# CHAPTER XII

LETTER TO A SON

G andhi’s second sentence ended on December 13th, 1908,

but, since civil resistance against the immigration ban con¬

tinued, he received a third three-month sentence and was

back in Volksrust prison on February 25th, 1909. Five days later,

carrying a few possessions on his head and walking in heavy rain,

he was escorted to a train for Pretoria where he sat out his term

in the newly built local penitentiary. On arriving, the warden

said, ‘Are you the son of Gandhi?’ He apparently looked so

youthful that the official mistook him for his son Harilal who was

serving a six-month period in Volksrust. Gandhi was forty.

In jail, Gandhi received a gift of two religious books from

General Smuts; he also read Stevenson’s Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde,

Carlyle’s French Revolution , and many Indian religious volumes.

‘My books saved me,’ he wrote in his reminiscences.

From prison, Gandhi sent a letter to Manilal who has preserved

it to this day. It was written by hand, with purple indelible ink

pencil, on both sides of five long cream-coloured foolscap sheets

of prison stationery and is in English. Normally, Gandhi would

have addressed Manilal in Gujarati, but printed instructions in

the left-hand margin of each page say, in English, Dutch and

Kaffir, that correspondence must be conducted in English,

Dutch, German, French, or Kaffir. The letter is dated March

25th, 1909; Gandhi’s number was 777; the censor initialled it two

days later.

Manilal was seventeen and, since nobody else worried, he

worried about his profession and future. He had had practically

no formal education. Now he was his father’s agent on the farm

and in Indian Opinion , and probably a very harassed young man.

My dear son [Gandhi began], I have a right to write one

letter per month and receive also one letter per month. It became

a question with me as to whom I should write to. I thought of

Mr. Ritch [the editor of Indian Opinion ], Mr. Polak and you. I

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chose you because you have been nearest my thoughts in all my

reading.

As for myself I must not, I am not allowed to say much. I am

quite at peace & none need worry about me.

I hope mother is now quite well. I know several letters from

you have been received but they have not been given to me. The

Deputy Governor however was good enough to tell me that she

was getting on well. Does she wall: about freely? I hope she and

all of you would continue to take sago & milk in the morning.

And how is Chanchi? [The nickname of Harilal’s wife, Gulab.]

Tell her I think of her every day. I hope she has got rid of all

the sores she had and that she & Rami [Harilal’s little daughter]

are quite well.

I hope Ramdas and Devadas are keeping well, learning their

lessons and not causing any worry. Has Ramdas got rid of his

cough?

I hope you all treated Willie well while he was with you. Any

balance of the food stuff left by Mr. Cordes I should wish you

have returned to him.

And now about yourself. How are you? Although I think that

you are well able to bear all the burden I have placed on your

shoulders and that you are doing it quite cheerfully, I have often

felt that you required greater personal guidance than I have been

able to give you. I know too that you have sometimes felt that

your education was being neglected. Now I have read a great

deal in the prison. I have been reading Emerson, Ruskin and

Mazzini. I have also been reading the Upanishads. All confirm

the view that education does not mean a knowledge of letters

but it means character building. It means a knowledge of duty.

Our own [Gujarati] word literally means training. If this is the

true view, and it is to my mind the only true view, you are

receiving the best education-training possible. What can be

better than that you should have the opportunity of nursing

mother & cheerfully bearing her ill temper, or than looking after

Chanchi & anticipating her wants and behaving to her so as

not to make her feel the absence of Harilal or again than being

guardian to Ramdas and Devadas? If you succeed in doing this

well, you have received more than half your education.

I was much struck by one passage in Nathuramji’s introduction

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to the Upanishads . He says that the Brahmacharya stage — i.e.,

the first stage, is like the last, i.e., the sanyasin [monk] stage. This

is true. Amusement only continues during the age of innocence,

i.e., up to twelve years only. As soon as a boy reaches the age of

discretion, he is taught to realize his responsibilities. Every boy

from such age onward should practise continence in thought &

deed, truth likewise and the not-taking of any life. This to him

must not be an irksome learning and practice but it should be

natural to him. It should be his enjoyment. I can recall to my

mind several such boys in Rajkot. Let me tell you that when I

was younger than you are my keenest enjoyment was to nurse my

father. Of amusement after I was twelve, I had little or none. If

you practise the three virtues, if they become part of your life,

so far as I am concerned you will have completed your education

— your training. Armed with them, believe me you will earn your

bread in any part of the world & you will have paved the way to

acquire a true knowledge of the soul, yourself and God. This does

not mean that you shd not receive instruction in letters. That

you shd & you are doing. But it is a thing over which you need

not fret yourself. You have plenty of time for it and after all you

are to receive such instruction in order that your training may be

of use to others.

Remember please that henceforth our lot is poverty. The more

I think of it the more I feel that it is more blessed to be poor than

to be rich. The uses of poverty are far sweeter than those of riches.

There follow one hundred and five lines of instructions, mes¬

sages, and greetings to persons at Phoenix Farm, then,

And now again yourself. Do give ample work to gardening,

actual digging, hoeing, etc. We have to live upon it in future.

And you shd be the expert gardener of the family. Keep your

tools in their respective places and absolutely clean. In your

lessons you shd give a great deal of attention to mathematics and

Sanskrit. The latter is absolutely necessary for you. Both these

studies are difficult in after life. You will not neglect your music.

You shd make a selection of all good passages, hymns and verses,

whether in English, Gujarati or Hindi and write them out in

your best hand in a book. The collection at the end of a year

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will be most valuable. All these things you can do easily if you

are methodical. Never get agitated and think you have too much

to do and then worry over what to do first. This you will find out

in practice if you are patient and take care of your minutes. I

hope you are keeping an accurate account as it should be kept of

every penny spent for the household.

The next paragraph is for a student at the farm. Continuing,

Gandhi writes:

Please tell Maganlalbhai that I would advise him to read Emer¬

son’s essays. They can be had for nine pence in Durham. There

is a cheap reprint out. These essays are worth studying. He shd

read them, mark the important passages and then finally copy

them out in a notebook. The essays to my mind contain the

teaching of Indian wisdom in a western guru. It is interesting to

see our own sometimes thus differently fashioned. He should also

try to read Tolstoy’s Kingdom of God is Within You. It is a most

logical book. The English of the translation is very simple. What

is more Tolstoy practises what he preaches.

Gandhi told Manilal to make copies of this letter and send one

to Polak, another to Kallenbach, and a third to a swami who had

left for India. He was to wait for Polak’s and Kallenbach’s replies

and incorporate them into his own which, however, ‘should not

contain any information about the struggle’. The censor did not

allow that.

In the last breath Gandhi asked for ‘a copy of algebra. Any

edition will do’.

And now I close with love to all and kisses to Ramdas, Devadas

& Rami.

from

Father.

Solicitude in the writer may be irritation to the recipient.

Gandhi’s warm and tender concern to mould Manilal into his

own image probably sounded like a sermon interlarded with

countless obnoxious chores. Gandhi’s selfless injunctions were

for his son’s good, but the prospect of chastity, poverty and hard

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work under a strict taskmaster who wanted the tools stacked

neatly in the storeroom offered few thrills to the young man on

the threshold of life.

Married at thirteen, Gandhi never had a boyhood and therefore

never understood his own boys. The letter to Manilal showed

this. As a blueprint of the future it had the virtue of truth, but

the truth was forbidding. The fact that his father had not enjoyed

life from the age of twelve would have saddened a sensitive son or,

indeed, frightened him. Such a father is difficult to live with.

Such a father writes such a letter. The letter said, in effect, ‘Your

life will remain tied to mine; you cannot go your own way. 5

Gandhi wanted a helper; Manilal wanted freedom. He thought

of becoming a lawyer or doctor. His father was training him to

be a minor saint.

Eyes fixed on a distant, glorious goal, Gandhi, at this stage,

sometimes failed to see those who were nearest. He expected them

to meet the exacting standards he cheerfully imposed on himself.

But he was not cruel; very likely, it never occurred to him that

his letter conveyed anything but deep love and paternal care.

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