

# MIRTOLA



*I MET SRI MADHAVA ASHISH (1920–1997), the third Mirtola guru, in September 1978. This was just a few months after joining the Theosophical Society. In an effort to understand H.P. Blavatsky's Secret Doctrine and the Stanzas of Dzyan on which it is based, I came across Ashish's books of commentary on those stanzas. These books, Man, The Measure of All Things (coauthored with his guru, Sri Krishna Prem) and Man, Son of Man, opened up an inner world for me that I did not know existed. This caused me to go to India and to meet him. Our first meeting at Mirtola led to annual visits with Ashish and a rich correspondence for nineteen years until his passing in 1997.*

*Mirtola is a farm of sixty acres with a Hindu temple at its center, about eighteen kilometers from Almora, a well-known Indian town in the foothills of the Himalayas northeast of New Delhi and near the borders of Tibet and Nepal. But Mirtola is more than that. Its rich history, with deep Theosophical roots, has been a source of wisdom since its founding in 1929. At the passing of Sri Krishna Prem in 1965, Sri Madhava Ashish became head of the Mirtola ashram and remained so until his passing in 1997. From that time, the Mirtola ashram has been maintained by Sri Madhava Ashish's stepson and follower, Sri Dev Ashish.*

*In addition to his several published books and articles, Madhava Ashish collected anecdotes and reminiscences about the history of Mirtola, about the two gurus who preceded him, Sri Yashoda Mai and Sri Krishna Prem, and about associated figures prominent in Theosophical history. In recent years a few of Ashish's pupils have undertaken to arrange these anecdotes and reminiscences with a view to their eventual publication as a book. The anecdotes and reminiscences recounted here are extracted from that manuscript. Insertions in square brackets [ ] are my own.*

—Seymour B. Ginsburg

# *A Himalayan Ashram with Theosophical Roots*

SRI MADHAVA ASHISH *Edited by Seymour B. Ginsburg*

Readers should take note of the fact that this is not a researched biography. It is a collection of anecdotes about the lives of the people who founded the Temple and Ashram of Uttar Brindaban at Mirtola in the Kumaon Himalaya. The deed of trust for the establishment is dated Almora, July 4, 1929. The people were: Sri Krishna Sevika Sri Sri Yashoda Mai Vairagini (1882–1944), born Monica Roy in 1882 and married to Dr. Gyanendra Nath Chakravarti, first vice-chancellor of Lucknow University; her first disciple, Sri Sri Krishna Prem Vairagi (1898–1965), born Ronald Henry Nixon, who came to India in 1921 as Reader in English at Lucknow and later Banaras Hindu universities; and Monica Chakravarti's youngest daughter, Arpita (1916–1951), otherwise generally known as Moti Rani or just Moti.

Everything prior to 1946, when I joined the ashram, consists of stories I heard from Krishna Prem and Moti. In this sense it is mythology. The rest is my memory of events from 1946 to the time Krishna Prem died in 1965. My memory is by no means infallible, so many of the names, places, and dates may be hopelessly wrong. These are stories and emphatically *not* history, so I make no claim as to their reliability. I can often only state that something of the sort was told or has happened—even if the names, places, and dates are incorrect.

At the time of writing, most of the people mentioned have been dead for a long time. It is because of this that I feel free to comment on their lives.

I am heir to an account of events from a line of people who saw things from a viewpoint that is different from the published histories, especially the published histories of major figures in the Theosophical Society. This does not mean that the stories are more true, only that they are put forward from a different viewpoint.

## **Sri Krishna Prem**

A few minutes after birth, when Ronald Nixon was held up for his father to see him, his father got the strong impression that the infant looked around with the question, “Where have I come to this time?”

Note that the elder Mr. Nixon was neither a Theosophist nor anything else in particular, certainly nothing that would lead one to expect thoughts about reincarnation. Mrs. Nixon, on the other hand, was a Christian Science practitioner, with quite a reputation for healing people.

Ronald had little to say about his time at the Non-conformist school at Taunton in Somerset, England. He seems to have been brilliant in the field of science, reproducing a rather complex process for measuring

the speed of light with interference. He then gave an exhibition in science at Kings College, Cambridge, but could not join till after World War I. War had broken out by the time Ronald went up to Cambridge for his exhibition. As soon as he was old enough, he felt it his duty to join up.

It is high time that something like the true story of Ronald's strange escape from enemy fighters replaced the distorted, even mythologized versions which are still circulating in India. Ronald was on the usual dawn patrol, which in his case consisted of a flight of two-seater fighters patrolling the section of the front line for which their squadron was responsible. According to what he told me, the British at that period held air superiority on that sector of the front, even though the German single-seater fighters had greater altitude. The Germans would not attack a flight of two-seater British fighters, because the observer's backward-firing guns gave the British the advantage over the fixed, forward-firing guns of the German single-seaters. They therefore adopted the tactic of using their superior altitude range to watch British squadrons from their vantage point, and then descend in force to attack British stragglers. In those days of unreliable aero engines, stragglers with engine trouble were many.

On this occasion Ronald's engine started giving trouble. Meanwhile, he was watching his attackers over his shoulder. When he judged that the attacking plane was about to open fire, he side-slipped. Ronald began to slip left, when he felt his hand on the control column pushed over to the right. As he slid right, he saw the attacker's tracer bullets flash past just at the place he had expected to be. In times of great stress, like wartime, latent psychic powers are often activated, but people are shy of mentioning their experiences for fear of being treated as mad.

Ronald was by no means alone in the pursuit of interests which led him into Theosophy and Buddhism. Men who have had the contemplation of death forced upon them by war will often turn to enquiry into the meaning of life.

One of Ronald's associates was Bob Alexander, a medical student some two years younger who had been under training for the Royal Air Force. They met in a bookshop, both looking for one of H.P. Blavatsky's books. "At that moment," said Bob, "I felt I had met a man I could follow for the rest of my life." When he had qualified, he took service in the Indian Medical Service so as to be close to Ronald, who by that time had just retired into an ashram. After ten years of service, Bob, too, entered the ashram and lived there with Ronald for the next nineteen years. Another was George Poole of Trinity, who went into the church at his father's insistence, but then joined Ronald in India and completed his teaching assignment for him when Ronald took monastic orders.



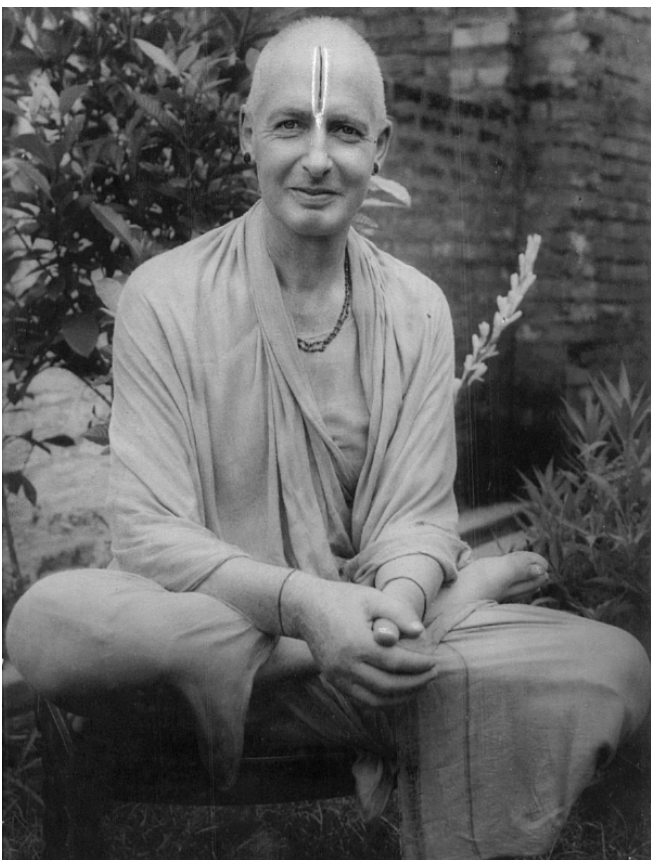
Sri Madhava Ashish

Perhaps the best known of this fairly large group was Christmas (Toby) Humphreys, successful both in his legal career and in his organization of Western Buddhism. What is remarkable is not that so many young men went through a stage of youthful enthusiasm, but that so many of them kept up their interest throughout their lives.

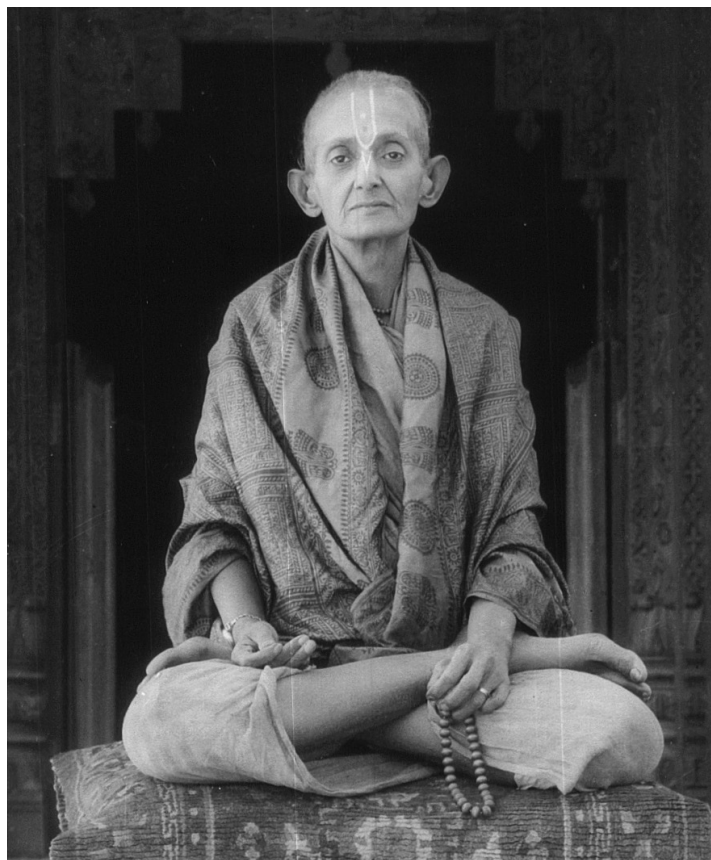
There was a lady they rudely called "The Airy Fairy Lilian," who gave the sort of occult teachings which are common to most such groups. They had to pair off and then attempt to meet each other in the astral body at some prearranged place. Ronald and his partner arranged to meet at the Cairo pyramids. Ronald, whose notions of what the pyramids looked like showed them with all the white marble coping stones in position, saw the piles of rough, stepped stone and dismissed the vision as a distorted dream image. It was not until some years later, when the first early photographs of the pyramids were not only taken but also reproduced and published, that Ronald discovered his mistake.

They also had a group exercise for constructing thought forms. Whether in this group or in others, they learned how to magnetize objects and perform similar bits of minor magic which are useful introductions to the factual presence of subtle energies.

Something happened to Ronald that was beyond Lilian's capabilities and was of great significance to some-



Sri Krishna Prem



Sri Yashoda Mat

one who would later dedicate his life to the inner quest. Call it fact. Call it dream. Call it vision. Ronald found himself at night rushing out into space in company with a guide or teacher. They seemed to rush outwards at great speed and for a long time. At last they stopped and turned round. Before them was a vast, roughly egg-shaped mass, glowing with the light of myriads of stars. The light was irregularly distributed following the distribution of the stars. Ronald asked which of the concentrations of stars was our solar system. Pointing to a smallish cluster towards one end of the total mass, the guide said, "That is your universe." The shock produced by the attack this statement made on Ronald's concept of scale sent him back to his room in Cambridge.

Ronald was already attracted to the figure of the Buddha before the event which clarified his dedication to the search. He filled his rooms at Cambridge with oriental bric-a-brac, much of it Buddhist in origin, and he took a Buddhist initiation from the Theosophical president, who was visiting Cambridge and its lively Theosophical lodges.

Ronald had gone up to London, where he loved to browse in the Charing Cross Road bookshops. On this occasion he went to the British Museum, where he was confronted by the severe ceramic image of the Lohan Buddha. He knew that this image was made some fifteen hundred years after the Buddha's death, so there

was no question of its being a photographic or realistic representation. This being the case, where did this impressive form and facial expression come from which was having so great an impact upon him? It could have come only from the heart of the sculptor, from the heart of a man. "What comes from the human heart," argued Ronald to himself, "can be realized by a man. And what is realizable must at some time have been realized. What one man has realized, another can realize." And so he determined to set out on the journey of the soul.

Ronald's intention was to get to India as quickly as possible. There, he felt, he might find a teacher who could speak from experience and not from books. But he had money neither to pay for a passage to India nor to support him when he got there. He had to have a job. So he wrote to the principal of the Theosophical school at Adyar, hoping that his Theosophical connections plus an honors degree might recommend him. The principal regretted that he had no vacancies, but forwarded Ronald's letter to Dr. Chakravarti, who was taking on staff for a new university at Lucknow. The outcome of all this was that Ronald was interviewed in London by Bertram Keightley (1860–1944), an old Theosophist and a member of the Lucknow University Senate who was visiting London. [Bertram Keightley and his uncle Archibald were wealthy Victorians who financed the publication of H.P. Blavatsky's *Secret Doctrine*.] Keightley approved

and lent Ronald enough money to get to Lucknow. One world had been left behind, and the next had not yet come. He arrived in Lucknow to find himself placed in the vice-chancellor's guest house, where newcomers stayed until they found themselves quarters.

Ronald had some particular friends in Lucknow. Dilip Roy was one of them, and with him, he started a correspondence which lasted till his death in 1965. Between 1934 and 1936 Dilip arranged the three-sided correspondence between himself and Sri Aurobindo on the one hand, and himself and Krishna Prem on the other. Krishna Prem's letters were shown to Aurobindo, and Aurobindo's replies were sent to Krishna Prem.

### Sri Yashoda Mai

Monica was the daughter of Rai Bahadur Gagan Chandra Roy, who was at the time of her birth the chief native official at the government opium factory at Ghazipur, Uttar Pradesh.

These were the days before the railways were built, and the Ganga was still the route taken by much traffic and many passengers coming up country from Bengal. Ghazipur was one of the important ports for river traffic and a centre of trade.

Gagan Chandra Roy was Bengali. He became a well-known figure both in Ghazipur and amongst travelers, who would often stay with him. One of these travelers was a Christian bishop who was staying the night that Gagan's only daughter was born. In the morning the bishop suggested she be called Monica because he had had a dream of St. Monica, mother of St. Augustine, that very night.

Visitors from the boats traveling to and from Calcutta were often highlights in the child's life, for visitors included such figures as Keshab Chandra Sen, Swami Ram Tirtha, and Swami Vivekananda. Many of them came specifically to have the *darshan* [view] of the now famous Pauhari Baba, a Mahatma who lived in his ashram a mile or two from Gagan's house.

As a child Monica heard many strange stories about this great man. It was said that he had hollowed out a cave for meditation in the floor of the temple (this is true) and that he would eat some medicinal root discovered on his travels and then enter the cave and meditate continuously for six months and, on one occasion, for six years.

When Monica reached the age of twelve her marriage was arranged with Gyanendra Nath Chakravarti, a much older man whose first wife had died, leaving one daughter aged six. Monica so much liked the little girl that she said she was ready to marry in order to have her as a daughter.

Chakravarti lived in Banaras with his old mother. He had done well at Allahabad University, studying

law and making several lifelong friends who included Motilal Nehru and Tej Bahadur Sapru.

When he started legal practice, he was congratulated on his work by the judges. However, he was deeply disappointed in the law as practiced when compared with his own high ideals. He therefore left law and went into service with the education department, becoming inspector of schools. He had become interested in Theosophy, and met Mme. Blavatsky, who slightly shocked him by what he considered to be her lack of proper piety. He asked one of the standard questions about the relative merits of *bhakti* and *gyan* (the path of devotion and the path of knowledge) and she had replied, "Some people like jam with their bread and some like cheese." Chakravarti found this analogy altogether too crude. However, this did not stop him from becoming a Theosophist.

The details of Chakravarti's Theosophical career are not available. However, he must have attained seniority fairly rapidly, for we find him representing the Indian branch of the Society at the Chicago Parliament of Religions, from where he wrote to Monica, describing the meetings and remarking on the excellence of Swami Vivekananda's speech. [One finds him along with Annie Besant in a photograph of dignitaries attending the Parliament.] At some point he became a close friend of Annie Besant, and Bertram Keightley became a disciple after being told by Blavatsky to go to India, where he would find his teacher.

While in Banaras Monica took to visiting *sadhus* [holy men] of all sorts, including the then famous Bhaskar Swami. Monica made a habit of meeting anyone with spiritual pretensions and she asked her husband to invite outstanding people to the house so that she could meet them. After some time she went to him and asked for initiation, saying that she had met all these people but had found no one his equal.

As there would have been in any Indian family, there was much concern because Monica did not immediately become pregnant. She was taken to all sorts of people for advice, and finally to an astrologer, who declared that there was no hope at all. But there was one faint possibility. "If she takes other people's children and brings them up as her own, then, perhaps, some of her own will survive."

Over the next twenty years or so Monica adopted, educated, and married off some forty children. Monica had four children of her own: Bhalli, the eldest son; Bulbul, the eldest daughter; Ratan, the youngest son; and, fifteen years after Ratan, Arpita, known as Moti Rani, the youngest daughter.

There was a curious story about Bulbul. Chakravarti had joined a group who were working with a medium in the attempt to open a channel of direct communication with Blavatsky's Masters following Blavatsky's death. Through this medium came the message that

Blavatsky would be reborn as Chakravarti's daughter. It was the sort of thing guaranteed to create excitement in Theosophical circles, especially when Monica then produced a daughter. Special arrangements were made for the child's upbringing, and for quite a time she was cared for by a Theosophical lady in Paris, where she learned to play the violin. However, as it more and more became apparent that she was an ordinary though good-looking and pleasant child, she was soon sent home, where her marriage was arranged.

Monica became very ill during one of her pregnancies when the child died in the womb. She was lying on the veranda of the house in Banaras, looking over the Ganga between Assi and Ramnagar where the Mahatma Hari Har Baba was performing *tapasya* [austerities]. Naked, he would stand on one leg on a sand bank in the middle of the river or, according to the time of year, up to his neck in water, staring open-eyed at the sun as it moved from horizon to horizon. He had gone blind. If anyone brought him food, he would eat. If not, as Monica often saw, he would take up a handful of mud from the river bed and eat it. Lying and suffering in her illness, she took strength from seeing Hari Har Baba's transcendence over the body.

Years later she was staying in a houseboat moored off the end of the house at Banaras. Crowds of people started coming to have her darshan. "Why are you coming to me?" she said. "Go and have darshan of Hari Har Baba. He is a real Mahatma." Hari Har Baba, now old, was living on a houseboat moored off Assi Ghat. Hearing that Monica was sending people to have his darshan, he returned the compliment and sent them to see her.

The Lucknow house seems to have had a constant stream of visiting Theosophists from England, some of them staying for considerable periods. There was a Mrs. Tibbets. Mrs. Cooper Oakley, who wrote on the Grail legend, was another.

It will have been at about the time of Chakravarti's retirement from Lucknow and the move back to

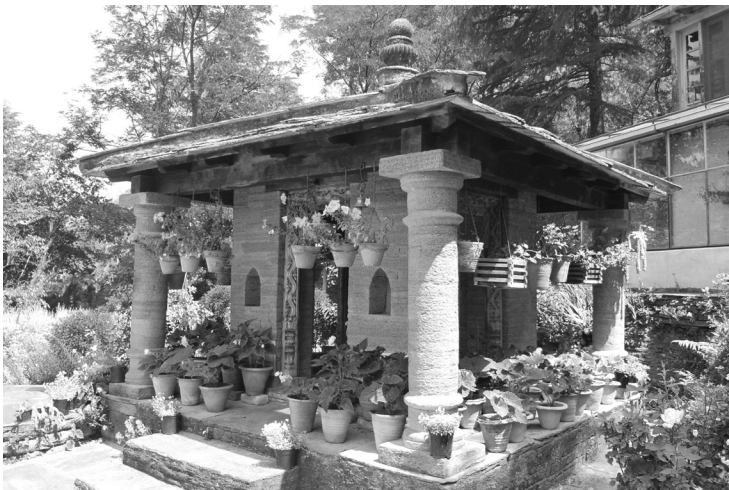
Banaras that Monica began to feel increasingly the conflict between what she had understood of the spiritual nature of the universe and the daily affairs of her household. It is therefore not surprising that Monica began to think in terms of leaving the family, taking *sannyas* [renunciation], and building the Krishna temple she had dreamed of since childhood.

One of the great stories of Monica's early life is that of the trip to Europe in about 1900–01, when there was an exposition in Paris and the Crystal Palace was still new in London. Monica went with her husband and Annie Besant, and there was a Bengali woman (Borodidi) who went with them as Monica's "companion." They went via Italy and visited St. Peter's in Rome. Monica was wearing a blue sari with silver stars embroidered on it. Some Italian peasants who were there saw this dark, big-eyed, beautiful woman in blue and silver and took her for an incarnation of the Virgin Mary. They surrounded her, tearing off bits of her sari. Annie hurried her out and into a cab, admonishing her never to wear that sari again.

In India Monica was not considered beautiful because her complexion was dark. But in Paris they saw her features and declared her most beautiful. When they visited the Exposition, Monica in all her finery and laden with heavy gold ornaments was thought to be the queen of Madagascar.

From Paris they went to London, visited the Crystal Palace, and stayed with Keightley's old mother in Windsor. There it was said she was noticed by Queen Victoria as she drove by in her carriage and was invited to the castle, but she refused on the grounds that an Indian woman goes nowhere without her husband, and the queen was not meeting men because she was in mourning.

There are several stories about Annie. One is that she was furious with Chakravarti when he married Monica. "Marrying that child when you could have had me!" she is supposed to have said.



There is a delightful story of how Colonel Olcott, president of the Society, was lecturing a group of Theosophists. "We will now meditate," he ordered. "One, two, three, begin!" Monica was watching. "Sahib," she whispered, "You're an old fraud!" Olcott put his finger to his lips. "Shhh!" he hissed.

Monica did not like the new house at Banaras. Shortly after moving in she had a disturbing dream. The marble image of Ganesh she had in her *puja* [worship] room was cuddling up to her and shivering because he was feeling cold, behaving as if he were a little child. In the morning she insisted on climbing upstairs to have darshan of her *thakurs* [deities]. A temple had been built on the roof, as promised, but the temple itself had no roof. Her *thakurs* were unprotected from the weather, and the images themselves were wet with dew. She promptly ordered all the images removed to her own room where she could look after them.

The same Ganesh came into her dreams shortly afterwards. He was flapping his ears and brushing his head as if irritated by something. When Monica got up to see what was wrong, she found that sugar syrup spilled from some sweets that had been offered had fallen unnoticed on Ganeshji's head and ants were running over it.

Many years later in the [Mirtola] ashram Monica was lying sick and in pain on her bed in her room, whose walls were covered with pictures of many divine forms of the Hindu pantheon, of no artistic merit, but there because of some special association which pleased her. There were large pictures of her husband, Blavatsky, Blavatsky's Masters, a large oil painting of Durga and another of Krishna she had commissioned. And there were photos of her favorite disciples. Right beside her bed, close to the head, in a narrow frame that fitted a particular bit of wall, was a bazaar print of Radha and Krishna on a swing. Half dazed by the pain, she felt little hands massaging her legs, as Indians love to do and have done to them when they are unwell—or indeed at any time. Looking up, she saw that Radha was missing from the picture.

When Monica Chakravarti decided, with her husband's permission, to leave the family, build a temple to Sri Krishna, and then to live as a *vairagini* [ascetic] in the deity's service, there were several factors at work. Firstly, Chakravarti's doctors had told him he should live by the seaside because of his very high blood pressure. Monica's doctors, on the other hand were saying that she had pleurisy and must go to the hills. Ronald's decision to accompany her as her first disciple had been taken when he left Lucknow.

There had been some talk of building the temple in the plains, but the idea of having to have iron grilles to stop monkeys and thieves from getting into the sanctum was distasteful. Finally they settled on Almora because

it was familiar to them from many hot weather holidays and there were many known people in the town. They rented Chilkapita House on the border of the town to stay in until they found a place for the temple. A puja room was immediately established in the house, the only image being a figure of Sri Krishna in Italian marble carved by an Italian artist according to the European canon of proportion. She had seen a similar Italian image of Sri Krishna in the palace of some maharaja and had asked her husband to bring her one from Italy, for he traveled quite often on Theosophical business. She intended this to be the main figure in her temple when she built it.

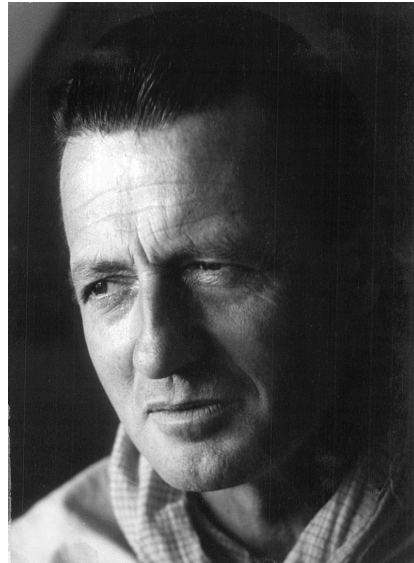
Ronald was by now wearing the *brahmachari's* [celibate's] white *dhoti* and *chadar*, with shaven head, *chutiya*, the double strand of small *tulasi* beads round the neck, and the "caste mark" of the *Gauriya sampradaya* or *Brahma sampradaya* to which they belonged by virtue of Monica's initiation by Bal Krishna Goswami of Sri Radha Raman temple in Brindaban. In accordance with the ancient rule for brahmacharis, Ronald had to beg food in the town for his guru and himself.

## Bertram Keightley

Bertram Keightley came from one of those wealthy Victorian families who would have considered it extremely bad manners had anyone enquired where the wealth came from. He went to Cambridge, studied mathematics, and became a wrangler. Then he got attracted to Theosophy along with his uncle, Archibald, who was about the same age. They were part of a group of London Theosophists who in 1887, after the trouble caused by the Hodgson report, went over to Ostend to persuade H.P. Blavatsky to come to London, where they would provide her with an establishment and she could complete her monumental work, *The Secret Doctrine*.

Blavatsky came and Bertram made himself useful. He got the manuscript typed on the newfangled typing machine. He suggested that the Stanzas be made the backbone of the book. And he put himself at the service of Blavatsky for checking the quotations which she "pulled out of the air." In effect he became her disciple. Keightley had many stories to tell about the quotations. Blavatsky had very few books, but she quoted from many with remarkable accuracy. But if she was sure of the quotation, she was often unsure of its source, and this made checking difficult.

She ascribed one bit of verse to Tennyson. Keightley knew his Tennyson and did not recognize the verse. When questioned, Blavatsky swore at him and said it was Tennyson. This went on with Blavatsky getting more and more angry, so Keightley went to see Richard Garnett, who was then librarian at the British Museum.



LEFT: Betram Keightley

RIGHT: Sri Madhava Ashish

Garnett did not know it as from Tennyson or from anyone else. Back went Keightley to Blavatsky, who called him names but agreed to “look.” She could not say where it came from, but was adamant that it was Tennyson. Back again he went to Garnett, saying that he had very good reason for believing it did actually come from Tennyson.

Garnett now suggested there was a faint possibility. He said there had been an ephemeral magazine at Cambridge to which Tennyson had contributed. Since the British Museum has to receive a copy of everything published in Britain, the few copies of the magazine had to be there, so they went to the archives, found the magazine, and found the verse.

Keightley took advantage of the opportunity to talk with Blavatsky. On his asking some question about phenomena and the nature of matter she gave him a private demonstration. She got him to sit opposite to her at a small table, put her hands in front of him, and made him watch as a ring on one hand went hazy, disappeared, and reappeared on the same finger of the other hand.

There came a day when Keightley sadly went to say goodbye to Blavatsky because of some family business matter in northern England. It was the last place he wanted to go to, but he believed it was his duty. He said that Blavatsky’s face changed, and her voice changed. “If you go,” said this person, “you will bring your family down in ruins.” He did not go, and shortly afterwards in 1890 Blavatsky sent him to India, saying that he would find his teacher there. Blavatsky herself died a few months later.

In India Keightley stayed with Annie Besant, ate her biscuits by the tinful, called her “Dear Annie,” and disliked her. At some point he met Chakravarti, decided that this was his teacher, like Ronald became a member

of the family, and lived with them. Unlike Ronald, however, except for wearing thin cotton *kurta pyjama* in the hot weather, he remained wholly a British sahib.

Keightley was a member of the University Senate and a bit of a figure in public life. As many people did in those days, Keightley slept naked. That would have been no problem had he stayed in his room. But on the occasion of Mrs. Tibbets’s delayed arrival he wandered out onto the roof of the porch in full view of the arriving guest. In the hot weather he would sleep out on the lawn with the other men and in the middle of the night wander past Monica’s female guests and household women in the veranda. And in the morning he could be seen doing physical exercises on his bed in full view of everyone.

Anyone might suppose that such a man could not possibly do anything in the spiritual life, but when staying at Mirtola and his hernia strangulated, he lay in agony for some time before help could come, with no fuss, and afterwards gave a blow by blow description of all he had gone through: sensations, feelings, and thoughts.

Keightley was delighted with Krishna Prem’s first draft of his commentary on the Stanzas of Dzyan. “Surely you aren’t going to take two bites of a cherry,” he said when Krishna Prem was dissatisfied with his work. In the end it took more than two bites. But it was good to have encouragement from a man who had done so much work on the original and had been so close to its author.

And at his end in Allahabad at his house, the Villa Italiana, which he had taken after Chakravarti’s death, with his brain deteriorating from lack of blood, Keightley suddenly came out of a coma, sat up and exclaimed “Ma!” as he saw Yashoda Mai, and fell back dead. ■