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A Short Account of the Life & Work
of Mary Adela Blagg-

put together by her nieces

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daughters of her sister Susan Masefield.

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MARY ADELA BLAGG.

Mary Adela Blagg was born at Abbots' Haye, Cheadle, Staffs. on the 17th. May 1858. She was the eldest surviving child of a family of twelve, her father being Charles John Blagg, a prosperous country solicitor in the family firm founded by his grandfather, when he moved from Mansfield about 1780. Her mother was Frances Caroline Foottit, also of a Nottinghamshire family, of Newark, whose father, the Rev. James Foottit had formerly been Headmaster of Southwell Grammar School. From him, no doubt, Mary inherited her great love of learning and teaching.

Abbots' Haye was a pretty little house, about a mile from the town, and with a pleasant garden surrounded by farmland. By the time eight children had been born, the Blaggs decided they must move. In 1870, they bought a large Georgian house, Greenhill, much more convenient for business, church, and shops, and this was the family home till 1923. Here there was room for the twelve children, as well as their governess, six indoor servants, and frequent visitors. It was indeed a Victorian household, such as Miss Yonge loved to portray.

The front of the house was made for gracious living, with much oak panelling both down and upstairs, with the exception of the first floor drawingroom, which was a light and elegant room, with large windows looking over the garden, and Adams decoration. Through a door by this room, as through one in the hall below, one entered the back wing of the house, a totally different world of plain, bare utility. Here was the children's schoolroom, and a number of bedrooms, above the kitchens and servants' hall. A room next to the schoolroom became Mary's bedroom, and here, in later years, she could retire to pursue her own interests. It looked over the rose garden, and she had a cage for her tame doves outside the landing-window.

Outside also there was plenty of room for the family's pursuits. There were large lawns and shrubberies, with a rose garden and hard tennis court, as well as kitchen garden and glass houses. In the stables the children could visit the horses for riding and carriage work, and there were also sufficient cows, pigs, and hens to supply the household needs.

In these lovely surroundings the family grew up, under the varied influences of their parents, and a succession

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influences of their parents and a succession of governesses. Their mother had decided artistic gifts. She made charming sketches both in water colour and pen and ink, and painted beautiful miniatures of many of the family. She was a keen gardener and scientific botanist, and drew studies of the wild flowers she collected. She was a great reader, and in her younger days wrote much verse. Her collection of old china was a great interest to her, as was fine needlework. It is a wonder that she found time for any of these hobbies in addition to supervising her household and bringing up twelve children. Mr. Blagg, also, was a man of many parts. Besides being a keen businessman, he was devoted to country pursuits. In his younger days he hunted whenever possible, and, till almost the end of his life, he found exercise in cricket, tennis, and shooting. He was also very fond of social life, and constant visits were exchanged with the country houses round. Two interests were shared by both parents, the one a love of country life, the other an unquestioning devotion to the Church of England, with regular attendance at Church, and family prayers.

When the move to Greenhill was made, the elder children had left the nursery. The boys were sent to preparatory schools, and the girls were at first taught by a governess. Their mother must have chosen these with perspicacity, for they were women of character who became lifelong friends of the girls. One was Miss Beale, who later married Mr. Saunders, the Principal of Downing College, another was Octavia Boyd, a shrewd and wellread Scotswoman.

In 1875, Mary and her next sister were sent to a "finishing school" in Kensington, at Mayfield Lodge, Addison road, kept by Miss Horley and her sister Julia. She was there for only a year, but during that time she studied two subjects which were to be of great use to her in later life. In October that year her sister wrote home, "Mary is very busy learning algebra just now, she seems to get on very well". The other acquisition was a good working knowledge of German. This led first to a favourite occupation, that of translating German poetry into English verse, carefully keeping to the original metre. In later years this knowledge was invaluable in her correspondence with German astronomers, particularly when she and Professor Müller were working together on the correlation of Lunar Nomenclature.

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3. While at school Mary made one very special friend, Margaret Cameron, who came from the Shetland Islands. She stayed with the Blaggs at Cheadle, and later Mary returned the visit, being accompanied north by her brother, John. This journey was a great event in her life, with experience of new ways of life, and travel by train to Aberdeen and then by sea. The deeply religious nature of both girls was a bond of sympathy, and Miss Cameron later joined the Anglican Community of St. Margaret, in time becoming its Reverend Mother.

On leaving school Mary found plenty of occupation at home. She was of course her mother's chief assistant, and a companion to her father when required. The youngest of the family was born in 1877, and Mary was a deputy-mother to the babies in the nursery, and chief nurse whenever there was illness in the family. Above all, she now took over the charge of the schoolroom, preparing two more sisters for school, and taking on the little brothers and sisters as they emerged from the nursery. These were eventually joined by her eldest nephew, and the schoolroom days came to an end only in 1893, when her youngest sister went to school. She loved children, making lessons a delight to those who were responsive and intelligent, and was rightly proud of one little sister, whose powers of imagination and literary expression greatly exceeded her own. She had nursed this sister through a long and dangerous illness, and although there were sixteen years between them, they were devoted to one another all their lives. An example of her meticulous and painstaking work still exists in a wall chart, which she made for the schoolroom, showing all the sovereigns of England, and tracing the descent of Queen Victoria from King Egbert. This was obviously the same brain which could cope with all the intricacies of her astronomical work in later life.

Mary was of a very retiring disposition, and though never neglecting her duties, kept in the background when she could. The children learned to ride, and she often went out with her father on her cob, Daphne, but she never hunted, and gave up riding as soon as younger members of the family could be his companions. As the family grew up her parents gave parties and dances for their young people, but she avoided them if possible. An old servant remembered that "Miss Blagg would go to bed with a book and an orange". The book would probably be one of C.M. Yonge's delightful family stories, which she collected, as they were published, from the fifties to

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the nineties. Through these books she absorbed at second hand the teaching of the Rev. John Keble and the Oxford Movement, and used to read his "Christian Year" on every Sunday and Saint's Day. All her life she was utterly devoted to the Holy Catholic Faith as taught by the Prayer Book of the Church of England.

In 1890 a new Rector came to Cheadle, the Rev. E. S. Carlos, who instituted Morning Prayer in Church daily at 8.30 a.m. This Service Mary hardly ever failed to attend as long as she was able. The following year he started a branch of the Girls' Friendly Society, and she became its first Branch Secretary. Under her guidance it grew steadily in numbers and influence for the next twenty years, and became one of her great interests. She paid an annual visit to London to attend the yearly Conference and Festival Service. One of her younger sisters helped her with the Candidates of the Branch. Mary was already a Sunday School teacher, for this was a tradition in the family for two generations, and it was a duty after her own heart.

Another social work which she undertook in later years, and very much appealed to her, was the care of "deprived" children, boarded out with approved families by various Boards of Guardians. She undertook the regular visiting of those sent to Cheadle, and took the greatest interest in each one, really knowing and caring for them all. She continued to correspond with them after they went away to work, and they looked on her as a kind of godmother, some keeping in touch with her as long as she lived.

In 1879 occurred the first break in the family in tragic circumstances. The second son, then a schoolboy at Repton, was drowned while bathing at Scarborough. His father and elder brother were also in great danger, and this tragedy naturally had a great impact, particularly on the parents, and the brother who was barely revived. The latter was now at Oxford, having won a scholarship to New College. Two years later, however, a happy event was the first wedding, that of the second daughter. Her husband being a member of the family firm of solicitors, they settled at her parents' first home, Abbots' Hays, where Mary could enjoy her small nephews and nieces. The two next sisters both married before long, but both lived within visiting distance, and many family meetings were arranged.

In 1895 came another terrible blow in the death of the brilliant

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eldest son from meningitis. He was next in age to Mary, sharing in many of her tastes and interests, though latterly he had been living away from home, and practising as a barrister. This shock was too much for their mother, and her health began to fail. She died the following year at only 63 years of age.

The loss of these two beloved people must have been almost overwhelming for Mary, but she could not give herself time to grieve, and must take up her new position as head of the large household, and her father's hostess and companion. She was now aged 38, and with three sisters married and her next two brothers dead, there was a gap of ten years between herself and the rest of the home "family". The next sister, a rather delicate girl, with none of Mary's intellectual tastes, was, however, her very willing assistant in entertaining and household cares. Then there were two young men, the younger of whom married before long, and then went to South Africa, serving in the Yeomanry throughout the Boer War. Mary's beloved young sister, Dorothea, came next, with bonds of sympathy between them in their devotion to their religion, and in sharing their intellectual pursuits. Of the two youngest, one had always had very poor health and was often away from home, while the other, now just "grown-up", developed into a "modern young woman" and later went to work in London.

Such was the family of which Mary now took charge, and for whom she had to organise dinner, garden, and tennis-parties, as well as entertaining her father's shooting guests, and many other visitors staying in the house. All this was quite foreign to her nature, but as ever, she rose to her duty. She found time as well for other interests to occupy her ever-active brain, and became a brilliant chess player when an evening game with her father was a regular institution. She took to writing charming fairy tales for children, and four of these were published locally. Later on, she much enjoyed editing a manuscript magazine, "Literary Links", which was sent round to the various contributors, with her editorial comments, which were always kind and helpful. This magazine continued in her hands until 1944, and she evidently felt it in some sort a continuation of her teaching days.

In 1904, occurred an event which led to the great work of her later

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life. About the turn of the century a series of annual University Extension Lectures were first organised in the new Town Hall of Cheadle. On the 12th. January 1904, Mr. J. A. Hardcastle, of the Oxford University Delegacy, gave the first of six fortnightly lectures on "The Birth of the Moon and the Origin of the Earth". The students wrote papers on questions set by the lecturer, and Mary Blagg's showed such extraordinary ability that Mr. Hardcastle called her "a mathematician lost to the world". He asked her to help him in some important observations and calculations, and soon afterwards introduced her to Professor Turner of the Oxford Observatory.

There were now only one brother and two sisters living at home, besides her father, and, at 46, she was able to give considerable time to what almost amounted to a new career. She continued to work for Professor Turner, but in 1907 Mr. S. A. Saunder co-opted her to help the International Committee working on the "uniformity in nomenclature of lunar formations". This remained her major work until its completion in 1935, but meantime she had other and original projects in her mind. Her researches led to her writing papers for the Royal Astronomical Society, which ~~were~~ published in their transactions in 1913, 1924, 1928, 1929 and March and December 1930. The most important of these was her "Suggested Substitute for Bode's Law", which appeared in the same year that her "Collated List of Names of Formations on the Moon" was completed and published. At the end of this year, 1913, she received a letter from Professor Turner asking her if she would allow him to put her name forward for election as a Fellow of the R. A. S. Up till then women had not been considered eligible, and this proposal would be as a feeler to find out the reaction of the present Fellows. Professor Turner evidently knew her well enough to be sure that she would not be affronted if the proposal was turned down. Probably feeling that she would, ^{be} helping others by so doing, she agreed to her name being put forward, but it was not till a year later that she heard that her election had been formally proposed. On the 14th. January 1916 a formal notice of her election, together with that of two other women, was sent to her by the Secretary of the R. A. S., and she became the first woman to be proposed as a Fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society.

Meanwhile many changes had happened in her home life. In 1910, she lost

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her next unmarried sister, after nursing her through a long illness. A few peaceful years followed, and then the war broke out. As soon as the need was known, Mary and her father offered to take in a refugee family from Belgium, and great was her delight when they came. A cultivated young couple, with Madame, her mother, and two small boys, with their Flemish nursemaid, they were immediately taken to the hearts of their two hostesses. Mary was in her element with the children, and they became devoted to "Miss Mary", as also to her brother and his horse and dogs.

Her father had had wonderful health all his life, and was still active, and the head of the family firm, with his youngest son and eldest nephew in the office with him. But his horses had been commandeered by the War Office, and he could not get about, and the difficulties of the time gradually told on him. The following June Mary lost the father, at the age of 82, whom she had looked after devotedly for twenty years.

The two sisters, Mary and Dorothea, and the one brother were now left at Greenhill. They could no longer keep their Belgian guests, who emigrated to Canada, and they shut up a great part of the rambling house, turning the drawingroom into a Red Cross workroom. Her sister spent much of the time in the Potteries doing social and Church work in one of the very poor parishes, and Mary had plenty of time to give to ~~her~~ astronomical work, which must have served to distract her from the further sorrows that the war brought. Three of her nephews were killed on the Western Front, and in 1916, her youngest brother died. The remaining brother tried to keep the family firm together, but he was used to an active, outdoor life, and his health broke down under the strain. Once more Mary had to turn nurse, and, with the help of two faithful servants, formally parlourmaid and groom, she cared for him devotedly until his death in 1922.

Now Greenhill was finally given up and sold. The following year she left the house that had been her home for 53 years, through so many changes, and she and her last unmarried sister settled in a small modern house at the other end of the town. This was conveniently near the home of the sister next in age to herself, Mrs. Masefield, and she lived here for the remaining twenty years of her life.

She was now ~~had~~ at work again on astronomical projects, including the maps of the moon. In 1928, accompanied by her sister, she attended a

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meeting of the International Committee, for whom she had been working, which was held at Leiden. Here she submitted the lists of names of lunar formations that she had prepared, and the Committee then appointed a Sub-Committee, consisting of Miss Blagg and Dr. Müller, of Germany "to prepare a definitive list of names for submission at the next meeting". The preparation of this list gave her tremendous interest in her correspondence with Dr. Müller and others, and it was completed by 1932. In that year it was approved at a meeting of the International Astronomical Union at Cambridge (Mass.). This approved list was finally published in 1935, under the title of "A Catalogue of Named Lunar Formations", and was accompanied by an Atlas of the Moon as a separate volume. A preface was written by Sir Frank Dyson, Chairman of the Commission, in which he stated that he "supported the suggestion that the names of Blagg and Müller should be given to two lunar formations, and overruled the objections made by Miss Blagg and Dr. Müller". The fact is that he could only overcome her objections, from her innate modesty, by personal persuasion. He travelled to Cheadle for the purpose of seeing her himself, on the 15th. February, 1935, and Mary could not hold out against such a mark of his esteem. So ~~Mount~~ Blagg can now be seen on the moon.
a Crater named

She was delighted, in 1929, to receive a really good telescope as a presentation from the Cheadle Branch of the Girls' Friendly Society in gratitude for all she had done for the members. Professor Turner expressed his pleasure at hearing of this gift, saying that her most important work probably had been in collating the different names for objects on the lunar surface, and in completing the map of the moon, begun by the late W.H. Wesley. "As Chairman of the committee, I state confidently that Miss Blagg has been by far the most important member of "this Committee of the International Astronomical Union". She has also done valuable work in discussing observations of variable stars.... and found a remarkable relation between the distances of the planets and their satellites, which may turn out to throw light on the origin of planets and satellites. All this work has been done with painstaking accuracy".

She was able to enjoy the use of the telescope for a few years before she became an invalid with heart trouble. She was bedridden for the last

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eight years of her life, but her brain was always active, and she kept it exercised on chess problems and acrostics, and enjoyed seeing visitors whenever she was fit. She had the joy of having her beloved sister, Dorothea, as her companion till the end. For some time she had one of her own G.F.S. members to attend on her, and it was a delight to this girl to care for her two "ladies". Miss Blagg died peacefully in April 1944, just before her 86th birthday, and was buried in the Churchyard of St. Giles' Parish Church, which she had attended so regularly as long as she was able.

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