# CHAPTER V

INDIAN INTERLUDE

I n London, Gandhi never got beyond Leviticus and Numbers;

the first books of the Old Testament bored him. Later in life

he enjoyed the Prophets, Psalms and Ecclesiastes. The New

Testament was more interesting, and the Sermon on the Mount

‘went straight to my heart’. He saw similarities between it and the

Gita.

‘But I say unto you, that ye resist not evil; but whosoever shall

smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if

any man take away thy coat let him have thy cloak too.’ These

words of Christ ‘delighted’ Gandhi. Other verses struck a sym¬

pathetic chord in the Mahatma-to-be: ‘Blessed are the meek . . .

Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you and persecute you . . .

whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in

danger of the judgment. . . Agree with thine adversary quickly . . .

whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed

adultery already in his heart . . . Love your enemies, bless them

that curse you . . . forgive men their trespasses . . . Lay not up

for yourselves treasures upon earth ... For where your treasure

is, there will your heart be also. . . .’

It was thanks to a Bible salesman in England that Gandhi read

the Old and New Testaments. At the suggestion of a friend, he

read Thomas Carlyle’s essay on the prophet Mohammed. Having

met Madame H. P. Blavatsky and Mrs. Annie Besant in London,

he studied their books on theosophy. Gandhi’s religious reading

was accidental and desultory. Nevertheless, it apparently met a

need, for he was not a great reader and, apart from law tomes,

had not read much, not even a history of India.

Gandhi refused to join Britain’s new theosophist movement, but

he rejoiced in Mrs. Besant’s renunciation of godlessness. He him¬

self had already traversed ‘the Sahara of atheism’ and emerged

from it thirsty for religion.

In this state he returned to India in the summer of 1891. He

was more worldly but no more articulate. He quickly recognized

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his failures yet stubbornly insisted on having his way. He was

self-critical and self-confident, temperamentally shy and intel¬

lectually sure.

On landing at Bombay, his brother told him that Putlibai, their

mother, was dead. The news had been kept from Mohandas

because the family knew his devotion to her. He was shocked,

but his grief, greater than when his father died, remained under

control.

Gandhi’s son Harilal was four; his brothers had several older

children, boys and girls. The returned barrister led them in

physical exercises and walks, and played and joked with them.

He also had time for quarrels with his wife; once, in fact, he sent

her away from Rajkot to her parents’ home in Porbandar; he

was still jealous. He performed all the duties of a husband

except support his wife and child; he had no money.

Laxmidas Gandhi, a lawyer in Rajkot, had built high hopes

on his younger brother. But Mohandas was a complete failure

as a lawyer in Rajkot as well as in Bombay where he could not

utter a word during a petty case in court.

Laxmidas, who had financed Gandhi’s studies in England, was

even more disappointed at his brother’s failure to carry out a

delicate mission for him. Laxmidas had been the secretary and

adviser of the heir to the throne of Porbandar. He was thus

destined, it seemed, to follow in his father’s and grandfather’s

footsteps and become prime minister of the little state. But he

lost favour with the British Political Agent. Now Mohandas had

casually met the agent in London. Laxmidas therefore wanted

his brother to see the Englishman and adjust matters. Gandhi

did not think it right to presume on a slight acquaintance and

ask an interview for such a purpose. But he yielded to his brother’s

importuning. The agent was cold: Laxmidas could apply through

the proper channels if he thought he had been wronged. Gandhi

persisted. The agent showed him the door; Gandhi stayed to

argue; the agent’s clerk or messenger took hold of Gandhi and

put him out.

The shock of the encounter with the British agent, Gandhi

declares in his autobiography, ‘changed the course of my entire

life’. He had been doing odd legal jobs for the ruling prince. He

and his brother hoped he would finally obtain a position as judge

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or minister in the government which might lead to further ad¬

vancement in the tradition of the family. But his altercation with

the agent upset these plans. Only a sycophant could succeed and

get on. The episode intensified his dislike of the atmosphere

of petty intrigue, palace pomp and snobbery which prevailed in

Porbandar, Rajkot and the other miniature principalities of the

Kathiawar peninsula. It was poison to character. Gandhi yearned

to escape from it.

At this juncture a business firm of Porbandar Moslems offered

to send him to South Africa for a year as their lawyer. He seized

the opportunity to see a new country and get new experiences;

T wanted somehow to leave India.’ So, after less than two un¬

successful years in his native land, its future leader boarded a ship

for Zanzibar, Mozambique and Natal. He left behind him his

wife and two children; on October 28th, 1892, a second son

named Manilal had been born. ‘By way of consolation’,

Gandhi assured Kasturbai that ‘we are bound to meet again in

a year’.

In Bombay, Gandhi had met Raychandbai. ‘No one else,

Gandhi said, ‘has ever made on me the impression that Raychand¬

bai did.’ Raychandbai was a jeweller-poet with a phenomenal

memory. He was rich, a connoisseur of diamonds and pearls, and

a good business man. Gandhi was impressed by his religious

learning, his upright character and his passion for self-realization.

Raychandbai’s deeds, Gandhi felt, were guided by his desire for

truth and godliness. Gandhi trusted him completely. In a crisis,

Gandhi ran to Raychandbai for confession and comfort. From

South Africa, Gandhi sought and obtained Raychandbai’s advice.

Nevertheless, Gandhi did not accept Raychandbai as his guru.

Hindus believe that every man should acknowledge a guru, a

superior person, near or far, living or dead, as one’s teacher,

guide, or mentor. But Raychandbai lacked the perfection that

Gandhi sought in a guru. Gandhi never did find a guru; ‘The

throne has remained vacant,’ he said. For a Hindu, this is tre¬

mendously significant and for Gandhi it is endlessly revealing.

In the presence of prominent men he felt respect, humility and

awe, but, wrapped in these sentiments, he sometimes became

impervious to their thoughts. With all his diffidence he was

spiritually independent. Ideas came to him occasionally through

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books but chiefly through his own acts. He remade himself by

tapping his own inner resources.

Gandhi was a self-remade man and the transformation began

in South Africa. It is not that he turned failure into success.

Using the clay that was there he turned himself into another

person. His was a remarkable case of second birth in one lifetime.

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