



Swamiji and Madame Calvé

By Swami Tathagatananda

Madame Emma Calvé, the celebrated singer, was in Chicago with the Metropolitan Opera Company in 1894. The world was at her feet. Calvé, the toast of two continents, was seen by her flamboyant admirers and the celebrities composing the cream of society as a bright new star sailing forth to conquer the world. One evening in the opera, she had the worst attack of stage fright she had ever experienced. She was still feeling nervous as she stepped onto the stage after the first intermission, even though the first act had been a tremendous success. She felt terribly depressed and thought of giving up the rest of her performance that night. She barely staggered from her dressing room to the wings, where she stood frozen as though paralyzed. Persuaded by the manager to go on the stage, she sang magnificently in the second act. Returning to her dressing room during the second intermission, she virtually collapsed. She felt overwhelmingly depressed and had difficulty breathing. She requested the manager to announce to the audience her inability to perform because of illness. However, with the assistance of others nearby, the manager nearly carried her to the stage for the third and last act. Making the greatest effort of her life, she completed her role and received tremendous applause for one of the most glorious performances of her entire career. But her mind was still consumed by a strange foreboding of some impending grave peril. Running to her room after this rousing ovation, a solemn reception of several grave faces was waiting for her. The news was so tragic she fainted. Her only child, her beloved daughter, had been consumed by a fire during her mother's performance and had died.



The charm of her unprecedented success instantly vanished. She had showered every mark of tender affection upon her child and could no longer bear to live without her. Unable to bear the agony, she resolved to end her suffering by committing suicide: she would drown herself in the lake. Despite pious entreaties from all her well-wishers, she was helplessly borne like a straw on the strong current of her emotion. At that time, Swami Vivekananda was also in Chicago and the news of his great spiritual saving power was in the air. Many people were seeking interviews with him to get his help and guidance. But though she was definitely aware of Swamiji's spiritual power, her misconception about this power prevented her from visiting him.

Three times, she left her house with the intention of drowning herself in the lake. Remarkably, each time destiny led her, unconsciously, to walk on the road that led to the house of the Hale family where Swamiji was staying instead. But on each of these three occasions, she could not bring herself to see the Swami and returned home again. This kept recurring. Then, on her fourth or fifth attempt to go to the lake and drown herself, she went unintentionally as if in a trance to Swamiji, and sat down on a chair. She was in a dreamy state. She heard a consoling voice speak from an adjoining room, "Come, my child. Don't be afraid." In that dreamy, trancelike state she rose and went to him. Here we must give Madame Calvé's own reminiscences of her first meeting with Swamiji several years earlier:

It has been my good fortune and my joy to know a man who truly "walked with God," a noble being, a saint, a philosopher and a true friend. His influence upon my spiritual life was profound. He opened up new horizons before me, enlarging and vivifying my religious ideas and ideals; teaching me a broader understanding of truth. My soul will bear him eternal gratitude.

. . . . He was lecturing in Chicago one year when I was there; and as I was at that time greatly depressed in mind and body, I decided to go to him, having seen how he had helped some of my friends . . . When I entered the room, I stood before him in silence for a moment. He was seated in a noble attitude of meditation . . . his eyes on the ground. After a pause he spoke without looking up. "My child," he said, "what a troubled atmosphere you have about you! Be calm! It is essential!" Then in a quiet voice, untroubled and aloof, this man who did not even know my name talked to me of my secret problems and anxieties. He spoke of things that I thought were unknown even to my nearest friends. It seemed miraculous, supernatural!

"How do you know all this?" I asked at last. "Who has talked of me to you?" He looked at me with his quiet smile as though I were a child who had asked a foolish question. "No one has talked to me," he answered gently. "Do you think that it is necessary? I read in you as in an open book."

Finally it was time for me to leave. "You must forget," he said as I rose. "Become gay and happy again. Build up your health. Do not dwell in silence upon your sorrows. Transmute your emotions into some form of eternal expression. Your spiritual health requires it. Your art demands it."

I left him, deeply impressed by his words and his personality. He seemed to have emptied my brain of all its feverish complexities and placed there instead his clean calming thoughts. I became once again vivacious and cheerful, thanks to the effect of his powerful will. He did not use any of the hypnotic or mesmeric influences. It was the strength of his character, the purity and intensity of his purpose, that carried conviction. It seemed to me, when I came to know him better, that he lulled one's chaotic thoughts into a state of peaceful acquiescence, so that one could give complete and undivided attention to his words.

A great spiritual personality who is perfectly established in higher realizations can transmit spiritual knowledge to a disciple even if the disciple has not undergone vigorous spiritual practices. Swami Vivekananda himself experienced it and says in a lecture, “I began to go to that man (Shri Ramakrishna), day after day, and I actually saw that religion can be given. One touch, one glance, can change a whole life. I have read about Buddha and Christ, about all those different luminaries of ancient times, how they would stand up and say, “Be thou whole,” and the man became whole. I now found it to be true, and when I myself saw this man, all skepticism was brushed aside. It could be done, and my Master used to say, “Religion can be given and taken more tangibly, more really than anything else in the world.” Mme. Calvé’s unique experience of Swami Vivekananda during the most tragic event of her life illustrates the truth of Swamiji’s assertion.

Mme. Calvé saw Swamiji again in Paris during the nearly three-month period during which he gave two lectures at the Congress of the History of Religions at the Sorbonne (September 3 to 8, 1900). Following that, she traveled with Swami Vivekananda, Monsieur and Madame Loyson, Jules Bois and Miss Josephine MacLeod through southwest Europe to Constantinople, where Swamiji was her guest during her brief period of respite from singing. In her reminiscences of that journey and his visit, Mme. Calvé wrote:

What a pilgrimage it was! Science, philosophy, and history had no secrets from the Swami. I listened with all my ears to the wise and learned discourse that went on around me. I did not attempt to join in their arguments, but I sang on all occasions, as is my custom. The Swami would discuss all sorts of questions with Father Loyson [Père Hyacinthe], who was a scholar and theologian of repute. It was interesting to see that the Swami was able to give the exact text of a document, the date of a Church Council, when Father Loyson himself was not certain.



Around this time, Swamiji had a premonition about the death of his dear friend and supporter, Mr. Sevier. His sad, depressed mood did not go unnoticed by Mme. Calvé, who asked him the reason for it. Swamiji said, “I want to go back to India to die and want to be with my brothers.” Deeply moved by these words, Mme. Calvé made his return to India certain, and paid Swamiji’s fare with a full heart.

Having begun her life in poverty, Mme. Calvé had so improved her position in society that she was now the most famous opera singer in the western world. In Paris she entered into a closer association with Swamiji, for she was not only highly cultured musically, Mme. Calvé possessed a deep interest in philosophy and religion. Swamiji made the following remarks about her:

She was born poor, but by her innate talents, prodigious labor and diligence, and her wrestling against much hardship, she is now enormously rich and commands respect from kings and emperors. . . . Though there are other great singers of both sexes . . . Calvé's genius coupled with learning is unique. The rare combination of beauty, youth, talents, and "divine" voice has assigned Calvé the highest place among the singers of the West. There is, indeed, no better teacher than misery and poverty. That constant fight against dire poverty, misery, and hardship in the days of her girlhood, which has led to her present triumph over them, has brought into her life a unique sympathy and a depth of thought with a wide outlook.

The famed biographer of Shri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda, Romain Rolland, also had the unique privilege of meeting Mme. Calvé. On April 4, 1930 he wrote her a letter which reveals the factual nature of the subtle spiritual impact he was also seeking. His letter also confirms that a spiritually illumined personality can transmit this knowledge to one who has not lived an austere spiritual life. Romain Rolland writes in part:

. . . It now seems to me that my eyes too have seen him. I lived so intimately with him and with Paramahansa in these latter years that it is as though I was seated day after day in the little room at Dakshineswar on the banks of the Ganga.

I hope that the good effect of that great thought may enter into the soul of the West, wounded but still hard and contracted. It is a serious moment for the West, which has learnt nothing from the troubles it has already had. If it doesn't do something to gain possession of itself, the spell would be cast. It certainly won't be the first great Empire in the world that would have crumbled. The flame of the spirit will find—will even create—other places to dwell. It is never extinguished.

Conflicts, confusion, frustration of the mind, and uncontrolled emotions generate psychosis. These tendencies can hardly be removed unless individuals absorb the higher values and apply them practically in daily life. When one has a religious ideal and regulates all one's activities by that ideal, one has a satisfactory way of life. Therefore, we are to associate ourselves with spiritual souls and their message. The snow-white peaks of their sanctity, purity and holiness are a lighthouse of inspiration to drooping souls. The value of having an exalted ideal, strong love for a noble person, and a lofty purposefulness translates itself into service and absorbing devotion to a holy cause. Mme. Calvé was inspired to visit Belur Math in 1910 to express her deep gratitude.

End Notes

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Ibid, p. 552.

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