

Dr. Besant: Warrior

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FRIENDS,

I dare say all of you realise with what diffidence I venture to stand on a platform which Dr. Besant has so often magnificently adorned, to pay my own feeble and utterly inadequate tribute to her. I have been trying for many days, for many weeks, to find out what I might say on such an occasion as this. But I know well that nothing that any individual can say can measure her splendour and her priceless and unique service to the work in this life, in the lives gone by and in the splendid lives that await her in the future. I do not for a moment pretend to be able to voice the feelings of each one of you, of all those here who love her, who honour her, who are infinitely grateful to her. You may be able, perhaps through your own individualities, to perceive something different, to feel something different, from any expression of my own feelings. **[Page 2]**

I do not want you to imagine for a moment that my interpretation is a comprehensive interpretation, still less that it is the only interpretation which measures that great personality. We do not want to think of her now from the standpoint of our own individualities, nor from the standpoint of our personal and individual relations to her. She was, and is, a world figure. She was one who was able to be so many things to an infinite number of people. We do not want in these days to narrow her down within the limitations of our own particular and obviously partial view-points. We do not want to say she would have said this had she been alive, or she would have done this had she been alive. We do not want to enter into these particularities. We want rather to feel the life of her, the impersonal life of her, the spirit of her forms, in all the forms in which during those splendid eighty-six years and more she manifested in her incarnation as Annie Besant. It is her life that we need far more than any of those forms which she assumed for the service of the world. I want to go far away from anything which will bring her into any controversy. Let us out of honour to her stand face to face with a spirit, with a life; **[Page 3]** as for the forms I do not think we need very much bother about them. We must think rather of the life, the spirit, the soul, the fire, the inspiration.

Now I think it is obvious that, if we try to do this, we shall look upon her first of all as a warrior. In the beginning of her life she felt that she would be a warrior; at the end of her life she knew she had been a warrior, that she was a warrior; and even while stricken by illness, the illness which was to lead her down into the valley of the Shadow of Death, even during that illness, even during all her weakness, during that devastating sense she had of her impotence on the physical plane, she knew she was Annie Besant: Warrior. I have at home a little piece of paper signed by her "Annie Besant – Warrior", and I think that if you and I dream of her as warrior we shall be able to profit from her more than if we thought of any specific form in which that warrior spirit took shape. When I think of her as warrior I think of certain characteristics of her "wariordom", if I may use the expression. First, she fought with all her power, holding nothing back; and yet she never fought for power; second, she fought with all her genius, but

never fought for fame; third, [Page 4] she fought with all her fire, with a tremendous fire, but never to destroy. She fought for causes, for movements, for activities of all kinds, but not specially in order that those causes and those movements might triumph, but in order that truth might reign supreme. And so our beloved President-Mother was Annie Besant, Warrior for Truth. She sought truth greatly, she found truth richly, and she shared truth nobly. We have much to learn from that aspect of her life; a Fighter, but never for personal ambition, never for place, never for power, never for self-interest, always for truth unalloyed.

I look upon her as a marvellous, as practically a unique, collector of truth just, as you find connoisseurs collecting objects of value, just as you may find a little boy collecting stamps, and rejoicing in the varieties he is able to stick in his stamp-book. So did Annie Besant: Warrior collect truth; and in her splendid, dauntless seeking for truth she constantly added to the magnificent collection of truths she already had. In that search she found truth everywhere, and to me that is one of her greatest, one of her most distinguishing, characteristics. She found it in all classes, recognised it and hailed it; she found it in all religions, recognised [Page 5] it and hailed it. She found it in all forms, in all ceremonies and in all life. She hailed truth wherever she found it, were it imprisoned in form or were it relatively free in life. She was not one to say "Truth is not here, truth is not there". She knew God is Love and therefore Truth, that His Love and His Truth are all-pervading. It is only our ignorance which fails to perceive the truth and the love of God throughout the world, throughout His whole manifestation.

She was free in the very widest and most beautiful sense of the idea of freedom. Everywhere she could perceive truth in lesser or greater degree; everywhere she could utilize truth, she could acknowledge truth; everywhere she could reverence truth. And so it was that in her own special and unexampled way she was able to be all things to all men, all things to all movements, all things to innumerable forms. For wherever she looked she perceived truth in one shape or in another, she was able to disentangle it from its encumbrances and to give it freedom on the way on which it was travelling.

In this garden of life she delighted in the innumerable flowers with which the garden is full, the flowers and the fragrance — rejoicing [Page 6] not rejecting, imprisoned by no individual flower, loving them all, looking at the garden as a whole, able to rejoice in any flower, but never stopping short to love one particular flower alone. It is that capacity, it is that universality, which made her what she is and carries her onwards from triumph to triumph.

Until we know, as she knew, what the nature of truth really is, until we know, as she knew, what the nature of love really is, until we know, as she knew, what freedom is, we must needs remain partially lost amidst the mists of illusion, and we can talk of falsehoods, of darkness, or where truth is and where truth is not. But the time must come when we shall rise to her level and look out upon the whole world and know that it is a garden and that truth blossoms everywhere in it. Annie Besant : Warrior was free in life because she was master of all its forms. She could enter into forms, into ceremonies, into all kinds of limitations and remain the Warrior, remain free, remain unhindered, untrammelled, unconfined by those limitations into which she entered, and thus was able to render priceless service to so very many divergent activities and to so many different types of individualities. [Page 7]

How did she become this Warrior that she was and is ? I say "and is" because it seems to me from those intimations which we have of her as she is now that she is more than ever the Warrior. How was she a

warrior ? What were her standards ? First, as she herself says in her Autobiography, an indomitable will, a will which nothing could conquer, a will which knew no defeat, a will which paid no attention to desire. But coupled with that will she had infinite tenderness, and a touching greatness in loneliness. She knew loneliness as perhaps none of us have ever known it. In the midst of loneliness and of catastrophe was displayed her greatness, for she towered above all loneliness, above all defeats, above all catastrophe. Further, she had an illimitable understanding. Who was more understanding than our President-Mother ? If any of you had occasion to visit her in her room upstairs, you will remember how you may have gone full of difficulties, perhaps full of resentment against something or against somebody, full of a certain narrowness. You went into her room, you entered her presence, and all that with which you entered dropped away. You see clearly. Why ? Because she understands you, the real you, the seeking you, the eager you, the true you, the [Page 8] splendid you: she looks at that "you" and summons it to kingship. For the time being, while you are before her, as she thinks and looks at you, all the doubts and difficulties fade away, all the resentments and all that may have caused bitterness in your heart, or trouble or sorrow or grief. So, when you came out of her room you were different. Great was her power, her gift of enabling the great in you, the splendid in you, the real, the eternal in you, for the time being at least, for a moment or two, to gain the upper hand so that the higher and the lower self for once became one. That was her illimitable understanding. Along whatever road you were travelling she met you on that road, as Shri Krishna in his own greater degree meets all humanity on its innumerable ways. So will she meet you in the future to understand, to sympathise, to appreciate, to send you on your path more nobly and richer in the fulness of life. Such qualities she brought from many lives in the past. How did they manifest in this life? What was the early setting of her life? Conventionalities and ease on the one hand, offset by Milton's *Paradise Lost* on the other. That was the book of books in her youth. Her Bible was Milton's *Paradise Lost*. I suppose in some way that book was prophetic. [Page 9] She began to lose her paradise, and year after year she went further and further away from her paradise until she lost it altogether. There came a desire for martyrdom, a desire to stand for forlorn causes and for lost hopes, and yet, on the other hand, there was the desire for ease, the desire for happiness. Such was the first stage. The second stage was the intensification of the call for Truth, and that restlessness for Truth which marked the whole of her life. She knew and felt that until the hands are empty of gifts they cannot grasp Truth, even though those gifts may indeed embody it; and so came a splendid succession of surrenders capped by the surrender of herself in her relation to her mother. She says: "The hardest struggle was against my mother's tears and pleading; to cause her pain was tenfold pain to me. Against harshness I had been rigid as steel, but it was hard to remain steadfast when my darling mother, whom I loved as I loved nothing else on earth, threw herself on her knees before me, imploring me to yield. It seemed like a crime to bring such anguish on her; and I felt as a murderer as the snowy head was pressed against my knees. And yet — to live a lie ? Not even for her was that shame possible; in that worst crisis of blinding [Page 10] agony my will clung fast to Truth. And it is true now as it ever was that he who loves father or mother better than Truth is not worthy of her, and the flint-strewn path of honesty is the way to Light and Peace".

You see the struggle between orthodoxy, conventionality and the desire for Truth; and the insistent desire for Truth triumphs. Then comes the seeking stage through Charles Bradlaugh, atheism, the match girls, the cause of right everywhere as against might, and in the midst of that seeking her paradise was indeed lost. But she passed through darkness, through troubles, through agony, and at last regained paradise, the paradise she had known in lives gone by. She knew, as she says in so many words, "My philosophy was not sufficient" and that is a wonderful message for us. Anyone's philosophy is but a philosophy of the less. We continually reach out after the philosophy of the more. However much we can be sure that our knowledge is truth, it must be the less because it comes through a partial channel. It must be less because the whole is so infinitely more. No one's philosophy, no one's declarations of Truth, can ever be sufficient, still less final. It is always less, it is always a halting place where we may stay awhile but from

[Page 11] which we must ever be journeying forth to the more. The real joy of life consists in seeking, in finding, in seeing beyond the finding, so that one may seek and find again: to seek, to find again, to look beyond that which we have found for something still more beautiful to find, and ever onwards and upwards from height to height, always gazing upon greater and more splendid vistas, a humility in the present and an infinite joy in the way which leads to the future, never “at last” or “I have reached the goal” or “there is no more to know or be”. There is always more to know, more to live, more to be.

Then came to her that splendid series of illuminations which began with the reviewing of *The Secret Doctrine*, with her meeting of H.P.B. and so on. I do not think I have the time or perhaps that it is necessary for me to quote the splendid extracts in which she writes of her discovery of *The Secret Doctrine* and of her meeting with H. P. B., of her joining the Theosophical Society, “As I turned over page after page the interest became absorbing; but how familiar it seemed; how my mind leapt forward to presage the conclusions, how natural it was, how coherent, how subtle, and yet how intelligible. I was dazzled, blinded by the light in [Page 12] which disjointed facts were seen as parts of a mighty whole, and all my puzzles, riddles, problems, seemed to disappear. The effect was partially illusory in one sense, in that they all had to be slowly unravelled later, the brain gradually assimilating that which the swift intuition had grasped as truth. But the light had been seen, and in that flash of illumination I knew the weary search was over and the very Truth was found”.

She writes about that marvellous meeting in these words: “On receiving my diploma I betook myself to Lansdowne Road, where I found H. P. B. alone. I went over to her, bent down and kissed her, but said no word. “You have joined the Society ?”. “Yes”. “You have read the report ?” (Psychic Research Society's Report) “Yes”. “Well ?” I knelt down before her and clasped her hands in mine, looking straight into her eyes, “My answer is, will you accept me as your pupil, and give me the honour of proclaiming you my teacher in the face of the world?” Her stern, set face softened, the unwonted gleam of tears sprang to her eyes; then, with a dignity more than regal, she placed her hand upon my head. “You are a noble woman, May Master bless you”. [Page 13]

There you have the first of the great illuminations, the beginnings of Paradise Regained. We may not tread the way she trod. We may not have the opportunity to work with Bradlaugh, or to work for the Match Girls' Union; it may not be our dharma to be atheists or secularists or to do the things that she did. But we can try to be as she was. What she was, and not what she did, gives to us her supreme value. You and I have our own settings for our lives. We need not copy her actions or echo her words, but we can bring down into our lives her spirit. So this splendid soldier, in losing her paradise, rediscovers Theosophy, the ancient and eternal Wisdom, rediscovers her general, H. P. B., rediscovers her Master, and finds that in Their service lies that perfect freedom which she has been ceaselessly seeking.

We thus come to the last chapter of that wonderful autobiography of hers “From Storm to Peace”, to the Peace that passeth understanding; not to comfort or ease or self-satisfaction, but to the peace of ceaseless service in the cause of changing and growing Truth, and of Those Whose Light shines ever in our darkness. She was never satisfied with the truth of today, she knew there was more splendid truth to know tomorrow. She knew [Page 14] the truth as we perceive it must ever change, and as the truth changed, became deeper and more wonderful, so did she grow in strength and wisdom to understand it.

Warrior, indeed she was. Persistent, fearless, quixotically generous to her foes. Sometimes we who

fought with her rather wished that she had a little more of the world's method of fighting than of that very essence of almost reckless chivalry which was hers. We sometimes felt, just a trifle aghast at the generous nature of her treatment of those to whom she was opposed, and who injured her. She knew that there is but one life, even though there may be many battlefields. As for the flowers of victory she never kept them for herself. She ever offered them to Those Whose will she strove to do. If there were any weeds of defeat those were hers. She uprooted them, and freed the soil for the flowers of triumph.

You know the great records of her achievements. The real awakening of Hinduism in 1893, the beginning of National Education through the founding of the Central Hindu College in 1898, teaching patriotism without hatred, freedom within the empire, reverence for religion and the spirit of service. In 1907, the Presidentship of the Theosophical Society, in 1910 that [Page 15] splendid fight for Krishnaji's freedom. Some of us who were in the midst of it know how splendidly she fought so that her foes soon became her friends. She won for Krishnaji the freedom he needed for his work. She helped to send him on his great way, so that he might become a mighty channel of life and light to the world. In 1914 she went out into the world again — Home Rule for India. Here we have the splendid tribute from the Rt. Hon. V. S. Srinivasa Sastri: "While we Indians have slept, Mrs. Besant has been awake. While we have been idle, she has laboured hard. While we have been disposed to lay down our arms, her sword has always been active and doing heavy execution. While we have despaired, she has hoped. While we have quarrelled and nearly broken the head of India, she has never spoken an unkind word, and always called on us to unite, unite, on the common platform of the Commonwealth of India Bill". A splendid tribute from a really great man. How are we ourselves to take advantage of that example? It is accessible to each one of us, if only we have the ears to hear and perhaps the eyes to see. First remember that she was the great exponent of Lord Buddha's Middle Way. Serene as ever [Page 16] in the splendid life, free in many forms, she sent out life into forms and made forms the servants of life—Co-Masonry, Liberal Catholic Church, Bharata Samaj and many others — she vitalised all, but always saw to it that they were servants of the life, and never masters of it. She used every form as a means to an end, never dwelling in any form as an end in itself.

Her legacies to us are three. She has left these legacies to us not only to us who are here but to her children throughout the world. The legacy of India, the legacy of the Theosophical Society, the legacy of the young. I think that if she were to speak to us here and now possibly she might say to us and to all who love her in all the countries of the world "Will you not love India as I love her and have loved her? Will you not serve her as I have served her and serve her still. Will you not lead her to her rightful place among the nations of the world as I strove to do?" I think she looks to England to do her duty, she looks to England to recognise her imperial responsibilities, to understand the meaning and the purpose of the British Empire, and to fulfil that purpose in all generosity, in all understanding, as I believe the British people [Page 17] can and will, if the appeal is made in the right way. We must try to understand what it is that India needs, we must organise the force of public opinion behind a definite Declaration of India's Rights, and if Britain knows what India wants, her heart will, I am sure, nobly and happily respond.

As regards the second legacy, the Theosophical Society, there is no doubt whatever of course, what she would say. In one of her addresses in 1914 she stressed the one word which is the way out of our Society's difficulties at any time — 'tolerance'. The Theosophical Society is a nucleus for universal brotherhood. All who are willing to be brotherly, willing to show goodwill to others, willing to show the same respect to other's beliefs and opinions as they have a right to expect for their own, must be welcome in the Theosophical Society. There must be no tyrannical orthodoxies, there must be no

ruthless dominations of sect or creed, or opinion in the Theosophical Society. We do not want to question each other's motives, we do not want to misunderstand each other, we do not want to criticise each other save generously, save appreciatively, save ascribing to others all those good motives which we believe ourselves to have. She wants the Theosophical [Page 18] Society to have one heart, the heart of goodwill, one work, the work of brotherhood, one life the life of the Elder Brethren on Whom the Society depends, without Whom the Society would be but as an ordinary movement such as there are so many in the outer world. Our Society must be a bridge between the less and the more, must be that final keystone to the splendid arch which shall make the circle of brotherhood complete, bringing the Elder Brethren into Their rightful place among us all.

And then the young. As she was young in heart, in aspiration, in will, so did she love the young in body, for she knew that if youth of body could be but allied to youth of purpose and of enthusiasm the world would soon leave its darkness and enter the light. Our President-Mother loved the young, and they loved her, for they knew she understood them, appreciated them, rejoiced in them. She wanted youth in the Theosophical Society. She wanted youth in all progressive movements. She wanted youth round about her. She was eager that youth should learn as soon as possible to take upon its shoulders the burdens age is now bearing, which age must soon relinquish. She looked to youth ardently, for in youth she saw the world's salvation. Her legacy to us is — Help Youth, [Page 19] Understand Youth, Bring Youth forward into the forefront, Look into the future through the eyes of Youth, And youth to enter, in its own way and by its own road, upon its heritage of the world to be. So let us go forward with these great legacies, make the Society still more splendid because it is Their Society, and because H. P. Blavatsky, Colonel Olcott and Annie Besant have shown us such a splendid way. Forward with H. P. Blavatsky and those who came after her.