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Helena Andreevna Hahn

MOTHER OF H. P. BLAVATSKY, WHOSE PORTRAIT APPEARED IN OUR JULY NUMBER

Translated and compiled by LYDIA P. BOBRITSKY from the Preface to the *Complete Works of E. A. Hahn* published in 1905 in St. Petersburg by N. F. Mertz.

IN THE thirties of last century there appeared in France, Germany and Russia several novels, following each other in quick succession, in which were treated, for the first time in history, the questions concerning the social position of women in all its aspects. To those novels one could actually trace the beginning of the so-called *feminist movement* and women's suffrage in the western world, and three women-writers were responsible for it: the famous George Sand in France, the Countess Ida H. Hahn-Hahn in Germany and Helena Andreevna Hahn in Russia, writing under the nom-de-plume, *Zenaida R-va*. They tried to show in their writings the luckless destiny and miserable social position of women, who either were forced by circumstances to remain outside the circle of married happiness, or to survive the complete wreckage of their marriage.

Among these three the leading figure was George Sand, whose books were immediately translated into other languages and every-

where read with breath-taking interest. But it seems to us that the brilliance of her fame had unduly clouded the actual talents and merits of her two companions, who, by the miraculous play of accident, happened even to bear the same name. The fact remains, however, that these three writers laid the solid foundation and pointed the direction for the social reform of the future position of women and were actual initiators of the questions of women's equality and suffrage.

It seems that the memory of these three writers should have remained alive forever among the intelligent class of Russian readers, especially among Russian women, who are entirely indebted to those pioneers of feminism, but such was not the case. Only the works of George Sand remain known and are still read. As to the writings of Countess Hahn-Hahn — they were not all translated into Russian and therefore remained little known in Russia, while Helena Andreevna Hahn has been simply forgotten together with many other Russian writers who deserve, nevertheless, great credit and public appreciation for their social significance and work.

Since the death of Helena Andreevna, Russian literature has greatly grown in depth and breadth and has begun to speak an altogether different language. Meanwhile the only edition of the *Complete Works of Zenaïda R-va*, published fifty years ago, became a bibliographical rarity, and little by little the very name of the author had slipped into the oblivion of the history of literature.

However, there was a time when her books were regarded as extraordinary events in Russian literature, when she was recognized as the feminine equal of the great Lermontoff, and celebrated critics like Belinsky dedicated their articles to her. In spite of some old-fashioned expressions and literary forms, customary to the accepted style of her time, the writings of *Zenaïda R-va* have not lost their fascination for the reader, owing to their eternally-noble ideas, their richness of language, the depth of sincerity, powers of observation, spontaneity of feeling, of their author, and the ingenuity of the plots.

A. Belinsky, speaking of her works, says:

. . . There are writers who live apart from their books, and there are others whose lives are closely bound to their writings. While reading the former, we

delight in their God-given talents, but reading the latter, we delight in contemplation of beautiful human individuality that interpenetrates the written lines; we think of it, we love it and aspire to meet it face to face, we long to know the details of their own lives: Zenaïda R-va belongs to the latter class of writers.

And it is true that "the beautiful human individuality" of Helena Andreevna, brightly standing out in all her writings, attracted the sympathies of her readers, who saw how deeply she understood the humiliating position of women in society and how deeply she was afflicted by women's suffering. Belinsky, who had such a profound insight into the social significance of literary works, said of her:

The pathos of her lyric is not only in her idea that men are not able to love as sacrificially as women, but in her energetic protest against the social humiliation of women and her sincere grief that such a condition could actually exist among human beings.

Therefore we maintain that this pioneer-defender of women's social position and bearer of the noble idea of women's rights should not be allowed to be forgotten, but should be ever remembered as a writer and great humanitarian, who had contributed so much to the elevation of the human mind and heart. As A. Belinsky truly said, one does have a desire to know more about the individuality of Helena Andreevna, to know more about her short life, which "flourished like a full-blown flower, filling the surrounding space with a fragrance of ennobling thoughts and profound feelings."

The only detailed account of her life is to be found in the article about her by Mme. H. C. Nekrassoff, written with great accuracy and attention, based not only on then extant printed information, but — what is especially valuable — on her personal letters.

Her father, Andreï Michailovich Fadeeff, and mother, Helena Pavlovna, were not rich. The mother was born Princess Helena, being a daughter of Prince Dolgorouki. She married A. M. Fadeeff against the wish of her parents, who objected to her marriage with the commoner, although he was known as the most honest and straightforward man of the city. Princess Helena was considered by all as a kind of phenomenon among womankind, being actually an outstanding personality among women of the first half of the 19th century. She knew and spoke five languages; knew History, Na-

tural Science, Botany; was deeply interested in Archæology and Numismatics. In all these she was not an amateur but was thoroughly and practically familiar with these branches of science, having built rare and precious collections, written books on these respective subjects, and carried on a scientific correspondence with the outstanding scientists of Europe, among them the President of the London Geographical Society Mr. Murchison, Stwain, Bear, Abich, Karelin and Robert. Mr. De Guel many times refers to her in his writings, as to an outstanding scientist helping him in his research. Lady Stanhope, the famous English traveler, who had circled the entire world dressed as a man, says in her book on Russia:

In that barbarian land I met an outstanding woman-scientist, who would have been famous in Europe, but who is completely underestimated due to her misfortune of being born on the shores of the Volga river, where there was none to recognize her scientific value.

Into such a family, on January 11, 1814, was born Helena Andreevna Hahn. It goes without saying that a mother like Princess Helena would impart to her children all the keen interest in life she herself possessed, and the outstanding intellectual development of Helena Andreevna was undoubtedly due to her mother's influence. In her story, *The World's Judgment*, Helena Andreevna makes a remark, which we can well take as autobiographical:

If I had to tell you that our mother was our nourisher, our caretaker, our teacher and our guardian-angel, that, still, would not describe all her sacrificial, endless, selfless attachment, by which she constantly gladdened our lives.

In the beginning, H. A. lived with her parents in Ekaterinoslav, where her father had an office in the Foreign Department of Immigration. Until 1827 her only teacher was her own mother, under whose influence the growing H. A. read a great number of books, studying languages and the history of literature. She became thoroughly familiar with French, German and Russian writers and poets, who now delighted her, now plunged her into reveries, now fascinated her mind with brilliancy of language. She wept and laughed over the books and having mastered the technic of poetical composition, herself began to confide to paper her most profound feelings. In the words of one of her heroines:

Sometimes she would take her pencil almost unconsciously, under some irresistible inner urge, as it were, when it seemed to her that her very heart cried to impart its deep feeling within. The thoughts would rush to her brain, powerless to be expressed in mere words, which only impeded their powerful and invisible flight, and she had to impatiently throw aside her impotent pen.

Again she writes in her *World's Judgment*:

My mind was getting rich in knowledge, my imagination was fanned by dwelling on the heroic figures of the books, I measured the world by infinite measures. My attention was taken up by historical events, by the aspirations, passions and actions of the outstanding people who have contributed to the spiritual elevation of mankind, against whose lives our social everyday life looked pale and insignificant like an ant-hill. At 15 I reached with my mind everywhere, I felt with my heart everything. Even at that early age my opinions and aspirations were above and outside of the current influences of life. They were not the subjects of the outside influences, and could be fed but by the fire of my passionate inner flame, which alone could give them form and expression.

Such was the portrait at 15 of our writer. Graceful, beautiful and intelligent, she would have had many admirers among the youth of the city and many offerings of heart if it were not for her special ideas and requirements in regard to marriage. To use her own words:

I was used to consider love and marriage as an indivisible whole. I witnessed many times how my radiant ideals had been wrecked by life, but one of them I have been trying to guard and to save from the wreck: it is my dream about the possibility of eternal changeless love between two people. I had a profound faith in it, I hoped for it, I waited for its realization, lovingly carrying in my heart the germ of the sacred fire. I did not waste any of its flame on temporary infatuations. No — I guarded it as a celestial gift, which I hoped would bring me happiness once and forever. . . .

However, Helena Andreevna was destined to witness the wreckage of this ideal also. In 1830 she found at her feet a Captain of Horse Artillery, Peter Hahn, a man twice her age, but very well educated, brilliant and gay. She felt attracted to him and accepted his proposal to share with him her road of life, carrying within her heart the ideal images she associated with marriage. Her hopes for personal happiness were cruelly broken, and broken forever. Her dreams had to be buried without hope of resurrection.

The marriage proved an unhappy one not because the husband

was unable to bring happiness into the average marriage, but because his character and approach to the world at large were entirely different from hers. This fact had made inevitable the ruin of her passionate youthful ideas of marriage. The rapidity with which the disillusionment took place was responsible for the bitterness of the broken soul which she had to carry through all the days of her married life. She says again, in the words of her novel *World's Judgment*:

The fine, sharp and fast mind of my husband, as a rule accompanied by a cutting irony, smashed every day one of my brightest, my most innocent and pure aspirations and feelings. All that I admired, all that I aspired to from my childhood, all that was sacred to my heart was either laughed at, or was shown to me in the pitiless and cynical light of his cold and cruel reasoning.

She was hoping to find in the husband a friend, a companion to her inner search, an echo of her own aspirations and a reflector of her own feelings, but instead he checked her dreaming by turning their conversations to the dinner menus and other such subjects, yawned at the expressions of her sentiments, or began to expound his own ideas on the subjects, throwing into indignation her entire being. That absence of spiritual ideals in her husband soon made him a stranger to her. Fate refused to give to this pure and poetic soul the lover and husband who would be able to understand and appreciate the treasures of her mind and heart and delight in the beauty of her inner world, but placed her instead in conditions of life altogether foreign to her inner urge and character.

Her husband, due to the military office he held, had been often transferred from one city to another, and that constant wandering was ever like a dark cloud over her life. As soon as she became settled and attached to her home, as soon as sweet friendships had taken root and things became dear to her heart, the nightmare of the frightening word *transferred* again would descend upon her and would force her once more to leave all this behind, moving on and on to strange and lonely places. Small, dirty provincial towns, boring dinners and tea-parties with their heavy smoke of cigarettes, the eternal conversations about horses, dogs, guns, and the like, were themselves like the revolting tobacco fog enveloping and suffocating her by its dark and sticky veils.

In course of time she became more indifferent to the rough ex-

pressions of her husband, more patient to his opinions; but to become habituated did not mean the acceptance of them, did not mean the parting with her own heart's aspirations. The outstanding example of her mother and respect for her own individuality helped her to keep her head above water. After a few hard transitional years she again put her earnest mind and attention into books, study and reflection. The education of her children also occupied her days. Sometimes she would go away to Odessa, to visit her relatives, among whom she rested from the boredom of the military atmosphere of her circle.

In 1836 she went to spend some time in St. Petersburg. The multicolored life of the great capital city, theaters, museums, new books, personal acquaintance with many Russian writers, among them Alexander Poushkin, again awakened her soul, but at the same time sharpened her suffering, for she saw in a new and brighter life of contrast how great was the inner difference between herself and her husband. The thought of returning home was frightening to her, yet she felt still greater loneliness in the absence of another congenial soul to share her experiences. Under the pressure of the new feelings overcoming her heart she began to write.

At the instance of O. I. Zenkowsky, editor of the *Library for the Reader* she made a compilation from the English novel *Godolphin* by Bulwer Lytton, and soon saw it published in that magazine. The compilation was so well done that Mr. Zenkowsky insisted on her trying out an original story. The new turn of life and the attractive project of creative writing moved Helena Andreevna to make a decision to part temporarily with her husband. Taking along her children and accompanied by her father, she went into the Kalmick steppes of Astrachan, where her father was in charge over wandering tribes of Kalmicks.*

As a result of that sojourn, in 1837 her first original novel, *Ideal*, signed with her nom-de-plume "Zenaida R-va," appeared in the *Library for the Reader*, and she was invited to become a regular contributor to that magazine. Happy in her success, and full of new hopes, she began to collect material for her next story, *Memoirs of*

*The mongol tribes living in Russia along the Volga river, followers of the Buddhist religion.

Gelesnobodsk,* which appeared late in 1837, after her visit to the Caucasus. In 1838 appeared her second large novel, *Umballa*, the subject taken from Kalmick life. This was followed by another novel from Caucasian life, its title taken from the name of its hero — *Djelaleddin*.

It was not an easy matter for her to write, between her constant travelling and the education of her children, who required more and more attention as they grew up. At that time she met a kindly and helpful person, Miss A. H. Kulevin, who took charge of the education of the children. All the money she was making by her literary work, Helena Andreevna devoted to this end, and she was very happy when she was able at last to afford an English governess. In her opinion only good education could help a woman to win better social standing and could open for her a new road in life — an idea far in advance of many intellectuals of her time.

Meanwhile her frail health was becoming more and more delicate, although she continued her writing, disregarding her condition. In 1839 she published her story *Medallion*. Soon after, however, she was forced to change to a warmer climate, and was sent to Odessa, where she was put under the doctors' care. She had met while there some outstanding Russian intellectuals, Benedict Kniajevich among them, who contributed to her inspiration. From Odessa she went to visit her relatives in Saratoff, where she wrote her important large novel *The World's Judgment*, which appeared in print in 1840. The same year brought to a finish another novel: *God's Judgment*, but this she considered not worthy of publication.

Her illness, however, continued to progress. In spite of that she wrote and published her best novel: *Theophania Abiadjo*, which definitely brought her wide recognition and fame. But her own days were already counted. Little by little the strength was leaving her frail body, the illness gaining on her. She was greatly worried about her children, feeling her approaching end. "I am not only ill in my body," she wrote in one of her letters, "but in my soul also. I will not last long now. . . ."

In 1842, in the famous Russian magazine *The Country's Records* had appeared her last story to be published during her life — *The*

*A large Causasian city.

Vain Gift. Her doctors insisted once more on her immediate removal to a warmer climate, and on their advice she again took the children and went to Odessa. There she began to concentrate and collect the material for her next novel *The Flowergirl*, but on the 24th of June, 1843, the tragic end stepped in and she died in the arms of her mother in the twenty ninth year of her life.

It is a simple life-story of a great soul.

No use to analyze the details of each of her novels. Their subjects were only the backgrounds, like the librettos of the operas for the musical composer. They were, in her own words, the stories of *the double existence of a woman*, the pictures of the radiant and pure soul, merged into the light of her inner world on one hand, and on the other, its reflection on the screen of public opinion — that treacherous mirror, which like the kiss of Judas, was only intent on her slander, on the ruin of her honor and often on her very death.

Again she says:

If a woman, by a cruel caprice of Fate, or by a Supreme Will beyond our power, has been born with a character different from the average predominating in this world; if she happens to have a fiery imagination and a heart avid for sacred love, in vain she will look around for another soul, mutual in understanding. Every outstanding woman, especially a writer, will be persecuted by the world. In its eyes she will be only a monstrous caprice of Nature, a feminine monster, and the like. The man with a higher intellect is intolerable enough to this world, but the position of a woman, who has been placed by Nature itself above the crowd is verily desperate. (*Ideal*)

The Hundred-headed monster of public opinion will declare her immoral, will throw dirt on her noblest feelings, her purest aspirations, her most elevated thoughts; it will soil them by the mud of its comments. . . . Her gifts of intellect, her talents all are in vain before the crowd; she will be like a criminal rejected by Society. . . . Why, then, does Nature endow her so lavishly with her penetrating mind, her abilities and talents, her perceptions of higher purposes of life, her deep feeling for beauty? . . . Yet, it is not Nature who hinders her on her road to brighter and higher existence, to which she was destined from above, but man — man-made laws and social conditions.

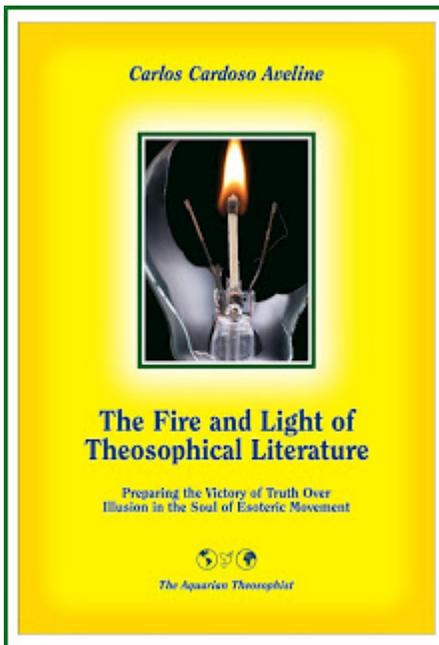
Such and similar quotations are characteristic of Helena Andreevna's writings. Her books do not offer any formulae for the solution of feminine problems; they are only the fiery protests of genius against the social conditions, especially concerning women, of her time — protests which cause one to think and to look for the way out.

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The end of “Helena Andreevna Hahn”.

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On the role of the esoteric movement in the ethical awakening of mankind during the 21st century, see the book “**The Fire and Light of Theosophical Literature**”, by Carlos Cardoso Aveline.



Published in 2013 by **The Aquarian Theosophist**, the volume has 255 pages and can be obtained through [Amazon Books](#).

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