# CHAPTER XVIII

ON THE WAY HOME

a n D h i sent apologies to persons and groups in almost every

free country of the world; he could not visit them because

VJ he had work to do in India, On the way home, he stopped

for a day in Paris. Sitting on a table, he addressed a large meeting

in a cinema theatre, and then took the train for Switzerland,

where he stayed five days with Romain Rolland at Villeneuve,

at the eastern end of Lake Leman.

Rolland, whose Jean Christophe is a literary masterpiece of the

twentieth century, had come under the influence of Count Leo

Tolstoy, author of the finest novel of the nineteenth. Rolland

made a shrewd comparison between Tolstoy and Gandhi. ‘With

Gandhi/ he said in 1924, 'everything is nature — modest, simple,

pure — while all his struggles are hallowed by religious serenity,

whereas with Tolstoy everything is proud revolt against pride,

hatred against hatred, passion against passion. Everything in

Tolstoy is violence, even his doctrine of non-violence.’

Tolstoy was storm-tossed, Gandhi calm and equable. Gandhi

could not have fled from his wife, or from anything. The market

place in which he sat was crisscrossed by hundreds of millions of

persons with their wares and carts and cares and thoughts, but

he sat still and there was silence in him and around him. Gandhi

would have suffocated in an ivory tower or on an Olympian

height.

Tagore was different. ‘But where am I in a great crowd,

squeezed in at all sides?’ Romain Rolland quotes Tagore as say¬

ing. ‘And who can understand the noise I hear? If I hear a song,

my sitar can catch the melody, and I can join the chorus, for I

am a singer. But in the mad clamour of the crowd, my voice is

lost, and I become dizzy.’

Rolland and Gandhi had never met before 1931. Rolland knew

Gandhi from long conversations with Tagore and G. F. Andrews

who had lived for fifteen years with Tagore. He had also read

Gandhi. Like Tagore, Rolland was a singer. He was the author

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of books on Beethoven, Handel, Goethe and Michelangelo. He

wrote a book on Ramakrishna, the Hindu mystic.

Rolland regarded Gandhi as a saint. In fact, he wrote in his

1924 biography of the Mahatma, ‘Gandhi is too much of a saint;

he is too pure, too free from the animal passions that lie dormant

in man.’ Rolland and Tagore were afraid of the evil in human

beings. Tagore feared that when Gandhi lit bonfires of foreign

cloth he would kindle uncontrollable emotions in men; Rolland

agreed; Andrews agreed.

This estimate omits Gandhi’s faith in the basic goodness and

corrigibility of man which is the essence of Gandhi. In South

Africa, Gandhi believed that the ordinary, illiterate, indentured

labourer in a mine or on a farm could rise to the purity and re¬

straint required of a Satyagrahi. He trusted the peasants of back¬

ward Bardoli to resist provocation and violence. His trust exalted

them. Gandhi did not regard nobility as a monopoly of the great

man or the artist or the elite. Gandhi’s uniqueness lay in working

with common clay and finding the soul-spark in it.

Before Gandhi’s.arrival on December 5th, Rolland had received

hundreds of letters connected with the Mahatma’s visit: an Italian

wanted to know from Gandhi what numbers would win in the

next national lottery; a group of Swiss musicians offered to

serenade Gandhi under his window every night; the Syndicate of

the Milkmen of Leman volunteered to supply ‘the King of India’

with dairy products during his stay. Journalists sent question¬

naires and camped around Rolland’s villa; photographers laid

siege to the house; the police reported that the hotels had filled

with tourists who hoped to see the Indian visitor.

The two men, Gandhi sixty-two, Rolland sixty-five, met like

old friends and treated one another with the tenderness of mutual

respect. Gandhi arrived on a cold rainy evening with Miss Slade,

Mahadev Desai, Pyarelal Nayyar and Devadas. The next day

was Monday, Gandhi’s day of silence, and Rolland delivered a

ninety-minute talk on the tragic moral and social state of Europe

since 1900. Gandhi listened and pencilled some questions.

On Tuesday, they discussed Gandhi’s trip to Rome. He wanted

to see Mussolini and other Italian leaders as well as the Pope.

Rolland warned him that the Fascist regime would exploit his

presence for its sinister purposes. Gandhi said he would break

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through the cordon they might throw around him. Rolland

suggested that he put certain conditions. Gandhi replied that it

was against his convictions to make such arrangements in advance.

Rolland persisted. Gandhi said, ‘Then tell me, what is your final

opinion on my plan to stop in Rome ? 5 Rolland advised him to

stay with some independent persons. Gandhi promised and kept

the promise.

Rolland asked Gandhi to comment on his remarks about

Europe. Gandhi said it showed him how vast had been Rolland’s

suffering. Speaking English which Rolland’s sister translated into

French, Gandhi said he had learned very little from history. ‘My

method is empiric , 5 he explained. ‘All my conclusions are based

on personal experience . 5 This, he admitted, could be dangerous

and misleading, but he had to have faith in his own views. All

his trust was in non-violence. It could save Europe. In England,

friends tried to show him the weakness of his non-violent method;

‘but even though the whole world doubt it, I will continue to

believe in it 5 .

The next two days Gandhi spent in Lausanne where he

addressed a public meeting and in Geneva where he spoke m

Victory Hall. At each he was heckled for hours by atheists and

others. He answered them in perfect calm, ‘not a muscle of his

face twitching 5 , Rolland wrote.

On December ioth, they resumed their conversation. Rolland

recalled Gandhi’s statement at Geneva: ‘Truth is God . 5 He gave

Gandhi a brief sketch of his life, his childhood, how cramped he

felt in the small French town, how he became a writer and

struggled with the problem of the truth in art. ‘If it is correct 5 ,

Rolland said, ‘that “Truth is God 55 , it appears to me that it lacks

one important attribute of God: joy. For — and on this I insist —

I recognize no God without joy . 5

Gandhi replied that he did not distinguish between art and

truth. ‘I am against the formula, “Art for art’s sake”. For me,

all art must be based on the truth. I reject beautiful things if,

instead of expressing truth, they express untruth. I accept the

formula “Art brings joy and is good” but on the condition I men¬

tioned. To achieve truth in art I do not expect exact reproductions

of external things. Only living things bring living joy to the soul

and must elevate the soul . 5

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Rolland did not differ but he stressed the pain of searching for

truth and for God. He took a book from his shelf and read from

Goethe. Rolland later confessed that he thought Gandhi’s God

found pleasure in man’s sorrow; Rolland was trying to modify

this Gandhian view.

They talked about the perils of another war. Tf one nation

possessed the heroism to submit without answering violence with

violence,’ Gandhi declared, ‘it would be the most effective lesson.

But for this an absolute faith is necessary.’

Rolland: ‘Nothing should be done by halves, no matter whether

it is bad or good.’ Rolland’s sister, Madeleine, and Miss Konda-

chev, a Russian secretary, were taking notes. Neither recorded

Gandhi’s reaction to this assertion.

The last day, December nth, Rolland requested Gandhi to

deal with some questions submitted by Pierre Monatte, the editor

of a Paris magazine called The Proletarian Revolution . In response

to one query, Gandhi asserted that if labour was perfectly

organized it could dictate conditions to the employers; ‘labour is

the only power in the world’. But Rolland interposed that the

capitalists might divide the workers; there might be scabs; ‘then

the conscious minority of labour must set up a dictatorship of the

proletariat and force the mass of labour to unite in its own

interest’.

‘I am absolutely opposed to that,’ Gandhi affirmed. Rolland

dropped the subject and quickly introduced several others: non¬

violence in relation to criminals, etc. etc., and ‘What do you call

God? Is it a spiritual personality or a force.which rules over the

world?’

‘God,’ Gandhi replied, ‘is not a person . . . God is an eternal

principle. That is why I say that Truth is God . . . Even atheists

do not doubt the necessity of truth.’

The last evening Gandhi asked Rolland to play some Beethoven.

Rolland played the Andante from the Fifth Symphony and, as an

encore of his own accord, Gluck’s ‘Elysian Fields’.

The theme of the Fifth Symphony is considered to be man’s

struggle with fate, man’s harmony with fate, the brotherhood of

man. The second movement, the Andante, is melodious and

suffused with tender lyrical emotions, quiet nobility and optimism.

Rolland chose it because it came closest to his concept of Gandhi’s

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personality. It is gentle and loving. In the Gluck piece one almost

hears the angels singing to the strains of the flute. It is celestial

music, full of purity and clarity. The Gita might be set to it.

Rolland was frail and had just recovered from bronchitis, but

he insisted on taking Gandhi and his party to the railway station.

There they embraced, as they did when they first met; Gandhi

pressed his cheek against Rolland’s shoulder and threw his right

arm around Rolland; Rolland touched his cheek to Gandhi’s

head. ‘It was the kiss of St. Dominic and St. Francis,’ Rolland

said.

The Italian government wished Gandhi to be its guest and

made the corresponding preparations. Gandhi politely refused

and stayed with General Moris, a friend of Rolland’s, who had

lived in India. The day of his arrival, the Mahatma went to see

the Duce. An official communique said the interview lasted

twenty minutes. Gandhi’s companions recall that it lasted only

ten minutes. Gandhi could establish no psychological contact

with Mussolini. ‘He has the eyes of a cat,’ Gandhi said later;

‘they moved about in every direction as if in constant rotation.

The visitor would totally succumb before the awe of his gaze like

a rat running directly into the mouth of a cat out of mere fright.

‘I was not to be dazed like that,’ Gandhi testified, ‘but I noticed

that he had so arranged things about him that a visitor would

easily get stricken with terror. The walls of the passage through

which one has to pass to reach him are all overstudded with

various types of swords and other weapons.\* Mussolini’s office,

too, Gandhi noted, was hung with weapons, but, he added, ‘he

keeps no arms on his person’.

The Pope did not see Gandhi. Several members of Gandhi’s

entourage thought the Holy Father might have been acting in

deference to II Duce’s wishes, but they did not know. Some sug¬

gested that the interview failed to materialize not only on account

of Mussolini’s relations with the Vatican but also because of

Anglo-Italian relations; Gandhi, after all, was an anti-British

rebel.

Gandhi was taken to the Rome-Naples rugby match and to a

parade of the young Balilla Musketeers where he was received

with a salvo of cannon. He was more interested in the Vatican

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Library, and spent two happy hours in St. Peter’s. In the Sistine

Chapel he stood before Christ on the Cross and wept. ‘One can¬

not help being moved to tears,’ he said to Mahadev Pesai. If he

could have lingered ‘two or three months’ in the museums and

observed the statues and paintings every day, Gandhi wrote to

the ashram, he might have an opinion that was worth while.

Even then, ‘I am hardly qualified as an art critic.’

Romain Rolland, however, had directed his attention to art.

‘I do not think that European art is superior to Indian art,’

Gandhi boasted. ‘Both these arts have developed on different

lines. Indian art is based entirely on the imagination,’ he wrote

to a friend; he was probably recalling the Indian statues with

many arms and heads. ‘European art is an imitation of nature.

It is therefore easier to understand but turns our attention to the

earth, whereas Indian art, when understood, tends to direct our

thoughts to Heaven.’

Then he checked himself. ‘This is only for a person like you,’

he cautioned. ‘I attach no importance to these views. It may be

my unconscious partiality for India or perhaps my ignorance that

makes me say this.’

To Gandhi, art had to be spiritual. ‘True beauty’, he said in

his autobiography, ‘consists in purity of heart.’

‘Jesus [he wrote in Young India ] was to my mind a supreme artist,

because he saw and expressed Truth . . . But I know that many

call themselves artists, and are recognized as such, and yet in

their work there is absolutely no trace of the soul’s upward surge

and unrest . . . True art is thus an expression of the soul . . . All

true art must help the soul to realize its inner self. In my own

case, I find that I can do entirely without external forms in my

soul’s realization. I can claim, therefore, that there is truly suffi¬

cient art in my life, though you might not see what you call works

of art about me. My room may have blank walls. And I may

even dispense with the roof, so that I may gaze upon the starry

heavens overhead that stretch in an unending expanse of beauty

. . . Is a woman with fair features necessarily beautiful? . . .

Socrates, we are told, was the most truthful man of his time and

yet his features are said to have been the ugliest in Greece. To

my mind he was beautiful because he was struggling after truth

. . . Truth is the first thing to be sought for, and beauty and

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goodness will then be added unto you . . . True art takes note

not merely of form but also of what lies beyond. There is an art

that kills and an art that gives life. True art must be evidence of

the happiness, contentment and purity of its authors.’

Before Gandhi left Rome he sought out Tolstoy’s daughter.

As he sat spinning on the floor of her apartment, Princess Maria,

a daughter of the King of Italy, entered with a lady-in-waiting,

and brought the Mahatma a large basket of figs.

‘Her Majesty the Queen packed them for you,’ said the lady-

in-waiting.

Nobody exploited Gandhi’s presence for pro-Fascist purposes

although the Giornale d'Italia did print an interview with him

which he never gaye by a journalist he had never seen. Altogether,

from Swiss border to the Italian heel, Gandhi spent forty-eight

hours in italy. At Brindisi, he bade farewell to his two Scotland

Yard men, but not to Professor and Mrs. Edmond Privat.

The professor and his wife were friends of Romain Rolland and

accompanied Gandhi from Villeneuve to the Italian frontier. As

they were saying goodbye they remarked that they would like

some day to visit India. Gandhi asked why they didn’t come

along with him. They replied that they could not afford it.

‘You probably think in terms of first and second class,’ Gandhi

said, ‘but we only pay ten pounds each for our passage on deck,

and once there, many Indian friends would open their houses to

you.’

The Privats counted the money in their pockets and purse and

decided to go. At Rome they bought bedding, sent telegrams to

the University of Neuchatel, where the professor taught, that he

would not be back for his lectures, and on December 14th boarded

the S.S. Pilsna at Brindisi with the Gandhi party. Two weeks later

they landed at Bombay.

A mammoth crowd cheered Gandhi’s arrival on the morning

of December 28th. ‘I have come back empty-handed,’ he told

them, ‘but I have not compromised the honour of my country.’

That was his summary of how India had fared at the Round

Table Conference. But things were blacker than he thought.

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