

Helena Petrovna Blavatsky

Russia in the first half of the nineteenth century was regarded by the majority of European society as being a world apart. The country, despite the efforts of Peter the Great and his brilliant successor Catherine the Second, was somehow different, and seemed to many travellers only semi-civilised. The vast distances, the vagaries of climate and the polyglot population all tended to emphasise that the Russian Empire was only peripherally, at best, part of the civilised world. Socially there were essentially only two classes of society, the aristocrat and the peasant – an urban middle class of sorts existed in a few towns and cities but it was really unimportant. Over all of this country was the autocrat embodied for a quarter of a century by the Tsar Nicholas the First.

Helena Petrovna von Hahn – better remembered as Madame Blavatsky – was born on 12 August 1831. Her father, Peter Alexyevitch von Hahn, was an army officer. The von Hahns had originally been part of the Baltic gentry, sometimes referred to as the “Baltic Germans”. Originating in Mecklenbourg the von Hahns had entered the Russian service in the eighteenth century. Her mother, Helena Andreyevna Fadeyev, was the daughter of a senior civil servant. She was only sixteen years when she married in 1830; her husband was some fourteen years older. Legend has it that it was a love match and that it had all of the romantic elements in the poetry of Pushkin.

Shortly after the wedding the bride and groom were to be separated. He was ordered to rejoin his regiment, which was sent to repress the Polish uprising of 1830. The young bride returned to live with her parents at Ekaterinoslav, and it was here that Helena Petrovna was born. The infant was deemed to have little chance of survival for the cholera was endemic, but she confounded all prognostications to the contrary. At her christening, her three-year-old aunt accidentally set fire to the officiating priest’s robes – all of the participants except the infant were holding candles – with the result that he was very severely burned. The superstitious peasantry regarded the event as an evil omen, and prognosticated that the child would have a life full of difficulty.

With the restoration of Russian authority in Poland, Peter von Hahn and his family were re-united. They were to move from one garrison town to another. Two other children were to be born in quick succession, but only the daughter survived. The elder of the von Hahn children apparently was not particularly docile or agreeable. She had frequent temper tantrums and violent unpredictable rages. The story is told that she frightened a young serf who had annoyed her when she screamed at him that a *roussalka* was after him. He fled and apparently fell into a stream and was drowned. Officially, it was deemed to have been an accident, but the peasants were convinced that the little girl had caused his demise by occult powers.

Life in the limited society of the garrison town came to an end in 1837 when the von Hahns moved to St Petersburg. Helena Petrovna von Hahn found the society of the imperial capital much to her liking. Her life was not just one round of dinners, receptions and balls for she discovered that she had a talent for writing popular fiction. She was very successful, and her reputation among the literati was not inconsiderable. In all she was to be the author of eleven major novels and several novellas. She seems to have espoused women's rights in a modest manner and also to have promoted women's education. Like Charlotte Bronte and her sisters, she used a pseudonym, "Zenaida R-Va".

After several years serving in the garrison in St Petersburg, Peter von Hahn was sent to the Ukraine. His wife and daughters did not accompany him, preferring to join her parents. Helena Andreyevna's health declined, she probably had tuberculosis, and she died aged 28 on 6 July 1842. Her last words were supposedly directed to her elder daughter, "Ah well perhaps it is best that I am dying so at least I shall be spared what befalls Helena. Of one thing I am certain her life will not be as that of other women and she will have much to suffer." It is said that the dying have the gift of prophecy, and certainly Helena Petrovna's mother final words were very prescient indeed.

The Fadeyevs undertook to care for the von Hahn children. There were now three, two girls and a boy, the latter born in 1840. Two of the preceptresses, Anna Kulavein and Augusta Jeffries, were successful in ensuring that the young von Hahns were reasonably educated as befitted their social class. Helena Petrovna was not a bookish child but she had a certain talent for languages and was to be fluent in French, German and English as well as her native Russian.

Some time later in 1844 or early 1845 Peter von Hahn decided to make a trip to England and he arranged for his elder daughter to

accompany him. The travellers stayed in London and made several excursions. It was at this time she avowed that her father began to appreciate her musical talents, and found several good teachers for her in London. She later claimed to have had lessons from the distinguished composer and conductor Ignaz Moscheles, and asserted on a later occasion that she had played duets with Clara Schumann though there is no reliable evidence for the truth of these statements.

Upon their return they went to Saratov but shortly thereafter her grandparents, the Fadeyevs, were to move to Tiflis. Initially the von Hahns were to reside with their aunt Catherine Witte. Von Hahn returned to his military duties. After a short period of time Catherine Witte, her husband Yuli and her son Sergius – he was later to be Prime Minister in the reign of Emperor Nicholas II – and the von Hahn children moved to Tiflis. Andrei Fadeyev lived in considerable style in the Georgian capital in the palace belonging to the Chavchavadzes, one of the country's most historic families. The Kingdom of Georgia had only been part of the Russian Empire for about half a century and its capital Tiflis was an odd amalgam of Russian and semi-Asiatic society. The local people had their own language and their own autonomous branch of the Orthodox Church.

At sixteen Helena Petrovna von Hahn was a somewhat truculent young woman. She was decidedly plain with a Kalmuch (semi-Asiatic) face, a dumpy figure, and rather frizzy hair but her eyes were arresting. She declined to participate in the polite circles of her grandparents, observing, "I hate dress and civilised society, I despise a ballroom." Although not of a literary turn of mind, she seems to have enjoyed reading curious books concerned with mediaeval folk tales, the writings of mystics, alchemists and cabbalists. All of this literature she felt reinforced her special sense of occult powers. She attracted the attention of Prince Alexander Galitzine who like her was interested in the occult, but her family did not encourage him as a suitor. His family were thought to be excessively mystical and somewhat eccentric and Prince Alexander apparently inherited these undesirable characteristics. Helena Petrovna in later years said they were engaged, but the machinations of Andrei Fadeyev prevent the marriage and Prince Alexander was forced to leave Tiflis.

Among those who also found her interesting and attractive in an exotic sort of fashion was Nikifor Vassilievich Blavatsky, the deputy governor of Erevan in Armenia. He was a friend of the Fadeyev family and like them part of the state service. He was over twenty years her senior, and she derisively referred to him as "old man".

Initially, she totally rebuffed his attentions but apparently she seems to have changed her mind when her governess taunted her with the comment that she was so plain and so ill-natured that she could never find a spouse just like “the plumeless raven”. Facing such a challenge, Helena Petrovna made a complete *volte face* and accepted Blavatsky’s proposal. The Fadeyev family were delighted by her decision, but she had second thoughts and tried in vain to break off the engagement. From all reports, Nikifor Blavatsky was just a very decent man who was prepared to tolerate the vagaries of the individual with whom he had fallen in love.

The wedding took place in June 1849 with her grandparents, brother and sister and various other relations in attendance. Evidently, the family wished to ensure that Helena Petrovna would go through with the ceremony; hence the large family gathering. According to Madame Yermolova, a family friend, Helena Petrovna had actually tried to run away to join Prince Galitzine but much to her chagrin he apparently had lost all interest in her.

The marriage was to be a complete failure. It may well be that it was never consummated, and within a short space of time the young bride hated her middle-aged husband. After only a few months she decamped and returned to Tiflis. Nikifor Blavatsky, always the perfect gentleman, never talked about his wife and her aberrant behaviour; however, some years later he attempted to have his marriage annulled, but for reasons unknown does not seem to have been successful.

The Fadeyev family were horrified at Helena Petrovna’s decision to leave her husband, and she was received without any sort of enthusiasm. After discussions with the grandparents, she agreed to join her father who was living in St Petersburg. It is unclear whether her relations thought that somehow the marriage could be annulled or that a divorce could be obtained through von Hahn’s influence in the imperial capital.

The tales that she was to tell of her life of the next quarter century are confusing and certainly incapable of being proved. Her own veracity, even at the best of times, was never overly reliable. It seems, and everyone is in general agreement, that she evaded her travel companions appointed by her grandfather and made her way to Constantinople. Her cousin Sergius Witte says in his memoirs that she became a circus rider. As she had no visible sign of support, this may even be possible.

She herself was to say that in due course she left Constantinople and went on to Cairo. Again, without evidence to the contrary this

may be true. While in Cairo she struck up an acquaintance with an American artist named Alfred Lawson Rowson. He and she were to become intimate friends; he may well have actually proposed to her but she declined to marry him. Indeed, she could not do so without committing bigamy as she was still married to Blavatsky. She liked Rowson as a companion, but did not wish him to be a husband or, indeed, a lover. She accepted a position as companion to a Countess Kissilev with whom she remained for a few months. Later she appears to have had a similar situation in the household of a Princess Bagration.

She and the Princess travelled extensively and in 1851 they went to London. While there like most visitors they went to The Great Exhibition. The principal event of her stay was, as she noted, that on 12 August 1851 she met "The Master of my dreams". He is not a lover but her invisible protector; whomsoever he might be a fuller explanation was never provided.

Princess Bagration apparently separated from her companion either in London or somewhere on the continent. Helena Petrovna now took up with one Agardi Metrovich, the illegitimate son of the Duke of Lucca. Metrovich was a well-known opera singer, and during one of his tours he may well have become acquainted with her on a previous occasion. After staying with him for a time, probably as his mistress, she started on her peregrinations anew.

What she said occurred next is really highly improbable. She said that she made her way to Canada to study the Indians. Later she travelled in the United States and visited the Mormon settlement; in due course she said she went on to Mexico and Central America. From these places she then, according to her own account, made a brief trip to India via Ceylon. It was on this occasion she averred that made her initial attempt to visit Tibet but was unsuccessful. Returning to Europe she landed in England but on the outbreak of the Crimean War she left the country. During her sojourn in London she claimed to have met Prince Dulep Singh of Lahore, a protégé of sorts of Queen Victoria. She also seems to have been part of the entourage of Daniel Home, the spiritualist. He was very popular in society both in Britain and on the continent. Home evidently had the ability to make tables turn and to levitate. He and Helena Petrovna did not remain friends and were to become bitter enemies. At this time, and once again Sergius Witte is our source, she was to gain some acclaim as a concert pianist and to have the role of the director of the court musicians of King Milan Obrenevitch of Serbia.

After an absence of some eight years, she decided to return to

Russia and made her way to Tiflis. The Fadeyevs declined to receive her. Again, Sergius Witte is our authority when he writes that she had actually agreed to rejoin her husband. There is no truth in what he stated, indeed the situation was quite the contrary. Blavatsky was attempting to have his marriage annulled. He indicated to a friend that his wife was of no interest to him, and observed in a letter, "Time smoothes out everything, even memory." This was not to be quite the end of the story.

Seeking a refuge, she went to Pskov where she and her sister met on Christmas Day. The two women went to an estate nearby that had been bought by Vera Petrovna's late husband. At the estate she found her nephews and also her father, whose second wife had recently died. The household at Rugdevo was a comfortable enough ménage but Helena Petrovna found it somewhat boring. She indulged herself in conjuring up mischievous poltergeists to alleviate the tedium, and to show her relations that she did have occult powers. Her hostess was not overly pleased with these slightly nefarious activities, but accepted them with as good grace as she could. Apparently, Helena Petrovna's reunion with her father and her acceptable behaviour with her immediate family made a reconciliation with her grandparents possible. They invited her to stay with them in Tiflis in the summer of 1860. While there her cousin, Sergius Witte, met her and his report of her was like an earlier one, not very flattering. He described her as being exceedingly unstylish and with a somewhat dissipated appearance. However, he did note that her eyes were her best feature. "Never," he said, "in my life have I ever seen anything like that pair of eyes." The same comment was to be made of Rasputin, another "mysterious" Russian.