendra Nath took over the leadership of the Brahmo Samaj eight years after the Raja's death. During this interval, the movement had greatly weakened, but Devendra Nath reorganized it and soon made it stronger than ever before. He agreed with Ram Mohan in condemning image worship, but he was not much concerned with other world-religions. A monotheist, he drew his inspiration entirely from the Hindu scriptures and fought to prevent Christian ideas from infiltrating the Samaj. On this point he was altogether at variance with his successor, Keshab Chandra Sen.

Keshab was two years younger than Ramakrishna and a whole generation younger than Devendra Nath. He was born in a Bengali family of moderate means and educated at an English school. He did not know Sanskrit. He had little natural sympathy with the popular traditions of Hinduism. He was, indeed, very powerfully influenced by the personality of Jesus, and, if he differed from the Christians it was only because of their claim to possess the one true faith. Keshab held that Jesus, Moses, Buddha and Mohammed should be equally honored.

Some of Keshab's followers carried his neo-Christian ideas even further. They wanted a new, Indian kind of Christianity which should embrace all religions in the name of Jesus Christ. Here is part of an article which appeared in one of the last issues of the *New Dispensation*, a magazine which was founded by Keshab and continued after his death:

"Who rules India? What power is that which sways the

destinies of India at the present moment? It is not the glittering bayonet nor the fiery cannon of the British Army that can make our people loyal. . . . No. If you wish to secure the attachment and allegiance of India, it must be through spiritual influence and moral suasion. And such indeed has been the case in India. You cannot deny that your hearts have been touched, conquered and subjugated by a superior power. That power need I tell you—is Christ. It is Christ who rules British India, and not the British Government. England has sent out a tremendous moral force in the life and character of that mighty prophet, to conquer and hold this vast empire. None but Jesus ever deserved this bright, this precious diadem, India, and Jesus shall have it." It is amusing to think that this, and other expressions of a similar opinion, must have dismayed the Christian missionaries almost as much as the orthodox Hindus! And, in fact, Keshab's activities had the effect of much reducing missionary influence in Bengal. At the same time, Keshab was compelled by his own views to break with Devendra Nath Tagore. In 1868, he founded The Brahmo Samaj of India. Devendra Nath retained leadership of the other half of the movement, which was now called the Adi Samaj, or First Brahmo Samaj.

In 1870, Keshab went to England. He was warmly welcomed there, especially by the Unitarians. Queen Victoria herself received him in audience. While at Oxford, he visited Edward Pusey the theologian, in the company of Max Mueller, who describes one of their discussions as follows: "At the end of their conversation the question turned up whether those who were born and bred as members of a non-Christian religion could be saved. Keshab Chandra Sen and myself pleaded for it, Pusey held his ground against us. Much of course depended on what was meant by salvation, and

Keshab defined it as an uninterrupted union with God. 'My thoughts,' he said, 'are never away from God'; and he added, 'my life is a constant prayer, and there are but few moments in the day when I am not praying to God.' This, uttered with great warmth and sincerity, softened Pusey's heart. 'Then you are all right,' he said, and they parted as friends, both deeply moved." This anecdote alone is enough proof that Keshab's nature was capable of great humility and tolerance in the face of provocation; of compassion too, no doubt, for the naturally good-hearted but dogma-bound old man.

In 1875 another Samaj, called the Arya, was founded by Swami Dayananda, a famous Sanskrit scholar. Dayananda worked for the same reforms as Devendra Nath and Keshab, but he was unconditionally opposed to all non-Hindu religious influences in India; Moslem, Christian and Buddhist alike. He was a pugnacious man and the Arya Samaj was a fighting movement. Although he reinterpreted the Vedas to suit his own kind of monotheism, his ideas were sufficiently orthodox to appeal to the masses and not merely the intellectuals. The influence of the Arya Samaj was strongest in the Punjab, where the struggle between Hindus and Moslems was most embittered.

Ramakrishna met Dayananda during one of his visits to Bengal. Mahendranath Gupta once heard him refer to this meeting and has recorded what Ramakrishna said. (*Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna;* October 11, 1884.) "Yes, I went to see him (Dayananda). At that time he was living in a garden-house across the Ganges. Keshab was expected there that day. He was longing to see Keshab as the chatak bird longs for rain." (According to legend, the chatak bird will only drink rain water; it declines all other water, no matter how frantic with thirst it may become. Ramakrishna was fond of

using this bird as a metaphor for intense spiritual thirst.) "He was a great scholar. He believed in the existence of the various deities. Keshab didn't. Dayananda used to say, 'God has created so many things—why couldn't he have created the deities?' Dayananda believed that the Ultimate Reality has no form. Captain (Vishwanath Upadhyaya) was chanting the name of Rama. Dayananda said to him sarcastically, 'you'd do better to keep saying "sandesh"!'" (Sandesh is a kind of sweetmeat made of cheese and sugar. In other words, Dayananda did not approve of making japa, or of any similar devotional practice.)

ONE DAY in March 1875, while Ramakrishna was in samadhi, he felt a prompting to go and visit Keshab. It so happened that he had seen Keshab once, many years before this, when they were both young men. Ramakrishna had seen Keshab meditating at the Brahmo Samaj, which was then still under the undisputed control of Devendra Nath Tagore. With his spiritual insight, he had realized that Keshab was the only one among the devotees present who had achieved a state of true meditation. Now, in samadhi, he had a vision of Keshab in the form of a peacock, with its tail outspread and a ruby adorning its head. The peacock's tail, he later explained, symbolized Keshab's followers and the ruby Keshab's own rajasic nature; his qualities of leadership and proselytizing zeal.

Keshab was engaged in sadhana with his disciples at a garden-house in Belgharia, a few miles to the north of Calcutta. Ramakrishna went to visit him there with Hriday, in a carriage belonging to Captain Vishwanath. On this occasion, Ramakrishna was dressed simply but quite adequately, in a dhoti with a red border, one end of which was thrown over his shoulder. They arrived about an hour after

noon. Getting out of the carriage, Hriday saw Keshab and his disciples seated on a brick-built ghat at the edge of the garden pond. Hriday went first alone to speak to Keshab, just as he had gone into the house of Bhagavan Das, in order to introduce his Uncle. "My Uncle is a great lover of God," he said. "He loves to hear talk and songs about the Lord. When he hears them, he goes into samadhi. He has heard that you are a great devotee, and he has come to listen to you talking about God and his glories. With your kind permission, I'll bring him to you." Keshab of course agreed, and Hriday helped Ramakrishna out of the carriage and led him over to them. Keshab and the others had been awaiting him with keen curiosity, but now they felt disappointed. On first inspection, Ramakrishna did not seem to them to be anyone out of the ordinary.

"Is it true, gentlemen," Ramakrishna asked humbly, "that you have the vision of God? I want so much to know what it's like. That's why I've come to see you." Presently he sang to them—it was a well-known song of Ramprasad's: "Who knows what Kali is? The six philosophies cannot explain her." Immediately after singing, he went into samadhi. Even this did not greatly impress the onlookers. They took Ramakrishna's loss of outer consciousness to be some kind of mental illness, or, worse still, a trick played to impress them. But when Hriday recalled his Uncle to his senses by chanting the name of Om in his ears, and when they saw a smile of dazzling innocence and sweetness overspread Ramakrishna's face, they began to be charmed out of their scepticism. And then Ramakrishna spoke to them, using his favorite, homely parables, comparing the many aspects of God to the different parts of the elephant that the blind men touched, or to the different colors of the chameleon seen at different times by different men—and taken always by their

ignorance to be the *only* aspect, the *only* color. . . . Soon, his hearers were listening and gazing at him enthralled—not so much by his teaching as by the manner of it. They no longer thought him ordinary. Indeed, they felt themselves to be in the presence of an enlightenment which was altogether beyond their understanding. And they were content merely to remain in that presence. They were unaware that the time for the next meal had long since gone by, and that they were even in danger of omitting the next period of prayer. It amused Ramakrishna to see this change in their attitude. He said to them, smiling, "if any other kind of animal comes to a herd of cattle, they'll turn on it and gore it with their horns. But, if a cow joins the herd, they'll lick its body and welcome it as one of themselves. . . . That's what has happened to us here today." Then, addressing Keshab, he added, "your tail has dropped off." This odd-sounding remark startled and displeased Keshab's disciples; they took it at first for some kind of insult. But Ramakrishna went on to explain, "as long as the tadpole has its tail, it can only live in the water, it can't come on land; but, when the tail drops off, it can live on land as well as in the water. As long as a man wears the tail of ignorance, he can only live in the world; but, when the tail drops off, he can live either in the knowledge of God or in the world, whichever he pleases. Your mind, Keshab, has reached that state now. You can live in the world and still be aware of God."

FROM that day onward to the end of his life, Keshab remained under the influence of Ramakrishna. True, he did not yield to this influence immediately or unconditionally. At first he mistrusted his own judgment and sent some of his followers over to Dakshineswar to observe Ramakrishna and report their impressions of him. And even much later, when

Keshab had become absolutely convinced of Ramakrishna's spiritual greatness, he was still tormented by the conflict between his own previous ideas and prejudices and Ramakrishna's teachings. Nevertheless, the influence grew in strength, until Keshab found that he could hardly endure to stay away from Ramakrishna for more than a few days at a time. Sometimes he would come to Dakshineswar; sometimes he would invite Ramakrishna to visit him at his house in Calcutta, which was called the Kamal Kutir, the Lily Cottage. Sometimes Keshab and a party of Brahmo devotees would take Ramakrishna for a steamer trip on the Ganges, so that they could enjoy his society without fear of any intrusion.

Although Keshab was now one of the most famous men in India, and was himself looked up to as a teacher, he always treated Ramakrishna with the utmost humility and respect. Whenever they met, Keshab brought the offering of fruits which is traditional when the pupil visits his guru. And, like a devoted pupil, Keshab would seat himself at Ramakrishna's feet. Once, Ramakrishna said to him playfully, "Keshab, you delight so many people with your lectures—please expound something to me, too!" To which Keshab replied, "Sir, am I to sell needles in a blacksmith's shop?" (The Indian proverbial equivalent of "carrying coals to Newcastle.") "Please talk and let me listen. People are delighted whenever I tell them anything you have told me."

One day, Ramakrishna said to Keshab that, if one admits the existence of Brahman, one must also necessarily admit the existence of Brahman's Power, through which the universe is created—since Brahman and its Power are eternally one and the same. To this Keshab agreed. Ramakrishna then told him that the Scriptures, the Devotee and God are also one and the same. To this also Keshab agreed.

Ramakrishna next told him that the Teacher, God and the Devotee are also one. But Keshab became disturbed and perplexed. At length, he said respectfully, "Sir—just now I can't accept anything more. Please, let us not speak of this for the present." "Very well," Ramakrishna told him. "Then we'll stop there."

In 1878, a scandal split the Brahmo Samaj. The Maharaja of Cooch-Behar had asked for the hand of Keshab's daughter. The marriage was one of the most brilliant that a Hindu girl could possibly have made, and Keshab agreed to it. There is no reason to suppose that he did this from motives of self-interest, because of the Maharaja's rank and huge wealth; no doubt he was thinking only of his daughter's future. Unfortunately, however, the girl was not yet quite fourteen years old, and so Keshab was acting against one of his own publicly declared objectives: the abolition of child-marriage. Immediately a conflict broke out and two parties were formed—one defending Keshab, the other condemning him as the worst of traitors and hypocrites. The opposition party then left The Brahmo Samaj of India and founded a movement of its own, called the General Brahmo Samaj.

When Ramakrishna heard of this schism, he was much distressed. He had never approved of Keshab's campaign against child-marriage. "Birth, death and marriage are all subject to the will of God," Ramakrishna had said. "They can't be made to obey hard and fast rules. Why does Keshab try to make such rules?" Nevertheless, if anybody spoke of the Cooch-Behar marriage in Ramakrishna's presence and blamed Keshab, Ramakrishna would defend him: "How is Keshab to blame? He's a family man. Why shouldn't he do what he thinks best for his sons and daughters? He wasn't acting against religion or morality. He has only done

his duty as a father." Ramakrishna refused to take sides in the quarrel, and remained on friendly terms with members of both movements.

One of the most prominent of these was Vijay Krishna Goswami. After the Cooch-Behar schism he had become a leader of the newly-formed General Samaj. He visited Ramakrishna often and would tell everyone he met that Ramakrishna was the greatest soul in India, bewailing the blindness of those who could not recognize this fact. He used to say to Ramakrishna, "Dakshineswar is so near to Calcutta—we can visit you whenever we like; there are plenty of boats and carriages. If we don't understand you and value you highly enough, it's only because you're so near home and so easily available. If you were sitting on a mountain top, and we had to walk miles without food and climb precipices to reach you, clinging on to the roots of trees—then we would know what a treasure you are. As it is, we imagine there must be better teachers living far away from here; and so we run seeking them this way and that way, and put ourselves to endless trouble for nothing."

As for Ramakrishna, he thought very highly of Vijay's spiritual attainments. "Vijay has reached the room just next to the innermost chamber," he would say, "and now he's knocking at its door."

Before the schism, Keshab and Vijay had been good friends; after it, they stopped seeing each other. However, as both continued to visit Ramakrishna regularly, a meeting between them was sooner or later inevitable. Mahendranath Gupta tells us that Vijay was sitting with Ramakrishna in his room at Dakshineswar, on the afternoon of October 27, 1882, when some of Keshab's followers arrived with an invitation. Keshab had chartered a steamboat which had just dropped anchor opposite the temple com-

pound; would Ramakrishna go out with them in a rowboat to the steamer and join him? Ramakrishna agreed, and Vijay went along with him—we are not told how willingly or unwillingly.

The encounter could hardly have begun more embarrassingly. No sooner was Ramakrishna in the rowboat than he went into deep samadhi. They had difficulty in getting him on board the steamer. Partially conscious of his surroundings but still moving stiffly and mechanically, he was helped downstairs into a cabin. Keshab and the others bowed to him. He did not seem to recognize them. He was placed in a chair. Keshab and Vijay sat down on two others. As many devotees as could squeeze into the cabin squatted on the floor; the rest peered in through the door and the windows, which had to be opened because the cabin had already become terribly stuffy. Meanwhile, Ramakrishna went back into deep samadhi. Keshab and Vijay were thus left virtually alone together, awkwardly enthroned in the midst of this audience which was, no doubt, eagerly curious to see if they would show any signs of their hostility. They appear to have behaved with formal politeness.

Gradually, Ramakrishna returned to external consciousness. He whispered to himself, "Mother, why have you brought me here? They're shut in. They're not free. Can I free them?" A Brahmo devotee spoke to him of a holy man whom some of them had visited, and added, "he keeps a photograph of you in his room, Sir." This seemed to amuse Ramakrishna. Pointing to his body and smiling, he said, "it's just like a pillowcase." A train of ideas had thus been started, bringing him back, as it so often did, to the plane of consciousness on which he was able to speak as a teacher. And now he began to talk to them, with charming informality and humor, about the heart of the devotee which is the

"favorite parlor" of God, about the dream which we call our life, about the dance of Mother Kali. He compared the Divine Mother just before the recreation of the universe to a housewife who keeps a pot of seeds ready for the next sowing. He imitated the sound of the English language: *Foot fut it mit.* He sang hymns to Kali and Durga. His hearers were so delighted that they did not want the voyage to end, and Keshab asked the captain to steam a little further down the river. Puffed rice and grated cocoanut were served. Everyone was enjoying himself.

Yet there was still a constraint between Keshab and Vijay. Ramakrishna noticed it and said to Keshab, with his characteristic forthrightness, "look—here is Vijay. Your quarrel reminds me of the fight between Shiva and Rama. Shiva was Rama's guru. They fought each other but they soon made it up again. It was their followers, Shiva's ghosts and Rama's monkeys, who went on making faces and chattering at each other; they wouldn't stop! You have a religious society, so Vijay thinks he has to have one too. That's quite natural. While Sri Krishna, who was incarnate God himself, was happy in the company of the gopis at Vrindavan—even then, those two troublemakers, Jatila and Kutila, had to appear on the scene. Why? Because the plot cannot thicken without troublemakers. Without Jatila and Kutila there's no fun." Ramakrishna's affectionate teasing of Keshab and Vijay had been greeted by loud laughter, and now the two leaders were forced to become reconciled with each other. But Keshab's "ghosts" and Vijay's "monkeys" continued to carry on the feud, just as Ramakrishna had hinted that they would.

THE public recriminations caused by the Cooch-Behar marriage had had one good result; Keshab now began to feel

a distaste for all the vanities of public life and a longing for spiritual experience. Under Ramakrishna's influence, he now accepted many Hindu rituals and symbolic acts which he had previously rejected as meaningless: the offering of oblations, bathing in consecrated water, shaving the head, wearing the ocher-dyed cloth. Within two years, he had formulated and begun to preach a new creed which he called "The New Dispensation." "The New Dispensation" was, fundamentally, a presentation of Ramakrishna's teachings—as far as Keshab was able to understand them. What chiefly appealed to Keshab in Ramakrishna was his universality, and particularly the fact that he had had the vision of Jesus of Nazareth. But, over and above this, he regarded Ramakrishna as a living embodiment of his creed. When he came to Dakshineswar he would bow down before Ramakrishna and symbolically take the dust of his feet, exclaiming, "victory to the Dispensation! Victory to the Dispensation!" It was through Keshab that Ramakrishna first became known to the general public of Calcutta, and this was only the beginning of a fame which was to spread throughout India and the world.

Ramakrishna delighted in Keshab's spiritual growth. He now began to appear frequently, unannounced, at meetings of the Brahmo Samaj, joining with the Brahmo devotees in their *kirtan* (singing of religious songs). Not unnaturally, the Brahmos were encouraged by his visits to regard him as their exclusive property and to imagine that he shared their particular beliefs and theirs only. They could not understand that Ramakrishna's absorption in God made him eager to take part in religious observances of any kind.

Ramakrishna tried to wean the Brahmos away from their excessive preoccupation with social reform and turn their

minds toward meditation and the realization of God. But he knew human nature and did not expect too much of them. "I have said whatever came into my head," he used to tell them. "Take as much of it as you want. You can leave out the head and the tail." Later in his life, he would describe the Brahmo meetings to his own disciples: "I went to Keshab's house and watched them praying. After the speaker had talked a long time about the glories of God, he said, 'let us now meditate on him.' I wondered how long they'd meditate. But, oh dear, they'd scarcely had their eyes shut for two minutes before it was all over! How can one know God by meditating like that? While they were meditating, I was watching their faces. Afterwards, I said to Keshab: 'I've seen a lot of you meditate, and do you know what it reminded me of? Troops of monkeys sometimes sit quietly under the trees at Dakshineswar, just as if they were perfect gentlemen, quite innocent. But they aren't. They're sitting thinking about all those gourds and pumpkins that householders train to grow over their roofs, and about all the gardens full of plantains and eggplants. After a little while, they'll jump up with a yell and rush away to the gardens to stuff their stomachs. I saw many of you meditating like that.' And when they heard that, they laughed."

Ramakrishna would also try to correct the Brahmos' ideas about worship. "Why," he would ask them, "are you always talking so much about the various powers of God? Does a child who's sitting beside his Father keep thinking how many horses, cows, houses and estates his Father has? Isn't he simply happy to feel how much he loves his Father and how much his Father loves him? The father feeds and clothes the child—and why shouldn't God? After all, we are his children. If he looks after us, is that so extraordi-

nary? So, instead of dwelling on that, a real devotee makes God his very own, through love. He begs—no, he demands that his prayers shall be answered and that God shall reveal Himself to him. If you dwell so much on God's powers, you can't think of him as your nearest and dearest—and so you can't feel free to demand things of him. Thinking about his greatness makes him seem distant from his devotee. Think of him as your very own. That's the only way to realize him."

Ramakrishna did succeed to a large extent in curing the Brahmos of their unreasonable fear of image worship, which was based on the conviction that God is without form. Some of them, at least, began to understand what Ramakrishna meant when he said, "you should never set limits to God's nature"—that God is both with form and formless.

In the meeting of Ramakrishna and Keshab, we may see an epitome of the meeting between what was eternally alive in the Hindu tradition and what was noblest in the ideas of the West. Ramakrishna himself was no reformer, and he did not worry at all about the effects of Western culture upon India—believing, as he did, that nothing could have happened or would happen without the sanction of the Divine Mother. But the Brahmo Samaj and its kindred movements were destined, as we shall presently see, to exert an important influence, both direct and indirect, upon Ramakrishna's disciples and hence upon the Mission which bears his name.

GLIMPSES OF SISTER NIVEDITA

BRAHMACHARINI USHA

THE YEAR 1963 is the birth centenary of Swami Vivekananda, who interpreted the eternal religion of Vedanta for modern man. The Swami's immediate realization of the great truths he had come to preach, and his familiarity with Western as well as Eastern thought and culture, made him a religious leader of world-wide impact. His spiritual gifts may be seen in the work he left behind—in the organizations he founded in Asia, Europe, and the United States, and in his writings and speeches. His influence is also apparent in the men and women whose lives he transformed by his magnetic personality, so that they too might know the truth of God and serve his work.

One of those on whom Vivekananda left an indelible impression was Margaret Noble, a young Irishwoman, who was to become his spiritual daughter Nivedita and—in the words of the poet Rabindranath Tagore—a Mother of the Indian People. The devotion which Vivekananda received from this fiery and independent disciple is a tribute to him which it seems fitting to recall on the eve of his centenary.

Margaret's story is a story of religious aspiration which has been of interest to spiritual seekers of the East and the West for the past fifty years. We have retold it below, with the help of familiar sources, in order to feature selected portions from a series of her own hand-written letters.

These letters were sent to Swami Prabhavananda early in 1962 through the courtesy of Mrs. Frances Leggett.

BORN in 1867 in the town of Dungannon in North Ireland, Margaret was the first child of a minister of the Wesleyan Church. After finishing her schooling at the age of seventeen she took up teaching, and in 1892 she opened her own school in London. Through her study of the teaching techniques of Pestalozzi and Froebel, Margaret became aware that children's natural aptitudes and inclinations should be cultivated from an early age. This educational approach was to be of great help to her in her later teaching experiments in India.

In London, Margaret (called Margot by her friends) became acquainted with a group of English intellectuals. She was an active member of the Sesame Club, a salon devoted to the discussion of modern influences and thought, where among others Thomas Huxley and George Bernard Shaw used to lecture. Margaret also associated herself with the Irish Freedom Movement. She was absorbed in these various activities and interests until, in the winter of 1895, a new phase of her life began with her meeting of Swami Vivekananda.

Swamiji (as Vivekananda was more familiarly known) had been invited to come to London by two English friends who had made his acquaintance in the United States. (In 1893, Swamiji had represented Hinduism at the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago, and for the following two years he had lectured in various American cities.)

The initial impact made on Margaret by Swami Vivekananda is described by her in her book *The Master As I Saw Him*: "It had never before fallen to my lot to meet with a thinker who in one short hour had been able to express

Sister Nivedita

all that I had hitherto regarded as highest and best." There were many points in Swamiji's teachings of which Margaret saw the truth at once. And within a few months, before he returned to America, she addressed him as "Master." Yet, impressed as the young Westerner was by Swamiji's character and message, she withheld full acceptance of his teachings at this time. "I noted what he said, was interested in it, but could pass no judgment upon it, much less accept it," she admitted frankly. "And this statement describes more or less accurately the whole of my relation to his system of teaching, even in the following year . . ." Margaret explained further that she studied Vivekananda's teaching sufficiently to become convinced of its coherence, but never, till she had had experiences that authenticated them, did she inwardly cast in her lot with the final justification of the things he came to say. She was temperamentally incapable of subscribing to any truth which she herself had not thoroughly examined and directly realized. And in her sincere questioning and testing she had Swamiji's full sympathy and approval. He had similarly tested the teachings of his guru, Sri Ramakrishna. Therefore, when Margaret was teased one day about her apparent scepticism by a fellow disciple, Swamiji was to console her: "Let none regret that they were difficult to convince! I fought my master for six long years, with the result that I know every inch of the way."

Later, Margaret was to say of Swamiji's method of training that it would have been altogether inconsistent with his idea of freedom to have sought to impose his own conceptions on a disciple: "He was, without knowing it, a born educator. He never checked a struggling thought."

Swami Vivekananda's mission, as Margaret later summed it up, was twofold: world-moving in its first aspect,

nation-making in the second. As a world-mover, Swamiji was the first authoritative exponent to the West of the Vedantic ideal: liberation from the bondage of ignorance through realization of the divinity in man. Regarding the second aspect of his mission, Margaret said that he never proclaimed nationality; but he had "an inextinguishable passion for his country's good." He dreamt of the reawakening of India to the glory of her ancient spiritual heritage. And to this end he preached to his people man-making, his concept of character and strength. Swamiji felt that India's masses would be competent to settle all other problems themselves once their education was achieved. In this scheme, the training of girls and women was of foremost importance; and it was primarily in this field that Margaret was to apply her numerous talents and find her life's work. Not only did Swamiji hope that through education wives and mothers would be produced who in their turn would become teachers of future generations, but also brahmacharinis —women aspirants devoted to the monastic ideal.

The two aspects of Swami Vivekananda's mission have their basis in his own spiritual realization. Seeing God in all beings, his compassionate heart went out to the poor and down-trodden, in his own country and elsewhere. To serve these was to serve God. In order to equip the underprivileged physically and mentally for the pursuit of spiritual truth, they must first be provided with economic security and education. Thus religion, according to Vivekananda, must be made to work for everyone, whatever be his occupation, whatever he might be, the human mind reaching toward higher and higher ideals until finally everything is merged in the vision of the nondual Reality.

It was during Vivekananda's second visit to London (in the late spring and early summer of 1896) that Margaret

decided to make herself the servant of his love for his people. As during his first visit, she attended all his lectures and classes. In one of the latter, one day, Swamiji exclaimed in an inspired mood: "What the world wants today is twenty men and women who can dare to stand in the street yonder and say that they possess nothing but God. Who will go? Why should one fear? If this is true, what else could matter? If it is not true, what do our lives matter?"

Margaret was moved by these words to write to the Swami. In return she received a letter in which he summed up his mission, and asked her to work for his cause:

My ideal indeed can be put into a few words and that is: to preach unto mankind their divinity, and how to make it manifest in every movement of life.

This world is in chains of superstition. I pity the oppressed, whether man or woman, and I pity more the oppressors.

One idea that I see clear as daylight is that misery is caused by *ignorance* and nothing else. Who will give the world light? Sacrifice in the past has been the Law, it will be, alas, for ages to come. The earth's bravest and best will have to sacrifice themselves for the good of many, for the welfare of all. Buddhas by the hundred are necessary with eternal love and pity.

Religions of the world have become lifeless mockeries. What the world wants is character. The world is in need of those whose life is one burning love, selfless. That love will make every word tell like a thunderbolt.

It is no superstition with you, I am sure, you have the making in you of a world-mover, and others will also come. Bold words and bolder deeds are what we want. Awake, awake, great ones! The world is burning with misery. Can

you sleep? Let us call and call till the sleeping gods awake, till the god within answers to the call.

Later, one day, Swamiji told Margaret that he had a project in mind for the women of his country in which he thought she could be of great help to him. But he did not elaborate on this idea for some time. It was not his way to plan ahead. He had previously written to Margaret: "The details come to me as I go. I never make plans. Plans grow and work themselves."

In December, Swami Vivekananda and a small group of his followers went to India. Margaret was disappointed. She had hoped to accompany the party in order to serve the cause of Indian women. But Swamiji had not invited her to come, nor had he made any reference to her future. In his absence, she helped with the Vedanta work in London, which was being continued under the direction of Swamiji's brother-disciple Abhedananda.

Swamiji had not changed his mind about Margaret's suitability for the Indian work as far as her capabilities and devotion were concerned. But he knew what tremendous tests of adaptability and perseverance awaited a foreign worker, brought up in such an entirely different cultural pattern. And so he did not encourage the young woman to leave her native land. Finally, after some months, her unflagging determination to go to India persuaded Swamiji to welcome Margaret, but only after enumerating the problems she would have to face in her new environment. He warned her of the climate, the lack of European comforts, poverty, caste restriction, and suspicion or possibly even hatred of her white skin. Then he told her that he was convinced a great future awaited her in India, and that her education, sincerity, purity, love, determination, and her Irish blood made

her just the woman wanted. At the same time, as her guru, he assured Margaret of his blessings and unconditional protection, regardless of the outcome of her gift of service: "I will stand by you unto death, whether you work for India or not, whether you give up Vedanta, or remain in it. The tusks of the elephant come out, but they never go back. Even so are the words of a man."

MARGARET landed in India in January 1898. She moved into a cottage on the newly acquired grounds of the Ramakrishna monastery at Belur with two other Western followers of Swami Vivekananda: Miss Josephine MacLeod and Mrs. Sara Bull. Miss MacLeod (familiarly called Joe, Jaya, or Yum) was one of Swami Vivekananda's staunchest American friends. She served his work in various ways, such as the publication of many of his books. Sara Bull (whose Sanskrit name was Dhira Mata) was also a devoted admirer of Vivekananda. Her generous financial contributions made possible the construction of the shrine at Belur, the endowment of the monastery, and later much of Margaret's work.

Swamiji would visit the cottage of his Western disciples every day and talk to them about the ideals of Vedanta, Sri Ramakrishna, Indian people and their customs. A fascinating conversationalist, he had the gift of infusing his listeners with his own enthusiasm for the subject under discussion. Swami Turiyananda, a brother-disciple, said that "Swamiji's words were so powerful, both in feeling and in language, that they straightaway entered the heart. Everything else was forgotten when he spoke." In these talks, the seeds of Margaret's knowledge and love of India were sown. Swamiji's conversations, here at Belur, and afterwards in northern India, Europe, and America, provided her with a back-

ground of information invaluable to her in her daily life and in the writing of her books.

Two highly important events in Margaret's life took place in March 1898. First of all, accompanied by Joe and Sara, Margaret met Sri Sarada Devi, the Holy Mother, who lovingly welcomed the three ladies. Not only that. Holy Mother, who had been brought up in a pious brahmin family, ignored caste restrictions by eating with the Western visitors. Coming from her—the widow of Sri Ramakrishna, and a spiritual figure of the highest order in her own right—this act was particularly significant. Not only did she thereby implement her acceptance of Swamiji's Western disciples as members of her spiritual family; her act of disregarding an ancient religious custom in order to welcome the foreign devotees into her home without any restriction opened the way for Margaret's admission into the society of her adopted land. This visit marked the beginning of a deeply affectionate relationship between Sri Sarada Devi and Margaret. The latter from that day on responded to Holy Mother with childlike trust and simple devotion. The Mother, on her part, loved Margaret as her own and called her "Khooki"—using the Bengali term of endearment which means "little daughter."

The second significant event of this period was Margaret's initiation into brahmacharya, the first monastic vows. On her initiation day, the day of the Christian Feast of the Annunciation, Swamiji gave her the name Nivedita, which means "the Dedicated." After teaching his disciple the worship of Shiva, Swamiji made the ceremony culminate in an offering of flowers at the feet of Buddha. In her biography of Vivekananda, Nivedita recorded the words with which her master consecrated her to a life of renunciation and service: " 'Go thou,' he said, as if addressing, in one

person, each separate soul that would ever come to him for guidance, 'and follow him who was born and gave his life for others five hundred times before he attained the vision of the Buddha!' "

In May, Swami Vivekananda and several monks and Western devotees left for Almora, a place in the Himalayas. The party included Nivedita, Joe, and Sara.

With their arrival in Almora began for Nivedita what she later referred to as a "going-to-school," a period of intensive spiritual training. It had become increasingly clear that in spite of her sincere desire to serve her guru and his mission, Nivedita was still aggressively English in her outlook. She clung to her prejudiced views on history, art, literature, and other subjects under discussion; and she defended her patriotism with all the tenacity of her vigorous temperament. Now, blind half-truths and ignorant assertions had to go. As she later expressed it, her mind had to change its center of gravity. Not only were her preconceptions an obstacle in the path of her personal salvation, they barred any success of the work she had come to India to do. And so, a battle of wills took place between Vivekananda and Nivedita, these two strong personalities, described in the latter's words as follows: "My relation to our Master at this time can only be described as one of clash and conflict. I can see now how much there was to learn . . . and the first of lessons doubtless is the destroying of self-sufficiency in the mind of the taught. But I had been little prepared for that constant rebuke and attack upon all my cherished prepossessions which was now my lot." Yet, she said, no acceptance of new opinions or creeds was asked of her—never more than an emancipation from partiality.

Before Nivedita left England, Swamiji had begun to

teach her a great truth of spiritual life: The relationship between guru and disciple must not be confined within the bondage of the personal. Devotion must be offered without possessiveness, without expectation of anything in return. Swamiji had indicated to Nivedita that only those who have the breadth of the impersonal view can really serve; and by the unselfishness of their love, matter is changed into spirit. Nivedita had yet to learn this lesson. In the painful process of the stripping of her ego, she was not aware that her guru's rebukes and apparent harshness were blessings in disguise. She did not then realize that he was rooting out her bad karmas, the harmful tendencies in her character, and that, at the cost of a short period of suffering, she was being spared years of hard struggle. She only saw that her dream of a friendly and beloved leader was falling away, "and the picture of one who would be at least indifferent, and possibly silently hostile, substituting itself." Yet, however deeply she suffered, Nivedita never took back the offer of her service, although she was made to understand that she could not count on experiencing any personal satisfaction in it.

Her struggle reached a climax. How Joe MacLeod interceded for her with Swamiji and how Nivedita was reconciled with him is described in *The Master As I Saw Him*:

And then a time came when one of the older ladies of our party, thinking perhaps that such intensity of pain inflicted might easily go too far, interceded kindly and gravely with the Swami. He listened silently and went away. At evening, however, he returned, and finding us together in the verandah he turned to her and said with the simplicity of a child, "You were right. There must be a change. I am going away into the forests to be alone, and when I come

back I shall bring peace." Then he turned and saw that above us the moon was new, and a sudden exaltation came into his voice as he said, "See! the Mohammedans think much of the new moon. Let us also with the new moon begin a new life!" As the words ended, he lifted his hands and blessed with silent depths of blessing his most rebellious disciple, by this time kneeling before him. . . . Long, long ago, Sri Ramakrishna had told his disciples that the day would come when his beloved "Noren" would manifest his own great gift of bestowing knowledge with a touch. That evening at Almora I proved the truth of his prophecy. For alone, in meditation, I found myself gazing deep into an Infinite Good, to the recognition of which no egoistic reasoning had led me. . . . And I understood, for the first time, that the greatest teachers may destroy in us a personal relation only in order to bestow the Impersonal Vision in its place.

Nivedita now felt at peace. She had received an impetus in her spiritual life which helped her to assimilate her guru's teachings and to deepen her meditation.

From Almora, Swamiji went to Kashmir in June 1898 with Joe, Sara, and Nivedita. He permitted Nivedita to accompany him to Amarnath. At this famous cave temple, which is dedicated to Lord Shiva, Swamiji had one of the great mystic experiences of his life.

After this pilgrimage, the Swami's thoughts became centered on the Mother of the Universe—the Power which creates, preserves, and dissolves all manifestation. He went alone to Kshir-Bhavani, where he worshiped at the Divine Mother's shrine. The revelation he received at this sacred spot through the Mother's grace had a permanent effect on him. Thenceforth he no longer willed or planned but lived as a child of the Divine Mother, in an attitude of perfect

self-surrender to her. He was transfigured when he returned to Srinagar to meet his disciples. With raised hands he blessed them and then placed flowers which he had offered to the Mother on the head of each disciple.

AFTER returning to Calcutta, Nivedita asked to be a guest of Holy Mother in her little community in Baghbazar, Calcutta, no doubt hoping thus to acquaint herself more closely with the Indian environment in which she was to work. At this time, Nivedita had no idea into what a difficult position she put her hostess by her trusting but ignorant request. Although the Mother herself accepted Nivedita in the same loving manner she had demonstrated at their first meeting, several of the pious Hindu ladies of her household were at first quite shocked by the intrusion of this foreigner, whose presence must have posed numerous problems with respect to social etiquette and religious custom. However, Nivedita was soon accepted and regarded with affection by all the members of Holy Mother's community. There was Gopaler Ma, for instance (one of Sri Ramakrishna's foremost women disciples, who had been blessed by the vision of the Lord as the Child Krishna). Then in her eighties, she was the oldest member of the household and very orthodox in her habits. Gopaler Ma not only adjusted herself to the presence of a European in the house but came to love Nivedita, in whose home she was to spend the last years of her life.

Nivedita was very happy in the spiritual atmosphere of Holy Mother's place, and with her keen intelligence and desire to learn she soon began to appreciate the Indian mode of life, in which every detail of household custom, handed down from generation to generation, is interwoven with a quest for purity and the worship of motherhood.

After about a week, a house in Bosepara Lane, Bagh-

bazar, was found for Nivedita. Even so, she continued to spend her afternoons at Holy Mother's home, which was located nearby; and during the hot weather the Mother insisted that Nivedita sleep in her more comfortable house.

Nivedita says that it was characteristic of Swamiji's methods that she had not been hurried in the initiation of the work she had come to do, although it had been taken for granted from the start that she would open a girls' school in Calcutta. Instead, she had been given leisure, travel, and mental preparation. Now she was ready to begin to work. From her study of the techniques of Pestalozzi and Froebel she had learned that teaching must start from the standpoint of the pupil and help him to develop in his own way. Swamiji's concept of education was quite in accord with hers. On the one hand, he knew that people have to be reached in terms of their own aptitudes and heritage. At the same time they must be given scope to grow. And so he told Nivedita: "Frame laws, but frame them in such a fashion that when people are ready to do without them, they can burst them asunder. Our originality lies in combining perfect freedom with perfect authority." If Nivedita was to serve the cause of Indian education, it was important that she should see through the eyes of her pupils and identify herself with their aspirations. To this end, Swamiji instructed her: "You must Hinduize your thoughts, your needs, your conceptions, and your habits. Your life, internal and external, has to become all that an orthodox Hindu brahmin brahmacharini's ought to be. The method will come to you, if only you desire it sufficiently. But you have to forget your own past . . . You have to lose even its memory."

Thus Nivedita steeped herself in Indian customs: she ate what Indians ate, and ate with her fingers, as they did;

she sat and slept on the floor; she tried to bind herself by the feelings and observances of Hindu etiquette in every way. By these means she was to arrive "at that Indian consciousness which would afterwards enable one to orientate oneself truly to the Indian aspects of larger questions." This orientation, it was understood, might some day lead her to an emancipation such as that in which her guru lived.

Swamiji expected Nivedita to recast her mind and life completely in the Hindu mold. However, it must be emphasized that he never asked her to subject herself to custom and orthodoxy *per se*, but only in order that she might become a better instrument for her chosen work. He had once told her that "Custom is nothing." And before her return to England in the summer of 1899, he wanted Nivedita to resume her European way of life as if she had never dropped it. A saint, his heart fixed in God, can adjust to changing circumstances without losing his equanimity. Swamiji had this capacity, and he expected it of his spiritual daughter.

Although the Swami demanded tremendous powers of adaptability from Nivedita, he did not disregard her freedom. First of all, she was at liberty to organize the school according to her judgment. Secondly, she associated with various types of people, both Indian and European, without any interference on his part, although it is known that he felt uneasy about some of these contacts, fearing that they might make it difficult for her to fully enter into the life of a Hindu nun.

Then again, Swamiji—like Holy Mother—tried to smooth Nivedita's path by breaking down some of the rigid social barriers confronting her. Among these was the custom of shunning food cooked by non-Hindus and abstaining from eating in their company. On many occasions, the Swami would help himself to sweets after they had been

offered to Nivedita. At other times he would ask her to cook for him, partake of the food, and distribute the rest among others.

On Kali Puja day, on which the Mother of the Universe is worshiped, the Nivedita School for Girls was formally opened and blessed by Sri Sarada Devi, in the presence of several disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. (Affiliated with the Ramakrishna Mission in 1918, the school is still flourishing. The residential staff of the institution became the nucleus of what later developed into an order of nuns in India—the Sri Sarada Math (and Mission). The Nivedita School is presently under the jurisdiction of the Sarada Mission.)

The school started with a few girls from Baghbazar. It is a credit to the simple and religious life which Nivedita lived that the orthodox Hindu ladies of the neighborhood welcomed and befriended her, and entrusted their daughters to her care. The girls' curriculum included sewing, painting, clay modeling, reading, and writing.

Nivedita was not only busy with her school. She started a teacher's training class for some friends at a Hindu reform society. In addition, she gave lectures—including two on the worship of Kali, one of these at the famous shrine at Kalighat.

On the eve of her departure for India, Swamiji had written to Nivedita that a veritable lioness was needed for the work in his country. With all the energy and fearlessness which Swamiji had discerned in her nature, Nivedita offered her services wherever she might be of help. Thus, when plague broke out in Calcutta in March 1899, she immediately volunteered for relief work. Ignoring the danger of contagion, she nursed the sick and comforted the dying. It was probably about this time that Sir Jadunath Sarkar, the historian, first met her. He recalled that "when the

people were scared away by the terror of the unknown form of death and scavengers could not be had, Nivedita took a spade in her hand and began to shovel away the filth from the neglected lane in Baghbazar in which she lived. Her example shamed some young men of the locality to join her, and thus an object lesson in civic self-help was taught."

In December 1898, Swamiji decided to revisit the West to give new impetus to the work there. He asked his brother-disciple Turiyananda to accompany him. It was agreed that Nivedita would join them, although thirty girls were now enrolled in her school. Swamiji thought that Nivedita should collect funds in order to put the institution on firmer financial footing rather than continue without a permanent source of income. And so in June 1899, the two Swamis and Nivedita (who had temporarily closed the school) boarded ship. When at the end of July they reached London, they were met at the dock by Miss Christine Greenstidel, who had come from the United States to welcome Vivekananda. (Christine was a German-born disciple of the Swami, who had settled in Detroit.) The two Swamis and Christine continued on to America, Nivedita following shortly afterwards.

Upon their arrival in the United States, the Swamis were taken to Ridgely Manor, the estate of the Leggett family in New York state. Joe MacLeod (Mrs. Betty Leggett's sister), Nivedita, and other friends were also invited. It was at Ridgely that Nivedita finished writing *Kali the Mother*, a devotional book whi .h reveals her insight into the cosmic aspect of the Mother ideal.

With Swamiji's blessings, Nivedita soon left on an eight-months lecture tour of the United States, trying to collect funds for her work and to familiarize American women

with the life and ideals of their Indian sisters. She visited Chicago, Ann Arbor, Jackson, Detroit, Kansas City, Minneapolis, and Boston. In Chicago, she stayed at Jane Adams' Hull House and was pleased by the simplicity and unpretentiousness of the place.

Nivedita was an avid reader and observer. Perhaps the dynamic quality of her teaching and lecturing was due in part to her ever-present eagerness to learn. It is evident from her letters that she applied her inquiring mind enthusiastically to literature, philosophy, religion, history, sociology, and science. Her thinking was incisive and original, and her power and facility of expression made her an interesting correspondent.

In March 1900, while traveling, she wrote to Joe MacLeod in New York, telling her friend about her recent adventures in reading:

Schopenhauer is glorious. Almost as witty as Bernard Shaw in the third volume. He says that one of the chief arguments against the world's being the creation of a Benevolent Will must lie in the undrinkableness of sea water!!! . . .

He complains that poor dramatists put so much magnanimity into their characters—Shakespeare only gives perhaps Cordelia and Coriolanus as examples of perfect magnanimity in all his gallery (I should hold Brutus so too!) and then exclaims of Schiller that his one Marquis of Posa displays more magnanimity than is to be found in the whole of Goethe's works together! And he is full of odd interesting facts besides.

On March 13, she wrote from New York to Swamiji, who was then in San Francisco. An excerpt from this letter gives an idea of her way of sharing with him her thoughts, and news of her activities and acquaintances:

My dearest Father, . . . I am glad I have been to Chicago. It puts this wonderful group of people into a true perspective, and makes the constantly recurring possibility of brilliant conversation exhilarating.

For a certain Prof. Geddes and his wife, of Edinbro', Scotland, are staying here, till they sail for home on the 21st.

Long years ago in England—in the year I first met you —Norman Wyld [?] . . . told me that if I could only know Prof. Geddes—to whom he was proud to be disciple—my soul would be saved, and my attitude to Life determined forever.

This function however was played by someone else! Yet all the time in Kashmir I used to tell S. Sara and Yum-Yum of this man and of the claim Norman had made for him, that he was the first sociologist since Spencer to produce a new and living theory of society with a future in it.

Hence the present facts.

He is not in the least disappointing. But I am glad that I found my own place in the world before I met him. He is a light—beautiful and loveable—but with that most loveable kind of Westernness and *most* Western kind of loveableness—the air of the patient investigator who appeals to you to look at the same facts, not with the godlike solemnity of the East and of the Church that becomes itself the Incarnation, and says "*I am* the Life. . . . "

We had a great discussion on Sunday evening last between a certain Professor Griggs and myself. Prof. Griggs has specialized in the application of morals to life, and his subject at the moment was S. Francis. His contention was that S. Francis' habit of sprinkling ashes on his food was a mistake—and (far far worse to my thinking!) that he was *in love with S. Clara.* How I longed for you to be there, to assert the Ideal forever in such a way as to carry the hearts as well as the heads of all present. Of course I could only plead for the recognition of a certain class of natures, and

it was quite futile. But the Man of Science was "the witness"—and on the first opportunity he gave me one of his great sequences showing how the activities of the amoeba are twofold: nutritive or self-regarding or individuating, and reproductive or species-regarding or altruistic . . . and culminating in the picture of the Mother of Sorrows beside the Cross, where Mary represents the highest ideal of love attainable through one energy, and the Crucifix the individuation only to be reached by the celibate life. It delighted me to find that the biologist was more open to the ideal than the professor of Ethics and morals!

And then as he built up this vertical sequence, he showed how it was reflected in various depths of degradation, and then, folding the two pages together, he called these the golden and silver sides of the Shield, so that the higher a man's power of righteousness the deeper his power of sin—David, at once a spiritual genius and a horrid person tumbling in and out of the most disgraceful scrapes all his life long, being his example. Good manifesting through evil as well as good—I shall try to write out this particular sequence and send it—just to amuse you.

Ever your most loving daughter,

Margot.

The lecture tour in America was hard on Nivedita. Even favorably disposed listeners seldom offered to help her with donations. And all too often she had to counteract wild tales spread by Christian missionaries about the "heathen." More than one audience had to be informed that Indian babies are not fed to crocodiles. In the face of such ignorance, it was difficult for Nivedita not to become impatient and depressed. During her struggles, Swamiji's letters provided her with the reassurance she needed. He told her to remain steady, to surrender herself to the Divine

Mother's will; and he reminded her that self-sacrifice, not external success, was the goal.

After some months of uphill work, Nivedita reported progress. In a letter postmarked New York, June 26, 1900, she jubilantly wrote to Joe that a Mrs. C. P. Huntington had given her $5,000 the previous day. Up to this time Nivedita had collected $1,500. She continued:

Swami says that the interest on the present sum of $6,500 will give me in Calcutta a monthly income of at least 50 Rs. and that with what I may gain in the next few months will be enough to begin upon. So he wants me to leave for Calcutta next January or February!!! Won't that be joyful?

Miss Phillips on the other hand urges my return to New York at that time, as do the Meads of Boston. But he [Vivekananda] will have no plans. "Live from Mother's hand" is all he will say. So I think an early date will see me back in the beloved land.

Swami will follow to Paris I think as soon as he has been to Detroit, but I don't know. . . .

Dr. James [William James, the psychologist] was here to dinner last night, and we start Thursday morning.

That Thursday, Nivedita preceded Swamiji to Paris in order to work with Professor Geddes, the celebrated sociologist. From this collaboration she hoped to gain knowledge helpful to her later in India. However, it turned out that she and the Professor were temperamentally unsuited to work together. Although the collaboration had to be abandoned, their respect and friendship for one another continued unchanged through the years.

On July 20, Swamiji sailed for France. He had been invited to speak at the Congress of the History of Religions, which was being held in connection with the Paris Universal

Exposition. He chose the historical evolution of the Vedic religion as his subject, and his observations, delivered in French, were well received.

For the past few years the Swami's health had been poor. His mood became increasingly indrawn, and he gradually freed himself from his responsibilities. "I have bundled my things and am waiting for the great deliverer," he wrote to Joe in April 1900.

Nivedita misunderstood Swamiji's mood of detachment. She thought he had become indifferent to her work, and she worried what she might have done to displease him. He made her understand that his affection for her and interest in her activities had not changed. But he wished her to stand on her own feet, to act independently, without relying on his guidance in matters of work. When, in September 1900, Nivedita bade Swamiji good-by in Brittany, about to return alone to England in order to find friends and means for the school in India, he told her:

There is a peculiar sect of Mohammedans, who are reported to be so fanatical that they take each newborn babe, and expose it, saying, "If God made thee, perish! If Ali made thee, live!" Now this which they say to the child, I say, but in the opposite sense, to you, tonight—"Go forth into the world, and there, if I made you, be destroyed! If Mother made you, live!"

So ended Nivedita's years of schooling under Swamiji. For when she saw him again in India in the first half of 1902, it was to receive his final blessing and to take a last farewell.

In England, Nivedita gave a series of lectures on Hinduism, Indian women, education, and the Ramakrishna Or-

der. She quickly gained a reputation as a champion of India. Since her departure from France her thoughts about India's future had undergone a change. She began to feel that political freedom had to be won before India's social and spiritual regeneration could become a reality. Identifying herself increasingly with Indian nationalism, she was disillusioned by the lack of understanding the British were showing towards Indians and Indian causes. Nivedita had come a long way from her former patriotic zeal for England.

Upon her arrival on Indian soil, in February 1902, she was welcomed by Indians as one of their own. She freely expressed her new views concerning Indian independence, observing that India was perfectly competent to make any necessary social changes without outside interference. Soon Indian political leaders began to frequent her home in Calcutta, and as a result the British government deemed it necessary to put Nivedita under surveillance.

She started her school again, and was joined in this work by Christine Greenstidel in the following year. Nivedita humbly acknowledged Christine's help in managing the institution, giving her the credit for the success of their work for Indian women. Since Nivedita later was to be frequently occupied with lecturing and writing, Christine took complete charge of the school for long periods of time.

Swamiji had returned to India in December 1900. His poor health during previous years has already been mentioned. In several letters and conversations the Swami indicated that he would not live much longer. But, says Nivedita, his hints about his coming end fell on deaf ears.

On June 29, 1902, Nivedita paid a visit to the monastery at Belur. Swamiji told her on this occasion that a great austerity was coming upon him, and that he must prepare for death. But she never dreamt of less than three or four

years. On July 2, she went to the Math again. It was *ekadashi,* a day of fasting and meditation. Although Swamiji was observing the fast, he had a morning meal brought for Nivedita, and served it to her himself. While she ate, he fanned his disciple. Afterwards he washed her hands, himself pouring the water over them and drying them with a towel. "It is I who should do these things for you, Swamiji! Not you for me!" she protested. He startled her by his solemn answer: "Jesus washed the feet of his disciples." Nivedita stopped herself from exclaiming, "But that was the *last* time," not realizing that here too the last time had come. Before she left, Swamiji blessed her, taking her head in his hands. Two days later he entered into the final samadhi.

SOON after Swamiji's death, Nivedita was forced to make an important decision concerning her status as a brahmacharini of the Ramakrishna Order. Feeling increasingly identified with the cause of India's political independence, she wished to dedicate herself to its accomplishment. This, however, she could not do within the framework of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, a purely religious and humanitarian organization, whose rules prohibit political activities on the part of its monastics. And so, after giving the matter much thought, Nivedita regretfully renounced her membership in the Order. However, she remained devoted to the ideals of purity and selflessness until the end of her life, and her association with Holy Mother, Swami Brahmananda (President of the Math and Mission), and the other disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, continued as before. According to Nivedita's viewpoint, the step of formally dissociating herself from the Ramakrishna Order was taken in order to serve her guru all the better, by rousing in his

countrymen the consciousness of their great national heritage and spiritual culture.

In the fall and winter of 1902, Nivedita made lecture tours to Bombay and Madras. Where Swamiji had stressed "man-making," she imbued her audiences with the thought of "nation-making." Indians must become united in the thought of their common tradition, nationality, and destiny. And she appealed to India's women to renew in their sons the ideal of brahmacharya, the observance of continence and other religious practices according to the Vedic teachings.

Thus began for Nivedita a busy life of lecturing in Calcutta as well as outside of Bengal. And her literary contributions were increasingly requested by Indian newspapers and magazines.

In the meantime, Nivedita's girls' school grew steadily, proving the wisdom of Swamiji's concept of education and the faithfulness of Nivedita's execution of his idea. Nivedita and Christine were on excellent terms with the Hindu ladies of the neighborhood and, in November 1903, they started a women's section, with classes in reading, writing, sewing, and religion. Impressed by the innate dignity and gentleness of the ladies, Nivedita built upon their own customs and heritage. They were not to give up their Indian ideals and traditions in order to assume the Western ways of life. Their education, like their daughters', she felt, must be creative and national; it must be based upon the Hindu culture, which had produced a heroic literature and the highest flights of religious thought.

For the sheltered Hindu ladies to leave their homes in order to take lessons from a European was a radical departure from orthodoxy. But just how much the privilege of attending school meant to them is pointed out in a new biography of Nivedita, written by Pravrajika Atmaprana.

It is mentioned in this book that the Indian ladies would finish their household duties early, doing twice the amount and working especially hard at pleasing their families, so that they would not be prevented from going to school. Sometimes Holy Mother would visit the school, and this was always an occasion of great rejoicing for pupils and teachers alike.

Mention has already been made of the affectionate relationship which existed between Sri Sarada Devi and Nivedita. Nivedita was always in straitened circumstances and could rarely afford to buy anything for Holy Mother. But whatever Nivedita gave was cherished. Once she presented Holy Mother with a scarf. It was kept in a trunk long after it was worn to shreds. But Holy Mother refused to let anyone throw it away because it was a token of her Western daughter's devotion to her.

Nivedita admired Holy Mother's courtesy and broad-mindedness almost as much as her saintliness. No matter how difficult a problem or new a situation might be brought to Sri Sarada Devi's attention, her judgment was always the essence of charity and generosity. In order to illustrate Holy Mother's ability to appreciate foreign religious ideas, Nivedita told how one Easter Day the Mother and some of her attendants visited her. Sri Sarada Devi asked Nivedita to explain the meaning of the celebration and then listened with enjoyment to the singing of Easter hymns. And one evening, Holy Mother asked Nivedita and Christine to describe a European wedding. As the Sisters acted out the roles of the priest, the "Christian brahmin," and of the bride and groom, all the Hindu ladies present were charmed. But none of them appreciated the marriage vow as much as Holy Mother did. She asked to have it repeated again and again. The pledge "For better for worse, for richer for

poorer, in sickness in health—till death us do part" made her exclaim delightedly: "Oh, the *dharmmi* words, the righteous words!"

In a letter to Joe, dated "Wednesday, Easter Week, 1904," Nivedita wrote about Sri Sarada Devi: "The Holy Mother told me last night that you are a *jnani.* I hope it won't turn your head to be told so! . . . She grows dearer and dearer. So girlish and young and full of life and brightness. And she told me *always* to give you her blessings. She is always the same. Oh what a comfort—the one person who never changes, ideal Hindu, ideal disciple, ideal *woman,* of all place and time."

Further sharing her thoughts with her old friend, Nivedita confided in the same letter:

I feel as if I had become intensely uncharitable nowadays. I see people as black and white. And the black [ignorance] I cannot bear to meet. Exactly what constitutes blackness—whether it is insincerity, or vanity, or self-interest, I cannot say. . . . I wander about India, hunting for boys and fools, and *trying* to give them a certain idea, which probably does not reach them.

Oh Yum, I do pray that I may be allowed to go on doing this! I want never to leave India. While I am here, I am *sure* that I am in my right place. Can't you look into the future and assure me that I shall be allowed to go on and on, quietly sowing the seed that Swamiji has left? I think it must have been the same feeling that made him so difficult to move when the time came for him to go to America. He said that a ghost constantly appeared to him and told him to leave. Evidently he fought against it. . . .

You do not know how terrible the government is becoming. The Tibet expedition, the new stand about education, the division of Bengal, the Official Secrets Bill, the

Ancient Monuments. Every measure is oppressive and tyrannical, and aimed at the undermining of the faculty of liberty.

The British government's repression of the stirrings of Indian independence only served to strengthen the growing national feeling. Many societies fostering education, patriotism, and dynamic religion began to form among India's young people. Nivedita, who was becoming increasingly known all over India, wrote militant articles for these groups and gave eloquent speeches, praising India's ancient culture and urging the country to awaken from poverty and foreign oppression. And her audiences responded to her vital personality. Said Rashbehari Ghosh, the Bengali patriot: "If the dry bones are beginning to stir, it is because Sister Nivedita breathed the breath of life into them. . . . If we are conscious of a budding national life at the present day, it is in no small measure due to the teaching of Sister Nivedita."

Nivedita was a commanding figure. She had adopted as her dress a simple white gown, which covered her tall frame from her neck to her feet. Many of her photographs show her wearing a string of rudraksha beads around her neck, her brown hair tied in a knot. Several of Nivedita's acquaintances have made special mention of her expressive blue eyes which animated an otherwise rather plain face with love and tenderness or anger and indignation, whichever the occasion inspired.

According to one eminent Indian politician, meeting Nivedita was like "coming in contact with some great force of nature." And an English journalist of her day called her "flame-like." "There was no dull tolerance about her," the latter continued his description of Nivedita, "and I suppose no one ever called her gentle. Even with friends her disa-

greement could be vehement, and her contradiction was very direct. Her scorn of presumptuous ignorance and her indignation at wrong were blasting. . . . But of all nobly sympathetic natures, she was among the first."

Nivedita was personally acquainted with the intellectual and political leaders of the emerging India, and her house in Bosepara Lane provided a meeting-place for them. They included such distinguished figures as Rabindranath Tagore, the poet; Aurobindo Ghosh, the nationalist and philosopher; Romesh Chandra Dutt, the economist; Ananda Coomaraswamy, the art critic; and Dr. J. C. Bose, the scientist. Nivedita's home was also frequented by visiting Western friends, members of the Ramakrishna Order, and young artists and students.

In 1904, Nivedita traveled extensively in the United Provinces of India, giving many lectures. Sir Jadunath Sarkar recalled that once she had promised to speak at Lucknow on a certain date. She was coming from Rajgir, which was not on the main railway line. In order to catch the Lucknow train and reach her destination on time she walked eleven miles on foot over a lonely track among hills and tiger-infested jungles, her only companion being a villager to show her the way and carry her small bag.

G. K. Gokhale, the President-elect of the Congress Party, invited Nivedita to attend the Congress sessions in Banaras in December 1905. During her stay in the holy city, Nivedita wrote an appeal for the Ramakrishna Mission Sevashrama (the Home of Service). She mentioned this in a letter dealing with her travels, activities, and thoughts about various matters. This letter, dated Calcutta, January 24, 1906, was addressed to Joe in London. Excerpts follow:

Your lovely long letter and Lady Betty's [Betty Leggett] have both been heavenly to find on my return from my month's wandering. . . . Oh, if you could see the piles of work on my desk! But Swamiji really has allowed me to do something for him in Benares this time. I have given three lectures, by way of bringing him more prominently before the public there, and so indirectly assisting the Sevashrama. And he has really blessed it. I cannot tell you what it means to me when he lets me carry a little of his burden. . . .

Did I tell you where I went—Benares, for the Congress, Sanchi, Bhopal, Ujjain, Ajmir, Jaipore, Agra, Allahabad, Benares? Wasn't that a travel for you? But I left out Gwalior and Jhansi, through want of sufficient ambition and courage at my start. You remember the first night we saw the Taj? It is more, infinitely more lovely now. Can it be that one has grown so much that one can now understand the soul of Shah Jehan, the "Beggar of Love," as Sadananda called him? And yet you know I saw when I stood there, watching the Taj fade out from the throne of day and emerge radiant and spotless on the throne of night, that this crown of perfect pearls has been placed in all its beauty on the brow of India, only to prove to the soul that can understand that the *spiritual* achievements of love are greater than it. To be the emperor of India, and to call all the resources of the world to enrobe your beloved in a glory like a dream, is wonderful, wonderful indeed. Yet it is another's thought of beauty that one must use in such a case. What of the *thinker*, whose thought, whose knowledge, is one with the joy of his love?

Now at the beginning of what I believe—though this is for you alone—to be the last seven years of work, I can say that I am utterly satisfied, utterly at peace, that I feel sure at last that my feet are on the right path, the path blessed and approved by him [Swamiji], and that the only question now is whether I shall work *adequately* or inadequately along the lines he has given me. This peace comes

largely from finding the written word so much more powerful than the spoken—so that I am not anxious because my work is done at my desk. . . .

I have had two sweet letters from Madame Wallenstein, whom I am growing to love much. And please give my love to Mrs. Harris. How deeply I believe what she felt about Swamiji! Unlike you, I am always helped by the vision of others. . . .

Dear Yum, I believe I shall be in Europe this year, but the way is not yet clear. . . . Political difficulties to be overcome in the paths of others, and so on. So I can venture no plans. Only I would love to accept S. Sara's invitation to meet her at Assisi and there write Swamiji's Life. And I *would* like to see the primroses in Devonshire once more. And besides all this, I sometimes think I hear a call to come and dwell [?] for awhile in the West, that I may define to myself his [Swamiji's] place and the essentials of his teaching in the march of nations.

This letter is typical of Nivedita's correspondence in that it repeatedly refers to Swamiji and his mission. And Nivedita's tone of humility and gratitude at being permitted to serve her guru's work reveals her attitude toward her activities. She habitually referred to "Swamiji's work," "his message," "his teaching"—not her own. From her letters and other writings it is evident that she worked in the spirit of karma yoga, offering her actions and their results as worship. She did not claim credit for any successes that came her way. On the contrary, she frequently questioned whether she was an adequate instrument.

On February 7, Nivedita wrote to Joe MacLeod that her visit to the West that year was very uncertain although she wished to go, hoping to bring a wider circle of friends and help to Swamiji's work.

Another letter to Joe, written on February 21, mentions Nivedita's start on *The Master As I Saw Him*, the biography of Swamiji, which took her five years to write.

My beloved Yum,

As yet I dare not say it is a success, but at least the Life of Swamiji is afoot. I am at work! Yesterday Mr. Gokhale came to see Christine to whom he is extremely *dévote*, and I read him many pages of the old diary, and he was so enchanted that I felt that perhaps I knew henceforth where I was.

Last Friday I sat down to work, and then when I had finished a chapter, I turned to the old diary for something —and suddenly it flashed upon me that in those old diaries lay the germ at any rate of *the most wonderful* book! And finally, I determined to copy out and publish in the Brahmavadin— of course with all due and proper anonymity, and reserving copyright for the present. But I get so tired. At this moment I feel utterly worn out, and yet I have done very little today, not more than five or six hours altogether. What one needs is a human *break*—but that cannot be, so one must just do without.

Poor S. Sara, I am afraid she will be much disappointed at my not going. She has actually sent me money for the ticket! But as I have asked her to let Christine go instead, I must wait to know if she consents before returning it, or doing anything else. Christine would like to go to America this year. . . .

Oh how I wish I could run to you for a chat whenever I wanted to stop working. Do you remember those sweet days beside the Jhelum? How wonderful love is! It makes one open out and unfold one's whole nature to the listener! . . .

I am thinking of ordering from M. Hautecoeur this week a twelve franc Sistine Madonna photograph, without

the cherubs, and as many of the Ste. Genevièves at three francs as £1 will buy altogether. The Madonna I want for a Hindu lady's praying place.

Letters to Joe, dated February 28 and March 8, 1906, reflect Nivedita's interest in the resurgence of Indian art, which she did her best to encourage. In the first letter she asked Joe to consult Lalique, the famous French engraver, for advice on the design of medals of honor which she had been requested to distribute, stressing that nationality was the thought she was seeking to popularize. "Tell him that I am utterly ignorant and cannot draw," she said, "and yet I sometimes have beautiful thoughts, and hate an undisciplined imagination above all things." Nivedita described several ideas for medals, using symbols from India's mythology—such as Shiva's trident and the thunderbolt—and from her history.

The letter of March 8, 1906, makes reference to Swamiji and to memories of blessed days spent in holy association. Nivedita's work on *The Master As I Saw Him* is progressing:

Last Sunday was the Ramakrishna mela day [birthday celebration of Sri Ramakrishna]. We went to the Math after luncheon. All sorts of things come nowadays to make one remember that first year in India—a flower here, a fragrance there. And on Sunday, I could not help feeling full of that first time with you, when Gopaler Ma took us by the hand and introduced us. Do you remember? And do you remember that Gopaler Ma now lives with us, in this very house?

William Jennings Bryan [the American political leader] and his wife have been in Calcutta this week, and we have seen much of them . . . Yes, I know *you* won't approve of him. I think I won't mention him to S. Sara but he is the grandest thing I have seen, outside India. One thing you

would have liked. He is a connoisseur in human beings. Show him a fine man and he knows it *at once*. He would not have failed to love Swamiji. When I first met him, three Englishmen were present who had never been very sure as to my reliability, and Bryan went very wrong over China. So I pounced on him. And afterward I found that the three Englishmen were with me! Wasn't that good?

I think that when I am really sure of having completed a chapter of Swami's Life, I'll send it to you to read to Lady Betty. If your heart and her judgment are both satisfied, then I shall be at rest. What do you say? I am bringing out very strongly the element of struggle between myself and him. And this by the advice of the Man of Science [Dr. J. C. Bose]. It seems egotistical, I fear, but I think on the whole that this is the true advice.

I am sending three pictures, made by cutting paper . . . All the little old Indian arts seem to be coming back now, and few are more beautiful, or reached greater heights in the old days, than this paper-cutting. You will see at a glance the wonderful skill required.

As evidenced by her correspondence, Swamiji's message and the continuance of his work were uppermost in Nivedita's mind. On April 11, 1906, she wrote to Joe concerning the Vedanta center in London, where after Swami Abhedananda's departure for New York in 1897 no Swami was permanently stationed: "Is Swami's [Vivekananda's] work there to die? Or ought we to be able to put a monk there?" And she wondered whether it would be advisable for her to go to England and help to re-establish the Vedanta center by giving a series of lectures on India and the significance of Indian thought. Nivedita continued:

I can see that the era of the *world*-workers is quickly passing away, but I do think we ought to have a nucleus in Europe

before the movement of Ramakrishna settles down to the silent thought-germination which must come. I feel as if *Swami* wanted it to be worked at in this light. . . . You see, when we who understood Swamiji and remember him are dead, there will come a long period of obscurity and silence for the work that he did. It will *seem* to be forgotten, until, suddenly, in a hundred and fifty or two hundred years, it will be found to have transformed the West. But *he* thought it worth while to make London one of the points of radiation. Ought we not to maintain his tradition? Perhaps you could talk and think this over.

(For many years the London center, headed since 1948 by Swami Ghanananda of the Ramakrishna Order, has been one of the two permanent Vedanta societies in Europe.)

IN the summer of 1906, Gopaler-Ma passed away. Mention has been made earlier of this holy woman, who regarded Sri Ramakrishna as the embodiment of her Chosen Ideal, the Child Krishna. She was in her nineties when she fell ill, and Nivedita, upon hearing this, immediately offered to take care of her. And so it happened that the orthodox Hindu saint passed the last two-and-a-half years of her life in Nivedita's home.

In the fall of that year, East Bengal (now East Pakistan) was stricken by famine and floods. Nivedita went to help the people in their distress. She overexerted herself, and fell ill with malaria. Already weakened by an attack of meningitis which she had suffered the previous year, she never fully regained her health.

Thinking that a stay in the West might help Nivedita to recover, Dr. Bose and his wife Abala persuaded her to accompany them to Europe in the fall of 1907 and in the fol-

lowing year to America, where the scientist had been invited to discuss his researches on the response of organic and inorganic matter to external stimuli. The Boses were among Nivedita's closest friends, and through the years she had spent much time working with the doctor on the manuscripts of his books. In Nivedita's absence, Christine and a young Indian woman, Sudhira Devi, managed the school.

Nivedita did not return to India until July 1909. Meanwhile, the British government had executed, jailed, or deported many of the Indian political leaders. However, the national consciousness had been awakened, not to be extinguished again, and Swami Vivekananda's influence on the regeneration of the Indian spirit became increasingly recognized. Nivedita, who always bridled at any injustice done to anyone, continued to protest against the repressive acts of the English government, and tried to instill national fervor in Indian youth through her writings and speeches. However, although her sympathies were with the radical nationalist group, she pleaded with the Indian Congressional leaders to keep a united front. Nationalism, not partisanship, she felt, would serve India best. Pravrajika Atmaprana, in her biography of Nivedita, cites many facts to support the view that Nivedita never actively participated in the terrorist movement.

In the summer of 1909, Christine took a much-needed rest from the school, and Nivedita began to teach again. Enrollment had increased to over sixty pupils. Nivedita enlivened the girls' curriculum by taking them on short educational trips. Nor did she neglect their religious training. She exposed them to the spiritual atmosphere of Dakshineswar, Belur Math, and the Holy Mother's residence. She took a deep personal interest in her pupils and tried to help them in many ways—when necessary, arranging for the payment

of their medical expenses or persuading hesitant parents to let their children attend school.

Of Nivedita's writings, *Kali, the Mother* and *The Master As I Saw Him* have already been referred to. Mention must also be made of *Notes of Some Wanderings*, an account of her travels with Swamiji in 1898 in northern India and Kashmir. *Siva and Buddha* represents her devotional interpretation of these divine manifestations. *Web of Indian Life, Footfalls of Indian History*, and *Religion and Dharma*, are sympathetic and knowledgeable accounts evaluating respectively the ideals, culture, customs, history, and religion of India. *Cradle Tales of Hinduism* and *Myths of the Hindus and Buddhists* consist of stories from India's sacred literature. The latter book, one-third written by Nivedita, was completed after her death by Coomaraswamy.

Nivedita's writings not only reveal her spiritual understanding of Hinduism; they indicate how deeply she herself entered into the devotional life of India. Her books have enjoyed wide acclaim. All except *Myths of the Hindus and Buddhists* have been reprinted and are obtainable today.

In June 1910, Nivedita made a pilgrimage with a small party to Kedarnath and Badrinarayan, the sacred shrines in the Himalayas. Nivedita was thrilled to see the devotion of the pilgrims they met on the way—some of whom were old and sick, yet undaunted by the difficulties of the journey. Although as a Westerner Nivedita was not permitted to enter the temple of Badrinarayan, she circumambulated it as is the custom of Indian pilgrims when visiting temples. Upon her return to Calcutta, she wrote down her impressions of this journey in a book entitled *Kedarnath and Badrinarayan: a Pilgrim's Diary*.

Meanwhile, Sara Bull had become seriously ill and

wanted Nivedita to be with her. Nivedita acceded to her wish, joining her old friend and benefactor in Cambridge, Massachusetts, before the end of the year. One day, while praying for Sara in a church in Boston, Nivedita saw Sri Sarada Devi as the Madonna. Afterwards, she wrote a letter to the Holy Mother. This letter, well known as a tribute to Sri Sarada Devi, reveals of what tenderness the fiery Nivedita was capable:

Beloved Mother,

This morning, early, I went to church to pray for Sara. All the people there were thinking of Mary, the Mother of Jesus, and suddenly I thought of you. Your dear face, and your loving look, and your white sari and your bracelets. It was all there. And it seemed to me that yours was the presence that was to soothe and bless poor Sara's sickroom. And—do you know?—I thought I had been very foolish to sit in your room, at the evening service to Sri Ramakrishna, trying to meditate. Why did I not understand that it was quite enough to be a little child at your dear feet? Dear Mother! You are full of love! And it is not a flushed and violent love, like ours, and like the world's, but a gentle peace that brings good to everyone and wishes ill to none. . . . Dearest Mother—I wish we could send you a wonderful hymn or a prayer. But somehow even that would seem too loud, too full of noise! Surely you are the most wonderful thing of God—Sri Ramakrishna's own chalice of his love for the world—a token left with his children in these lonely days, and we should be very still and quiet before you—except indeed for a little fun! Surely the wonderful things of God are all quiet—stealing unnoticed into our lives—the air and the sunlight and the sweetness of gardens and of the Ganges. These are the silent things that are like you! . . .

Ever, my darling Mother, your foolish Khooki,

Nivedita

Nivedita's vivid feeling of the Mother's presence must have consoled her during the dark days through which she was now passing. She had to bear the hostility of Sara's family, who suspected Nivedita's presence at the bedside of her dying friend to be motivated by greed. After Sara's passing away, in January 1911, Nivedita returned to India. Mrs. Bull's death did pose financial problems for Nivedita. Sara had helped to maintain her school and to finance the publication of Nivedita's writings. As it later turned out, Sara had made a bequest for the school in her will.

For some time, Nivedita had had a premonition that her days were numbered, and she occasionally made reference to this thought in her correspondence. In an undated fragment, addressed to Joe, she said: "I shiver at your prognostication of fifty-five. Would prefer to have Cheiro come true." Cheiro, a famous palmist, had forecast that Nivedita would die between the forty-second and forty-fourth year. This note to Joe is pervaded by nostalgia and sadness:

Do you know why I am sitting chattering here? Just to make *that* more real—those talks under the trees in the mornings, that evening in the verandah as the storm came on. Yum Yum, *we* had the best, you and I, and what you and S. Sara have seen in his [Swamiji's] attitude to India, no other American ever had a glimpse of. Oh it is true. Bless me. Do bless me that I may tell it. Oh dear Yum, dear Yum, dear Yum, I feel so useless . . . so ignorant, so limited . . .

During the autumn holidays of 1911, the school was closed, and Nivedita went to Darjeeling with the Boses. There she had an attack of blood dysentery. Nivedita knew that the end was coming, and calmly she prepared for death.

Her longing for the final self-surrender to God and her serenity at the thought of her approaching death are expressed in two previously published fragments, which she wrote just a few days before her passing away. She called them "The Beloved" and "Death":

Let me ever remember that the thirst for God is the whole meaning of life. My beloved is *the* Beloved, only looking through this window, only knocking at this door. The Beloved has no wants, yet He clothes Himself in human need, that I may serve Him. . . . Beloved, O Beloved, all mine is thine. Yea, I am all Thine. Destroy Thou me utterly, and stand Thou in my stead!

. . . I am thinking more and more that death means just a withdrawal into meditation, the sinking of the stone into the well of its own being. There is the beginning before death, in the long hours of quiescence, when the mind hangs suspended in the characteristic thought of its life, in that thought which is the residuum of all its thoughts and acts and experiences. Already in these hours the soul is discarnating, and the new life has commenced.

I wonder if it would be possible so to resolve one's whole life into love and blessing, without one single ripple of a contrary impulse, that one might be wrapt away in that last hour and for evermore into one great thought; so that in eternity at least one might be delivered from thought of self, and know oneself only as a brooding presence of peace and benediction for all the need and suffering of the world.

Nivedita died on October 13, 1911. Abala Bose, who nursed her during her final illness, said that on the morning of her passing away Nivedita "spoke of the frail boat that was sinking, but that she was yet to see the sunrise. The sun had just risen over the snows when a shaft came stream-

ing in, and the great striving soul went forth to wake up in another dawn."

Is IT possible to evaluate the life of an individual and assign him a place in history? We can observe the external events; we can read his words and the words of those who knew him. But the inner life, the essential person, largely remains a mystery to us. This is particularly true in the case of a spiritual seeker. Who has the insight to estimate his spiritual struggle, his motivation, his growth, his capacity? None but the great illumined souls.

And so, when it comes to Nivedita and her claim on our interest, perhaps the best we can do is to recall how the holy personalities with whom she was privileged to associate thought of her.

Swami Brahmananda said that when Nivedita used to visit him, she would not come to talk but to meditate in his presence. And her devotion would kindle his spiritual mood.

The Holy Mother, as we have seen, regarded Nivedita as her own, and she praised the Western devotee's faith and purity.

And Swami Vivekananda thought Nivedita worthy of being his spiritual daughter, and he entrusted her with his work.

It is in the affection and blessings which these great souls showered on Nivedita that we get a clue to her place in the history of Ramakrishna-Vedanta.

ABOUT THIS ISSUE

CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD'S forthcoming book on Sri Ramakrishna is being serialized in *Vedanta and the West.* Thirteen chapters have thus far been printed, and additional installments will appear in the near future.

The sources on which the article about Nivedita is based include her biography of Swamiji, *The Master As I Saw Him;* the Advaita Ashrama editions of the letters of Swami Vivekananda and of the life of Swamiji; two biographies of Nivedita, one by Pravrajika Atmaprana of the Sri Sarada Math, the other by Moni Bagchee. Atmaprana's book was honored by the West Bengal government with its most recent award for outstanding non-Bengali literature. Nivedita's "The Beloved" and "Death," from which excerpts are quoted on page 62 of the present issue, were originally published in *The Modern Review,* December 1911. Special acknowledgment is gratefully made to Mrs. Frances Leggett, a niece of Josephine MacLeod, who sent a collection of Nivedita's letters to Swami Prabhavananda in January 1962, from which selected passages were used in the article. These letters have since been forwarded to Belur Math.

Vedanta and the West

Vedanta teaches that man's real nature is divine; that it is the aim of man's life to unfold and manifest this divinity; and that truth is universal. Vedanta accepts all the religions of the world and reveres the great prophets, teachers, and sons of God, because it recognizes the same divine inspiration in all.

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