

## AT MAYAVATI WITH SWAMI VIVEKANANDA

### SWAMI SHRADDHANANDA

[In the Issue of the *Vedanta Kesari* for September '81 readers would have enjoyed the excerpt 'At the Holy Mother's Feet' from our forthcoming publication *The Story of an Epoch—Swami Virajananda and his Times*. This is a further extract from the same book. It deals with the founding of the Advaita Ashrama at Mayavati in the Himalayas—a pet dream of Swami Vivekananda come true. His disciple Swami Virajananda also was a worker and later President of the Mayavati Ashrama for a number of years.]

In a time-worn hillhouse high in the forested Himalayas, an elderly English couple and an ochre-robed Sannyasin sat in quiet conversation one August evening in 1899. For many months these three—Swami Swarupananda, Captain and Mrs. Sevier—had lived in this wild mountain region under instructions from Swamiji, charged with establishing an Advaita Ashrama. At last, to assist in this effort, several monks were expected from the Math at Belur, but the time of their intended arrival had long since passed—and the three at Mayavati awaited them not without anxiety.

Overhead, the sky was hung with black clouds; then drizzling rain began to fall, rendering the atmosphere even more sombre.

"I think, Swarup", remarked the English gentleman, turning thoughtfully to the monk, "something untoward may have happened." Lines of worry quickly etched themselves on the lady's calm face; nevertheless she spoke very softly, "Such a thought is extremely distressing! Indeed, how will they reach here in this stormy weather?"

The Swami's mind flashed back over precarious trails leading to the Ashrama, and he appeared about to speak when the crunch of footsteps on the gravel broke harshly into his reverie.

"They are approaching, Maharaj—but there are only two!" cried the houseboy appearing in the doorway.

"Only two! How can that be?" Leaping up, Swarupananda rushed into the shadowy roadway.

Emerging from the gathering darkness, Budo Baba (Swami Satchidananda) and Swami Vimalananda strode rapidly towards them, followed by porters bearing their luggage. But Swami Virajananda and Swamiji's nephew Harendra (Nadu) were not to be seen.

"They set out ahead of us and we fell far behind," hurriedly explained Budo Baba. "We thought surely they would await us at Lohaghat, and when we did not find them there, we surmised that they had pushed on farther up the trail. Where have they gone? Have they lost their way?"

That wild animals freely prowled this region each one silently remembered. Moreover, night was drawing down and there was the rising storm. All spent the night in intense apprehension. But on the morrow Virajananda and Harendra arrived safe and sound. Near Lohaghat they had lost the path and after a hazardous detour had returned to the same spot at nightfall. Without proceeding further, they had taken shelter in the hermitage of a Sadhu.

Looking about him Virajananda now recalled his boyhood wish. These were the same Himalayas to which more than a decade ago he and Khagen (now Swami Vimalananda) had longed to run away to

live a life of religious austerity. How strange that his wish had at last proved true! Here in these forested mountains an Ashrama must be constructed and here the English mouthpiece of the Organization, *Prabuddha Bharata*, must be edited and published. Fervently, Virajananda resolved to devote himself not only to Japa and meditation, but to untiring service at the behest of his Guru. In like manner the others pledged, with hearty enthusiasm, to bring to reality Swamiji's cherished dream of an Advaita sanctuary high in the remote Himalayas.

Later Virajananda reminisced :

At that time we all lived in the bungalow below. Captain Sevier was manager of the Ashrama, Vimalananda the assistant manager, and Swarupananda the editor of *Prabuddha Bharata*. Budo Baba took charge of the construction and repairs of the buildings, and my work was something like that of the public works department—to make roads, clear the jungles and the like.

After the morning tea I would go out with axe, spade and hoe and work hard for two or three hours. As a result of this, I used to feel very hungry and would occasionally raid mother's (Mrs Sevier's) cupboard. At Lohaghat, the nearest town in the heart of this vast wilderness, there was extreme difficulty in obtaining food-stuffs, but we were a happy group and did not at all consider hardship as hardship.

Captain and Mrs. Sevier had originally come in contact with Swamiji in London. Soon after they had become his disciples and had followed him to India to serve him in every way possible to them. These simple devout people had no children of their own,

but even Swamiji invariably addressed Mrs. Sevier as 'mother'.

Captain Sevier's life was extremely austere, not unlike that of a monastic, and he toiled hard for the Ashrama. Even in appearance he resembled a monk. He wore a Dhoti (a man's wearing cloth) draped in the South Indian manner and all his clothing was dyed a light ochre. That a European, born and brought up amidst luxury, could in his later years so completely accept the Indian thought and way of life, and for the service of his Guru voluntarily embrace poverty and austerity, rendered the monks speechless with wonder.

Over a period of years Captain Sevier had suffered a chronic illness, and eventually his health took a bad turn. Lending a deaf ear to the urging of others, he consistently refused to travel to Almora for treatment by physic. "Throughout my life," he protested, "I have never stayed continuously in one place for more than six months, and I came here with the determination that I would on no account leave Mayavati."

Depending solely on the will of the Lord, he quietly bore the pains of his malady on his deathbed; at length this dedicated devotee attained peace supreme and was released from the body on October 28, 1900. As had been his wish, on the bank of the stream that runs below the Ashrama, his body was cremated and obsequies performed in accordance with the Hindu custom. Though Swamiji was half the world away touring in Egypt at the time, a conviction came to him that the good Captain had departed this life. He mentioned this thought to no one, but a restless longing seized him to return at once to India. Accordingly, he booked his passage on the earliest available steamer bound for Bombay. Arriving at Belur Math on December 9, 1900

he found it was indeed true that Captain Sevier had already passed away.

On December 26 he wrote to Miss MacLeod:

Dear Mr. Sevier passed away before I could arrive. He was cremated on the banks of the river that flows by this Ashrama, *a la Hindu*, covered with garlands, the Brahmins carrying the body and the boys chanting the Vedas. The cause has already two martyrs: Mr. J.J. Goodwin and Captain Sevier. It makes me love dear old England and its heroic breed. The Mother is watering the plant of future India with the best blood of England. Glory unto Her!

Though his first concern was to console Mrs. Sevier, Swamiji was also eager to visit the newly built Ashrama at Mayavati. Without delay he arranged to travel by train to Kathgodam—but Mayavati lay sixty-five miles beyond, accessible only by narrow trails over rugged mountain terrain. When Swarupananda in Mayavati received the news of Swamiji's expected arrival he had no time to arrange for cars. Virajananda, however, quickly rose to meet this crisis. Swiftly he made the rounds of the nearby villages and, with tremendous effort and for enormous fees, secured the needed porters. With these men, he then walked with all speed to Kathgodam, covering the sixty-five miles in only two days and arriving at midnight on the 28th of December.

In the early morning hours Swamiji's train pulled in. Accompanying him were Swami Shivananda and Swamiji's first disciple, Swami Sadananda (Gupta Maharaj). Spying Virajananda patiently waiting at the station, Swamiji was overjoyed. Later, when he heard of Virajananda's resourcefulness in securing porters and traversing this long distance in only two days, Swamiji

excitedly exclaimed, "Bravo! Here is a true disciple!"

After wiring Swarupananda, Swamiji had doubted if it would be possible for anyone to come from Mayavati in so short a time. Therefore he had also telegraphed Badri Shah, a devotee in Almora, giving the date of his arrival at Kathgodam. If no one could come from Mayavati, he had planned to proceed to Almora and from there to Mayavati. Badri Shah, however, when he received this wire, with all haste dispatched to Kathgodam his brother's son, Lala Govindlal Shah.

Despite his youthful vigour, Virajananda was extremely tired. This Swamiji immediately perceived, and since he himself felt feverish, made up his mind to rest a day at Kathgodam. The next morning all started for Mayavati, including Lala Govindlal Shah. Swamiji, out of necessity, was carried in a Dandi. Climbing the rugged trail, seventeen miles were completed the first day, and for the night a halt was made at the Dnari Dak bungalow. In those quiet hills Swamiji was as delighted as a child....

On the second day—after only two miles—rain, and then light snow, began to drift softly down. Thinking of Swamiji's fragile health, Virajananda became deeply concerned; for the next Dak bungalow lay some fifteen miles ahead over tortuous mountain paths. In the face of the oncoming storm, progress was increasingly slow and by mid-afternoon only seven miles had been traversed.

At a turn in the road there came into view a small mountain hut, a rustic wayside shop. Here the litter carriers begged a halt to smoke and to sip tea—a request which Swamiji out of sympathy readily granted. Virajananda had been travelling some distance behind and reached this spot a short

time later. Seeing what was taking place, apprehension seized him. How well he knew the nature of the adamant hill porters! Already he had cautioned Swamiji that once the carriers stopped they would be unwilling to resume the journey and it would therefore be impossible to reach their destination that day. His fears were soon confirmed. It was almost five o'clock when the porters finished their tea. Dusk was by that time enveloping all the surrounding hills. To start again in the falling snow seemed foolhardy indeed. There was no choice but to spend the night in the tiny shop!

The dilapidated structure was old and untidy in the extreme, and at one end an ancient fireplace continuously discharged clouds of smoke. Surveying the situation, Swamiji, with boyish indignation, addressed Swami Shivananda: "Kalikrishna is a young man, but you, brother, are sufficiently old! With what wisdom did you lead me into this plight in the hills?" Turning to Virajananda, he added, "Why did you persuade me to go directly to Mayavati from Kathgodam without allowing me to proceed to Almora?"

Coolly, Virajananda listened to this outburst and then boldly answered, "But, Swamiji, the fault is yours! I had previously warned you about the hill porters. By permitting the litter carriers to halt, it was you who have caused this muddle! Had they not delayed so long, we would have reached the Dak bungalow by nightfall."

Upon hearing these firm, courageous words of self-justification, Swamiji grew calm like a child. "Well," he responded quietly, "what must happen has come to pass. Don't mind my having scolded you. Does not the father rebuke the son? Let us now manage to pass the night here."

Meanwhile Lala Govindalal Shah and Swami Sadananda had gone on ahead to reach the Dak bungalow before the others, in order to make a fire there and to provide for Swamiji's comfort. Unaware of this and failing to find these two at the little shop, Swamiji became anxious, since night was coming on and the cold was severe. Fearing they might have lost their way in the storm, he repeatedly expressed his desire to have news of them. In response, the shopkeeper volunteered, "I shall be glad to send my nephew to obtain the needed information—but you must give two Rupees extra for this." Hurriedly the boy departed and within a few hours returned to report that the missing persons had safely reached the Dak bungalow farther up the trail. Swamiji felt tremendously relieved and the messenger was amply rewarded.

The evening meal in the tiny hut consisted of thick, hard Chapatis provided by the shopkeeper. These they broke with their teeth with considerable effort and chewed into small bits. Then all spent a sleepless night. Casually Virajananda reminded Swamiji that this was the night of December 31, 1900—that the nineteenth century was now at an end and the twentieth century was advancing, and that spending this Sandhi (transition) in this way was perhaps significant. Hearing this, Swamiji smiled thoughtfully...

At daybreak twelve inches of snow had already fallen. Lest further delays should occur, Virajananda walked beside the litter in which Swamiji was carried. Surveying the snowclad hills with their stately rows of marching trees, Swamiji's delight knew no end. Thus passed a quiet day. At sundown they reached the Mournalla Dak Bungalow, where, thanks to Swami Sadananda's efforts on the previous day, all was in readiness for Swamiji. In a happy mood, Swamiji related

to Sadananda the trying experience of the preceding night spent in the small wayside shop.

On the fourth day the snow had almost melted away and, after covering twenty-one miles, they rested at Dhunaghat. Near the end of this journey Swamiji walked a short distance, supporting himself with a staff in one hand and with one arm around Virajananda's shoulder. Regretfully he commented, "Formerly, walking twenty or twenty-five miles was nothing to me. But now how weak I have become! Even to walk this much is so difficult!" In a few moments he continued, "See, my son, at present I am indeed reaching the end of my life." Virajananda's heart sank. Swamiji was very weak. It was true.

The following day, January 3, 1901, the party reached Mayavati. During this visit of Swamiji there was no end of joy and inspiration for everyone. To be near him filled even the grief-stricken soul of Mrs. Sevier with peace. In discussing his plans for future activities there, Swamiji would be overcome with emotion. One day he outlined in detail all the services he desired to be carried on in the Mayavati Ashrama. Listening gravely, Swarupananda willingly accepted responsibility for all these projects, but added that this would be possible only if his assistants would remain for at least three years, helping him wholeheartedly in the undertaking. Without delay Swamiji called all the workers together and asked if to this they all were agreeable.

With characteristic independence, Virajananda candidly answered, "For a long time I have had a desire to live in seclusion and to spend my time wholly in austerities, begging my food from door to door."

Disturbed by this reaction, Swamiji attempted to dissuade him: "Why spoil your health by severe austerities? Just see how broken down is our health as a result of continued austerities. What is the gain in it? Please learn from our experience. Moreover, how long can you really meditate? Five minutes, perhaps. Why, if the mind is stilled even for one minute, that would be enough! For this purpose, some time should be spent in the morning and evening in Japa and Dhyana. But one must occupy oneself during the rest of the day in scriptural study and work for the good of the world. I want my disciples to feel more inclined towards work than to personal austerities."

Virajananda, however, was unshaken. He firmly contended that, though Swamiji's statement was true, to gain purity of character and spiritual power, religious austerities are absolutely essential; otherwise it is impossible to perform Nishkama Karma (selfless work). Faced with this obduracy, Swamiji furiously reprovved him. After a while, however, when Virajananda had left the room, Swamiji told the others, "What Kalikrishna says is actually correct, for what is there to equal meditation and the free life of a Sannyasin?" In spite of this Virajananda accepted Swamiji's counsel and continued to serve at Mayavati.

