

## 1875 - 1891 A Fragment of Autobiography by Annie Besant

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Annie Besant, on Sunday evening, the 30<sup>th</sup> of August, delivered an address on "1875 to 1891: a Fragment of Autobiography," at the Hall of Science, Old Street, St. Luke's. The occasion was her last appearance on the platform of this Hall, which has now passed entirely under the control of the National Secular Society. There was a very crowded and very interested audience.

Mrs Thornton Smith presided and, after making various announcements, said: "Tonight my friend [Mrs Besant] speaks from this platform for the last time." Annie Besant, who was greeted with most cordial and prolonged cheers, said:

On the 28th of February, 1875, I stood for the first time on the platform of the Hall of Science to speak from that platform to a Freethought audience. I spoke then, announced under my own name, but with another name added thereto — one under which, since the preceding August, I had written in the *National Reformer*. It was the name of "Ajax," and I used that name for writing in the *Reformer* because when the darkness came down upon him and his army, the words which were said to have broken from his lips expressed my own feeling then, as they express it now. Out of the darkness and the danger, his voice is said to have rung over the battlefield; "Light, more light." It is that cry for "light" which has been the key-note of my own intellectual life, then and ever since, light — whithersoever the light may take one; light, through whatever difficulties the light may lead one; light, although in its brightness it should blast the eyes that gaze upon it; I would rather be blinded by the light, than sit wilfully in the twilight or the dark. Months before — in the August of the preceding year — I had come to the Hall for the first time to receive my certificate of entrance into the National Secular Society. I received it then from the greatest president that Society has had or is likely to have. From that time there dated a friendship to which no words of mine can do justice, or speak the gratitude I feel — a friendship that was only broken by the grave. Had he lived, this lecture would, probably, not have needed to be given, for, if there was one thing that Charles Bradlaugh did, it was to keep free the platform which was given him in charge, and to permit no test of doctrine or of belief to claim a right to bar the platform that was *free* in name and in deed as well.

I pass hurriedly — for I have but brief time tonight — I pass hurriedly over many years, taking but one point after another that seems to me to be of interest in the retrospect of tonight. Not very long after I came on to this platform, in the May following, I was elected a vice-president of the National Secular Society, and that position I laid down when the late president gave up his office. I began my service in the Society under him, and I could serve under no lesser man. From that time forward — from the time, that is, of the commencement of my service — I constantly occupied the platform here and elsewhere. And they were rougher days then with the Freethought party in the provinces, than those they have now to face. During my first year of lecturing work I can remember some rough scenes that now it would not be

easy to parallel. Stones that were thrown as the most potent argument to use against a lecturer, even though that lecturer were a woman; the broken windows of a hall; a bruised neck at one place; a walk through waving sticks and a cursing crowd at another place — these were the kind of arguments which Christians were readier to use then than they are now. The party has grown very much stronger during the sixteen and a half years which have passed from then to now. I well remember, looking backward, and recalling incident after incident that marked those passing years, the memorable Conference in 1876, when there was present on the platform a miner of Yorkshire who, a member of the Society and an Atheist, was the first to spring into a cage to go down where 143 of his comrades lay dead and others were in danger of death after a colliery explosion — the cage into which none dared to spring until the Atheist set the example and stimulated the courage of others. My experience in the National Secular Society has taught me that you have the most splendid courage, the most absolute self-devotion, the most heroic self-sacrifice, that those virtues can exist without possessing faith in God or belief in a hereafter: they are, indeed, the flowers of man's nature springing up fragrant and beautiful in every creed and in none.

It was not so long after my entrance into the National Secular Society — a little more than two brief years — that that struggle came upon us in which Charles Bradlaugh and I myself defended the right to publish, at a cheap rate, information which we believed to be useful to the masses of the poor and of the weak. What the upshot of that struggle was you all know. How bitter the struggle was some of you, perchance, may have gauged. I, who went through it, know its results were that no amount of slander or abuse could hereafter make much difference, when one thought it right to take a particular line of conduct; for in the years that followed that trial there were no words too foul, no epithets too vile, to be used in Christian and in Freethought journals, against my co-defendant and myself. When one has once been through that fire of torture, when everything that man and woman hold dear, fame, good name, reputation, character, and all else — when all have been sullied, slandered and maligned, after such a hammering all subsequent attacks seem but poor and feeble, and no words of reproach or unkindness that later can be used avail to touch a courage that has held through trials such as that. And I do not regret (I have never regretted and don't now) the steps that then I took, for I know that both in the eyes of the wise today, and in the verdict of the history that in centuries to come shall judge our struggles, the verdict that then shall be given will not be given on what one has believed but on how one has worked: and I know that though one's eyes may often be blinded and one's efforts wrong, the courage that dares to speak, the courage that dares to stand — those are the things that men remember, and if you can never write "coward" on man or woman's grave, their place is safe in the hearts of men, whether their views are blessed or banned in days to come.

I pass, however, to the theological position, for that is one that interests all, is the most important, and the one to which your thoughts and minds will most strongly turn tonight. In 1872 I broke with Christianity, and I broke with it once and for all. I have nothing to unsay, nothing to undo, nothing to retract, as regards my position then and my position now. I broke with it, but I am no nearer to it in 1891 than I was when I first joined the ranks of the National Secular Society. I do not say that my language then was not harsher than my language would be now, for in the first moments after a great struggle, when you have paid such a price as I paid for intellectual liberty, you do not always in the first moments of freedom, in the reaction from a great conflict, you do not always think of the feelings of others as charity and as true toleration would command that you should think. I spoke words bitterer than I should speak now; words harsher and more critical than I should speak today; but of the groundwork of my rejection then I have nothing to alter, for I stand upon that ground today as I stood then. I did not give up that Christian faith without much and bitter suffering; and I do not know whether, if anyone set to work to fabricate some

physical apparatus which would give the best opportunity for suffering during life — I do not know that any ingenious artificer could do very much more cleverly, than to weld together in one human body the strong brain of a man and the warm heart of a woman: for where a man can break with opinions where logic tells him (not always, indeed, without bitter suffering), I doubt if there can be any woman who can break with any faith she has ever held, without paying some heart's blood as the price of alienation, some bitter meed of pain to the idol which is broken.

In looking back, as I have been looking today over some of my own past writing, I saw words with respect to the giving up of Christianity which were true: true in the feeling that they then depicted, and true in my remembrance of it now; for the deity of Christ is the last Christian doctrine, I think, to which we cling when we leave Christianity. "The doctrine was dear from association: there was something at once soothing and ennobling in the idea of a union between man and God, between a perfect man and a divine supremacy, between a human heart and an almighty strength. Jesus as God was interwoven with all art, with all beauty in religion; to break with the deity of Jesus was to break with music, with painting, with literature. The Divine Child in his mother's arms, the Divine Man in his Passion and in his Triumph, the human friend encircled with the majesty of the Godhead — did inexorable truth demand that this ideal figure, with all its pathos, its beauty, its human love, should pass into the pantheon of the dead Gods of the past?" People speak so lightly about change in theological belief. Those who speak lightly never felt deeply. They do not know what a belief is to the life that has been moulded round it, to the intellect that has accepted it, to the heart that has worshipped it; and those are not the feeblest but mostly the strongest Freethinkers who have been able to break with the faith that they have outgrown and still feel the pang of letting the intellect be master of the heart. On that I have nothing more to say than this: that, in the newer light into which I have passed, return to Christianity has become even more impossible than in my older days of the National Secular Society; for, whilst then I rejected, seeing the logical impossibilities, now I understand why that faith has held men for centuries as I never understood before; and if you want to be safe against a superstition, know the human truth that underlies it, and then no fresh name can ever take you back to it, no sort of new label can ever make you accept as true the myth that covers the truth you know.

To pass from that to the other two great points around which the struggle of the age today is raging: belief in a personal God and belief in the persistency of life after death. As regards the first, belief in a personal God, I have again nothing to say different from that which I wrote many years ago: "Existence evolving into endless forms, differing modes, changing phenomena, is wonderful enough; but a God, self-existing, who creates out of nothing who gives birth to an existence entirely diverse from his own — 'matter' from 'spirit', 'non-intelligence' from 'intelligence' — who, being everywhere, makes the universe, thereby excluding himself from part of space, who being everywhere, makes the things which are not he, so that we have everywhere and somewhere else, everything and something more — such a God solves no question of existence, but only adds an unnecessary riddle to a problem already sufficiently perplexing." Those were the words with which I summed up an argument against a personal God outside nature. By those words I stand today, for the concept is as impossible to me now as it was to me then.

Some years later, in 1886, I came across a phrase which shows how at that time my mind was beginning to turn towards a different conception. I was speaking of the various religions of the world, and alluded to those of Hinduism and Buddhism as dealing with the problem of existence, and then went on to say: "These mystic Oriental religions are profoundly Pantheistic; one life pulsing through all living things; one existence bodying itself forth in all individual existences; such is the common ground of those mighty

religions which number amongst their adherents the vast majority of human kind. And in this magnificent conception they are in accord with modern science; the philosopher and the poet, with the far-reaching glance of genius, caught sight of that unity of all things, the 'one in the many' of Plato, a belief which it is the glory of modern science to have placed on the sure foundation of ascertained fact." I do not mean that when I wrote those words I was a Pantheist; but I mean that you have in them the recognition of that unity of existence which is common to Pantheism and to Materialism, the great gulf between the two being this: that whereas Pantheism speaks of one universal life bodying itself forth in all lives, Materialism speaks of matter and of force of which life and consciousness are the ultimate products and not the essential fact. That is the difference in the opinions that I held, and that I hold now. I still believe in the unity of existence, but I realise that that existence is a living force, and not only what is called "matter" and "energy"; that it is a principle of life, a principle of consciousness; that the life and the consciousness that pulse out from its centre evolve from that one eternal life without which life and consciousness could never be. That is the great difference which separates the position of the Materialism that I once held from the position I hold today; and that has its natural corollary that, as the essence of the universe is life, so the essence of each man is life as well; that death is but a passing phenomenon, as simple and as natural as that which is spoken of as life; that in the heart of man as of the universe, life is an eternal principle fulfilling itself in many forms, but immortal, inextinguishable, never to be either created or destroyed.

Now, glancing back to the Materialism to which I clung for so many years of life, glancing back over the training it gave me, and the steps by which slowly I left it behind, there is one point that I desire here to place on record. You have Materialism of two very different schools. There is the Materialism which cares nothing for man but only for oneself; which seeks only for personal gain, personal pleasure, personal delight; which cares nothing for the race but only for self; nothing for posterity but only for the moment; of which the real expression is: "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die." With that Materialism neither I nor those with whom I worked had aught in common. With that Materialism, which is only that of the brute, we never had part nor lot. That is the Materialism that destroys all the glory of human life, it is the Materialism that can only be held by the selfish and, therefore, the degraded. It is never the Materialism that was preached from this platform, nor which has been the training school in which have been trained many of the noblest intellects and truest hearts of our time.

For what is the higher Materialism after all? What is it but the reason and thought which is the groundwork of many a noble life today? It is that which, while it believes that the life of the individual ends in death, so far as he himself is concerned, recognises the life of the race as that for which the individual is living, and to which all that is noblest and best in him is to be devoted. That is the Materialism of such men as Clifford, who taught it in philosophy, and of such men as Charles Bradlaugh, who lived it out in life. It was that Materialism which was put into words by Clifford when, for the moment fearing he might be misunderstood, he said: "Do I seem to say, 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die'? Nay; rather let us take hands and help, for today we are alive together." Against that Materialism I have no word of reproach to speak now. Never have I spoken word of reproach against it, and I never shall; for I know that it is a philosophy so selfless in its noblest forms that few are grand enough to grasp it and live it out, and that which I have brought back as fruit from my many years of Materialism is the teaching that to work without self as the goal is the great object-lesson of human life. For there can be no selflessness more complete than that which accepts a life of struggle for itself that the race may have an easier life in years to come, which is willing to die that, from its death, others may have wider life; which is willing to sacrifice everything, so that even on its own dead body others may rise to greater happiness and a truer intellectual life.

But — and here comes the difference — there are problems in the universe which Materialism not only does not solve but which it declares are insoluble, difficulties in life and mind that Materialism cannot grapple with, and in face of which it is not only dumb but says that mankind must remain dumb for evermore. Now, in my own studies and my own searching, I came to problem after problem for which scientific Materialism had no answer — nay, told me that no answer could be found. There were things that were facts, and the whole scheme of science is not that you are to impose your own will on nature, but that you are to question nature and listen to her answer, whatever that answer may be. But I came upon fact after fact that did not square with the theories of Materialism. I came across facts which were facts of nature as much as any fact of the laboratory, or any discovery by the knife or the scalpel of the anatomist. Was I to refuse to see them because my philosophy had for them no place? Was I to do what men have done in every age — insist that nature was no greater than my knowledge, and that because a fact was new it was, therefore, a fraud or an illusion? Not thus had I learned the lesson of materialistic science from its deepest depths of investigation into nature. And, when I found that there were facts that made life other than Materialism deemed; when I found that there were facts of life and consciousness that made the materialistic hypothesis impossible; then I determined still to study, although the foundations were shaking, and not to be recusant enough to the search after truth to draw back because it wore a face other than the one I expected. When I found that in the researches of men today, who still are Materialists, there are many facts which they themselves admit they cannot explain, and about which they will endeavour to form no theory; when I found in studying such branches of mental science as hypnotism and mesmerism, that there were undeniable facts which had their place in nature as much as any other facts; when I found that as those facts were analysed and experimented on, consciousness did not rise and fall with the pulsations of the brain or the vibrations of the cells of the brain; when I found that as you diminish the throb of physical life your intellectual manifestations became more vivid and more startling; when I found that in that brain in which the blood ran freely, from which, on examination, every careful instrument of science gave an average of the lowest conditions that made life possible at all, when I found that from the person with a brain in such a condition thoughts could proceed more vividly than when the brain was in full activity — then do you wonder that I began to ask whether other methods of investigation might not be useful, and whether it was wise for me to turn my back upon any road which promised to lead towards a better understanding of the subtlest problems of psychology?

Two or three years before, I had met with two books which I read and re-read, and then put aside because I was unable to relate them to any other information I could obtain, and I could find no other method then of carrying my study further along those lines. They were two books by Mr Sinnett. One was *Esoteric Buddhism* and the other *The Occult World*. They fascinated me on my scientific side, because for the first time they threw an intelligible light upon, and brought within the realm of law and of natural order, a large number of facts that had always remained to me unexplained in the history of man. They did not carry me very far, but they suggested a new line of investigation; and from that time onward, I was on the look-out for other clues which might lead me in the direction I sought. Those clues were not definitely found until early in the year 1889. I had experimented, to some extent, then, and many years before, in Spiritualism, and found some facts and much folly; but I never found there an answer, nor anything which carried me further than the mere recordal of certain unexplainable phenomena. But in 1889 I had a book given to me to review, written by H. P. Blavatsky, and known as *The Secret Doctrine*. I was given it to review, as a book the reviewers of the paper did not care to tackle, and it was thought I might do something with it, as I was considered more or less mad on the subjects of which it treated. I accepted the task, I read the book, and I knew that I had found the clue that I had been seeking. I then asked for an introduction to the writer of that book, feeling that the one who had written it would be able to show me something at least of a path along which I might travel with some hope of finding out more

than I knew of life and mind. I met her for the first time in that year. Before very long I placed myself under her tuition, and there is nothing in the whole of my life for which I am one tithe so grateful as the apparent accident that threw her book into my hands, and the resolution taken by myself that I would know the writer of that book.

I know that in this hall there will not be many who will share the view that I take of Helena Blavatsky. I knew her, you did not — and in that may lie the difference of our opinion. You talk of her as “fraud,” and fling about the word as carelessly of one with whom you disagree, as Christians and others threw against me the epithet of “harlot” in the days gone by, and with as much truth. I read the evidence that was said to be against her. I read the great proofs of the “fraud”: how she had written the letters which she said had come to her from the men who had been her Teachers. I read the evidence of W Netherclift, the expert, first that the letters were not written by her, and then that they were. The expert at Berlin swore that they were not written by her. I read most carefully the evidence against her, because I had so much to lose. I read it; I judged it false on the reading; I knew it to be false when I came to know her. And here is one fact which may, perhaps, interest you much, as rather curious from the point of view that Madame Blavatsky was the writer of those famous letters.

You have known me in this Hall for sixteen and a half years. You have never known me lie to you. My worst public enemy, through the whole of my life, never cast a slur upon my integrity. Everything else they have sullied, but my truth never; and I tell you that since Madame Blavatsky left, I have had letters in the same writing and from the same person. Unless you think that dead persons write — and I do not think so — that is rather a curious fact against the whole challenge of fraud. I do not ask you to believe me, but I tell you this on the faith of a record that has never yet been sullied by a conscious lie. Those who knew her, knew she could not very well commit fraud, if she tried. She was the frankest of human beings. It may be said: “What evidence have you beside hers?” My own knowledge. For some time, all the evidence I had of the existence of her Teachers and the existence of those so-called “abnormal powers” was second-hand, gained through her. It is not so now, and it has not been so for many months: unless every sense can be at the same time deceived, unless a person can be, at the same moment, sane and insane, I have exactly the same certainty for the truth of those statements as I have for the fact that you are here. Of course you may be all delusions, invented by myself and manufactured by my own brain. I refuse — merely because ignorant people shout fraud and trickery — to be false to all the knowledge of my intellect, the perceptions of my senses, and my reasoning faculties as well.

And so I passed out of Materialism into Theosophy, and every month that has gone since then has given me reason to be more and more grateful for the light which then came; for it is better to live in a universe you are beginning to understand than in one which is full of problems never to be solved; and if you find yourself on the way to the solution of many, that gives you at least a reasonable hope that you may possibly at last be able to solve those that are at the moment beyond your grasp. And, after all, those with whom I stand are not quite the persons whom it is the part of wise men merely to scoff at and make a jest of. Amongst them are men well able to investigate; many are men of the world, doctors and lawyers — the two professions which are just the two which ought to be able to deal with the value of scientific and logical evidence. Already you may find the ranks of Theosophy winning day by day thoughtful and intellectual adherents. Even in the ranks of my own party I have not gone over quite alone, for my friend and colleague, Mr Herbert Burrows, went over with me; and since then, Dr. Carter-Blake has joined us.

Are you quite wise to be so sure that you are right and that there is nothing in the universe you do not know? It is not a safe position to take up. It has been taken in all ages, and has always proved mistaken. It was taken by the Roman Catholic Church centuries ago, but they have been driven back. It has been taken by the Protestant Church time after time. They also have proved mistaken. If it is taken by the Freethought party now, is that to be the only body in human history that is the one and final possessor of the truth and knowledge that never in all the centuries to come may be increased? For, friends, that, and nothing else than that, is the position that you are taking in this Hall at the present time. [“Quite Right,” and “No,” “No”.] You say “no”. Listen for a moment, and let us see if it be not so. What is the reason I leave your platform? Because your society shuts me off it [“No,” and “Yes”.] When you have done shouting “no,” I will finish my sentence. The reason, that this is my last lecture in this Hall is because the condition which was placed upon my coming on the platform, after the hall passes into the hands of the National Secular Society, is that I shall not in my lectures say anything that goes against the principles and objects of the Society.

Now I will never speak under such conditions. I did not break with the great Church of England, and ruin my social position, and break with all that women hold dear, in order to come to this platform and be dictated to as to what I should say. Your great leader would never have done it. Imagine Charles Bradlaugh standing upon this platform and, when he went up to the room of the Committee of the National Secular Society, their coming to him and saying: “You should not have said so and so in your lecture.” And do you suppose that I, who have spoken on this platform so long, will place myself in that position? Mind, I do not deny the right of your Society to do it. I do not challenge the right of your Society, or any other, to make any conditions it pleases round its platform. You have exactly the right that every church and sect has to say: “This is my creed and, unless you accept it, you shall not speak within my walls.” You have the right; but, O my friends and brothers, is it wise? Think. I have no word today to say against the Society; no word to say against its committee; but I have sat upon that committee for many a year, and I know on it are many young men sent up by their societies — when they have only been members a very short time — to take part in the deliberations. Are these young fellows, who are not my equals in training or knowledge, of the world, of history or theology — are they to have the right to come and say to me, when I leave the platform: “Your lecture went beyond the limits of the principles and objects of our Society”? It is not thus I hold the position of a public teacher, of a public speaker.

I will only speak from a platform where I may say what I believe to be true. Whether it be true or not, it is my right to speak it; whether it be correct or not, it is my right to submit it to a tribunal of my fellows. But you, what is it you are saying? That you will have no word from your platform save that which you already know, echoing back from your brains to the brain of the speaker the truth you have already discovered. While one more truth remains in the universe to be discovered, you do wrong to bar your platform. Truth is mightier than our wildest dreamings; deeper than our longest plummet-line; higher than our loftiest soarings; grander than you and I can even imagine today. What are we? People of a moment. Do you think centuries hence, millenniums hence, your principles and objects will count in the truth which our race then will know? Why bar your platform? If you are right, discussion will not shake your truth. If you are right, you ought to be strong enough to hear a lecturer put views you don't agree with. I never dreamt that from this platform, identified with struggles for human liberty, a platform on which I have stood with half the world against me, I never thought I should be excluded from it by the barrier of objects already accepted; and while I admit your right to do it, I sorely misdoubt the wisdom of the judgment that so decides.

In bidding you farewell, I have no words save words of gratitude to say in this Hall; for well I know that for seventeen years I have met with a kindness that has never changed, a loyalty that has never broken, a courage that has always been ready to stand by me and defend me. Without your help I had been crushed many a year ago; without the love you gave me, my heart would have been broken many long years since. But not even for love of you, shall a gag be placed upon my mouth; not even for your sake will I promise not to speak of that which I know to be true. Although my knowledge may be mistaken, it is knowledge to me. As long as I have it, I should commit the worst treachery to truth and conscience if I allowed anyone to stand between my right to speak that which I believe I have found to those who are willing to listen to me. And so, henceforth, I must speak in other Halls than this; henceforth in this Hall — identified to me with so much of struggle, so much of pain, so much of the strongest joy that anyone can know — after having tried to be faithful, after having struggled to be true, henceforth in this Hall my voice will not again be heard. To you, friends and comrades of so many years, of whom I have spoken no harsh word since I left you, and of whom through all the years to come no words save of gratitude shall ever pass my lips — to you, friends and comrades, I must say farewell, going out into a life that is shorn indeed of its friends, but has on it that light of duty which is the polestar of every true conscience and brave heart. I know — as far as human being can know—that Those to Whom I have pledged my faith and service are true and pure and great. I would not have left your platform had I not been compelled; but if I must be silent on what I know to be true then I must take my dismissal, and to you now, and for the rest of this life, to you I bid ---- FAREWELL.

[As attempts are being made to misrepresent what is above said, I add here that the above Farewell was meant, as was plainly said, for the Hall of Science and its audience. In future, as since May, 1889, when I joined the Theosophical Society, I shall speak to any Branches of the National Secular Society, as I do to Spiritualists and others with whom I disagree, so long as they do not claim a censorship over what I say.]