

Yahi-Bahi Society of Mrs. Resselyer-Brown, The

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I. Introduction

Stephen Leacock (1869-1944) had a double career as a professor of political science and a humorist. At the time of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to Montreal in 1912) he was head of the political science and economics department at McGill University in that city. His collection of short stories, *Arcadian Adventures with the Idle Rich*, includes a parody of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in the story "The Yahi-Bahi Society of Mrs. Resselyer-Brown." [1]

The figure of Yahi-Bahi is recognizable to anyone familiar with Bahá'í history: the man in exotic costume, speaking through an interpreter, using such terms as Bahee, Boohoo, and Boohooism (the term Baháism was in common use at the time). It is not necessarily recognizable to those not familiar with the Bahá'í Faith. Lynch's critical work on Leacock's humor, which traces the sources of many of his ideas, does not make the connection. [2]

I am presenting a few excerpts from "Yahi-Bahi" with brief commentary in the hope that someone with more time than I will research the historical aspects of this story, including the following questions.

How did Leacock get the image of 'Abdu'l-Bahá as a con man? Was he simply prejudiced against anything non-Christian and non-Western? Or were there hostile rumors about 'Abdu'l-Bahá circulating in Montreal? Ward's narrative of the Master's journey to North America mentions no hostility there, but quotes nothing from the Montreal press. [3] Did the image simply blend in with occultists who made money by exploiting people's gullibility --the type of people Harry Houdini loved to expose?

What was the source of Yahi-Bahi's curious melange of Hindu, Buddhist, ancient Egyptian, and Islamic imagery? Was Leacock lampooning Theosophy -- or perhaps the syncretistic ideas that were common among Bahá'ís at the time?

Could Mrs. Resselyer-Brown have been derived from the famous hyphenated Bahá'í, Keith Ransom-Kehler?

How did the Bahá'í community react to the story? Leacock had become Canada's best-loved popular writer and undoubtedly had Bahá'ís among his fans. I have been told that the Canadian NSA once persuaded a radio station to remove the story from a program of readings from Leacock's works. Ralph Wagner

II. Excerpts

The first part of the story jokingly describes Mrs. Resselyer-Brown's

boring, hard-drinking husband and her intellectual daughter. To pass the time, Mrs. Resselyer-Brown goes to such activities as the Dante Society, the Bridge Club, and the Grand Opera. During a lull in the social life of Plutoria Avenue, she and her friends learn of the presence in the city of Mr. Yahi-Bahi, "the celebrated Oriental mystic," and has a conversation with his assistant, Ram Spudd. "What I like best about eastern people," went on Mrs. Resselyer-Brown, is their wonderful delicacy of feeling. After I had explained about my invitation to Mr. Yahi-Bahi to come and speak to us on Boohooism, and was going away, I took a dollar bill out of my purse and laid it on the table. You should have seen the way Mr. Ram Spudd took it. He made the deepest salaam and said, 'Isis guard you, beautiful lady.' Such perfect courtesy, and yet with the air of scorning the money. As I passed out I couldn't help slipping another dollar into his hand, and he took it as if utterly unaware of it, and muttered, 'Osiris keep you, O flower of women!' And as I got into the motor I gave him another dollar and he said, 'Osiris and Osiris both prolong your existence, O lily of the rice-field'; and after he had said it he stood beside the door of the motor and waited without moving till I left. He had such a strange, rapt look, as if he were still expecting something!"

"How exquisite!" murmured Miss Snagg.[4]

But for the time being the interest of Dulphemia, as of everybody else that was anybody at all, centred round Mr. Yahi-Bahi and the new cult of Boohooism.

After the visit of Mrs. Resselyer-Brown a great number of ladies, also in motors, drove down to the house of Mr. Yahi-Bahi. And all of them, whether they saw Mr. Yahi-Bahi himself or his Bengalee assistant, Mr. Ram Spudd, came back delighted.

"Such exquisite tact!" said one. "Such delicacy! As I was about to go I laid a five-dollar gold piece on the edge of the little table. Mr. Spudd scarcely seemed to see it. He murmured, 'Osiris help you!' and pointed to the ceiling. I raised my eyes instinctively and when I lowered them the money had disappeared. I think he must have caused it to vanish."

"Oh, I'm sure he did," said the listener.

Others came back with wonderful stories of Mr. Yahi-Bahi's occult powers, especially his marvelous gift of reading the future.[5] One example of Yahi-Bahi's prophecies: "Many things are yet to happen before others begin." [6]

So Yahi-Bahi and Ram Spudd are invited to the founding meeting of the Yahi-Bahi Oriental Society. The foibles of various of its members are described before the hero's arrival. Mr. Yahi-Bahi was tall.

His drooping oriental costume made him taller still. He had a long brown face and liquid brown eyes of such depth that when he turned them full upon the ladies before him a shiver of interest and apprehension followed

in the track of his glance.

"My dear," said Miss Snagg afterwards, "he seemed simply to see right through us."

This was correct. He did.

Mr. Ram Spudd presented a contrast to his superior. He was short and round, with a dimpled mahogany face and eyes that twinkled in it like little puddles of molasses. His head was bound in a turban and his body was swathed in so many bands and sashes that he looked almost circular. The clothes of both Mr. Yahi-Bahi and Ram Spudd were covered with the mystic signs of Buddha and the seven serpents of Vishnu.[7]

Mr. Snoop, a member of the club, gives the opening speech and later serves as interpreter for Yahi-Bahi. All of this Mr. Snoop explained in the opening speech which he proceeded to make. And after this he went on to disclose, amid deep interest, the general nature of the cult of Boohooism. He said that they could best understand it if he told them that its central doctrine was that of Bahee. Indeed, the first aim of all followers of the cult was to attain to Bahee. Anybody who could spend a certain number of hours each day, say sixteen, in silent meditation on Boohooism would find his mind gradually reaching a condition of Bahee. The chief aim of Boohoo itself was sacrifice: a true follower of the cult must be willing to sacrifice his friends, or his relatives, and even strangers, in order to reach Bahee. In this way one was able fully to realise oneself and enter into the Higher Indifference. Beyond this, further meditation and fasting -- by which was meant living solely on fish, fruit, wine, and meat -- one presently attained to complete Swaraj or Control of Self, and might in time pass into the absolute Nirvana, or the Negation of Emptiness, the supreme goal of Boohooism.

As a first step to all this, Mr. Snoop explained, each neophyte or candidate for holiness must, after searching his own heart, send ten dollars to Mr. Yahi-Bahi. Gold, it appeared was recognised in the cult of Boohooism as typifying the three chief virtues, whereas silver or paper money did not; even national bank-notes were only regarded as d6 or, a half-way palliation; and outside currencies such as Canadian or Mexican bills were looked upon as entirely boo, or contemptible. The Oriental view of money, said Mr. Snoop, was far superior to our own, but it also might be attained by deep thought, and, as beginning, by sending ten dollars to Mr. Yahi-Bahi.

After this Mr. Snoop, in conclusion, read a very beautiful Hindu poem, translating it as he went along. It began, "O cow, standing beside the Ganges, and apparently without visible occupation," and was voted exquisite by all who heard it. The absence of rhyme and the entire removal of ideas marked it as far beyond anything reached as yet by Occidental culture.[8]

After this the society was declared constituted, Mr. Yahi-Bahi made four

salaams, one to each point of the compass, and the meeting dispersed.

And that evening, over fifty dinner tables, everybody discussed the nature of Bahee, and tried in vain to explain it to men too stupid to understand.[9] The next major event is the "reastralisation of Buddha," which draws the members to the home of Mrs. Resselyer-Brown at midnight. "Has it ever been done before?" they asked of Mr. Snoop.

"Only a few times," he said; "once, I believe, by Jam-bum, the famous Yogi of the Carnatic; once, perhaps twice, by Boohoo, the founder of the sect. But it is looked upon as extremely rare. Mr. Yahi tells me that the great danger is that, if the slightest part of the formula is incorrectly observed, the person attempting the astralisation is swallowed up into nothingness. However, he declares himself willing to try." [10] The guests are instructed to bring gold ornaments, which are deposited on a table, and furs, which are piled in the corridor. "What is he doing?" whispered the assembled guests as they saw Mr. Yahi-Bahi pass across the darkened room and stand in front of the sideboard.

"Hush!" said Mr. Snoop; "he's laying the propitiatory offering for Buddha."

"It's an Indian rite," whispered Mrs. Resselyer-Brown. Mr. Yahi-Bahi could be seen dimly moving to and fro in front of the sideboard. There was a faint clinking of glass.

"He has to set out a glass of Burmese brandy, powdered over with nutmeg and aromatics," whispered Mrs. Resselyer-Brown. I had the greatest hunt to get it all for him. He said that nothing but Burmese brandy would do, because in the Hindu religion the god can only be invoked with Burmese brandy, or, failing that, Hennessy's with three stars, which is not entirely displeasing to Buddha."

"The aromatics," whispered Mr. Snoop, are supposed to waft a perfume or incense to reach the nostrils of the god. The glass of propitiatory wine and the aromatic spices are mentioned in the Vishnu-Buddayat."

Mr. Yahi-Bahi, his preparations completed, was now seen to stand in front of the sideboard bowing deeply four times in an Oriental salaam. The light of the single taper had by this time burned so dim that his movements were vague and uncertain. His body cast great flickering shadows on the half-seen wall. From his throat there issued a low wail in which the word wah! wah! could be distinguished.

The excitement was intense.

"What does 'wah' mean?" whispered Mr. Spillikins?

"Hush!" said Mr. Snoop; "it means, 'O Buddha, wherever thou art in thy lofty Nirvana, descend yet one in astral form before our eyes!'"

Mr. Yahi-Bahi rose. He was seen to place one finger on his lips and then, silently moving across the room, he disappeared behind the screen. Of what Mr. Ram Spudd was doing during this period there is no record. It was presumed that he was still praying.

The stillness was now absolute.

"We must wait in perfect silence," whispered Mr. Snoop from the extreme tips of his lips.

Everybody sat in strained intensity, silent, looking towards the vague outline of the sideboard.

The minutes passed. No one moved. All were spellbound in expectancy.

Still the minutes passed. The taper had flickered down till the great room was almost in darkness.

Could it be that by some neglect in the preparations, the substitution perhaps of the wrong brandy, the astralisation could not be effected?

But no.

Quite suddenly, it seemed, everybody in the darkened room was aware of a presence. That was the word as afterwards repeated in a hundred confidential discussions. A presence. One couldn't call it a body. It wasn't. It was a figure, an astral form, a presence.

"Buddha!" they gasped as they looked at it.

Just how the figure entered the room, the spectators could never afterwards agree. Some thought it appeared through the wall, deliberately astralising itself as it passed through the bricks. Others seemed to have seen it pass in at the further door of the room, as if it had astralised itself at the foot of the stairs in the back of the hall outside.

Be that as it may, there it stood before them, the astralised shape of the Indian deity, so that to every lip there rose the half-articulated word, "Buddha"; or at least to every lip except that of Mrs. Resselier-Brown. From her there came no sound.

The figure as afterwards described was attired in a long shirák, such as is worn by the Grand Lama of Tibet, and resembling, if the comparison were not profane, a modern dressing-gown. The legs, if one might so call them, of the apparition were enwrapped in loose punjahamas, a word which is said to be the origin of the modern pyjamas; while the feet, if they were feet, were encased in loose slippers.

Buddha moved slowly across the room. Arrived at the sideboard the astral figure paused, and even in the uncertain light Buddha was seen to raise and drink the propitiatory offering. That much was perfectly clear. Whether Buddha spoke or not is doubtful. Certain of the spectators thought that he

said, "Must a fagotnit," which is Hindustanee for "Blessings on this house." To Mrs. Resselyer-Brown's distracted mind it seemed as if Buddha said, "I must have forgotten it." But this wild fancy she never breathed to a soul.

Silently Buddha recrossed the room, slowly wiping one arm across his mouth after the Hindu gesture of farewell.

For perhaps a full minute after the disappearance of Buddha not a soul moved. Then quite suddenly Mrs. Resselyer-Brown, unable to stand the tension any longer, pressed an electric switch and the whole room was flooded with light.

There sat the affrighted guests staring at one another's pale faces.

But, to the amazement and horror of all, the little table in the centre stood empty -- not a single gem, not a fraction of the gold that had lain upon it was left. All had disappeared.

The truth seemed the burst upon everyone at once. There was no doubt of what had happened.

The gold and the jewels had been deastralised. Under the occult power of the vision they had been demonetised, engulfed into the astral plane along with the vanishing Buddha.

Filled with the sense of horror still to come, somebody pulled aside the little screen. They fully expected to find the lifeless bodies of Mr. Yahi-Bahi and the faithful Ram Spudd. What they saw before them was more dreadful still. The outer Oriental garments of the two devotees lay strewn upon the floor. The long sash of Yahi-Bahi and the thick turban of Ram Spudd were side by side near them; almost sickening in its repulsive realism was the thick black head of hair of the junior devotee, apparently torn from his scalp as if by lightning and bearing a horrible resemblance to the cast-off wig of an actor.

The truth was too plain.

"They are engulfed!" cried a dozen voices at once. It was realised in a flash that Yahi-Bahi and Ram Spudd had paid the penalty of their daring with their lives. Through some fatal neglect, against which they had fairly warned the participants of the seance, the two Orientals had been carried bodily in the astral plane.

"How dreadful!" murmured Mr. Snoop. We must have made some awful error."

"Are they deastralised?" murmured Mrs. Buncomhearst.

"Not a doubt of it," said Mr. Snoop.

And then another voice in the group was heard to say, "We must hush it up. We can't have it known!"

On which a chorus of voices joined in, everybody urging that it must be hushed up.

Couldn't you try to reastralise them?" said somebody to Mr. Snoop.

"No, no," said Mr. Snoop, still shaking. "Better not try to. We must hush it up if we can."

And the general assent to this sentiment shewed that after all the principles of Bahee, or Indifference to Others, had taken a real root in the society.[11] The police are waiting, however, and arrest Yahi-Bahi and Ram Spudd. The police explain that this is the fourth city in which they have pulled this scam since their release from prison six months earlier.

The Yahi-Bahi Society dissolves, but the members remain convinced that they have seen a reastralisation of Buddha. Nor was anyone more emphatic on this point than Mrs. Resselyer-Brown herself.

"For after all," she said, "if it was not Buddha, who was it?"

And the question was never answered.[12] Notes:

[1] Stephen Leacock, "The Yahi-Bahi Society of Mrs. Resselyer-Brown," in *Arcadian Adventures with the Idle Rich* (New York: John Lane, 1914), 115-55.

[2] Gerald Lynch, *Stephen Leacock: Humor and Humanity* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill University Press, 1988), 140-45.

[3] Allan L. Ward, *239 Days: 'Abdu'l Baha's Journey in America* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1979), 131-37.

[4] Leacock, "The Yahi-Bahi Society," 128-29.

[5] *Ibid.*, 131-32.

[6] *Ibid.*, 132.

[7] *Ibid.*, 136-37.

[8] *Ibid.*, 137-39.

[9] *Ibid.*, 139.

[10] *Ibid.*, 143.

[11] *Ibid.*, 146-52.

[12] *Ibid.*, 155.

Fiction

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