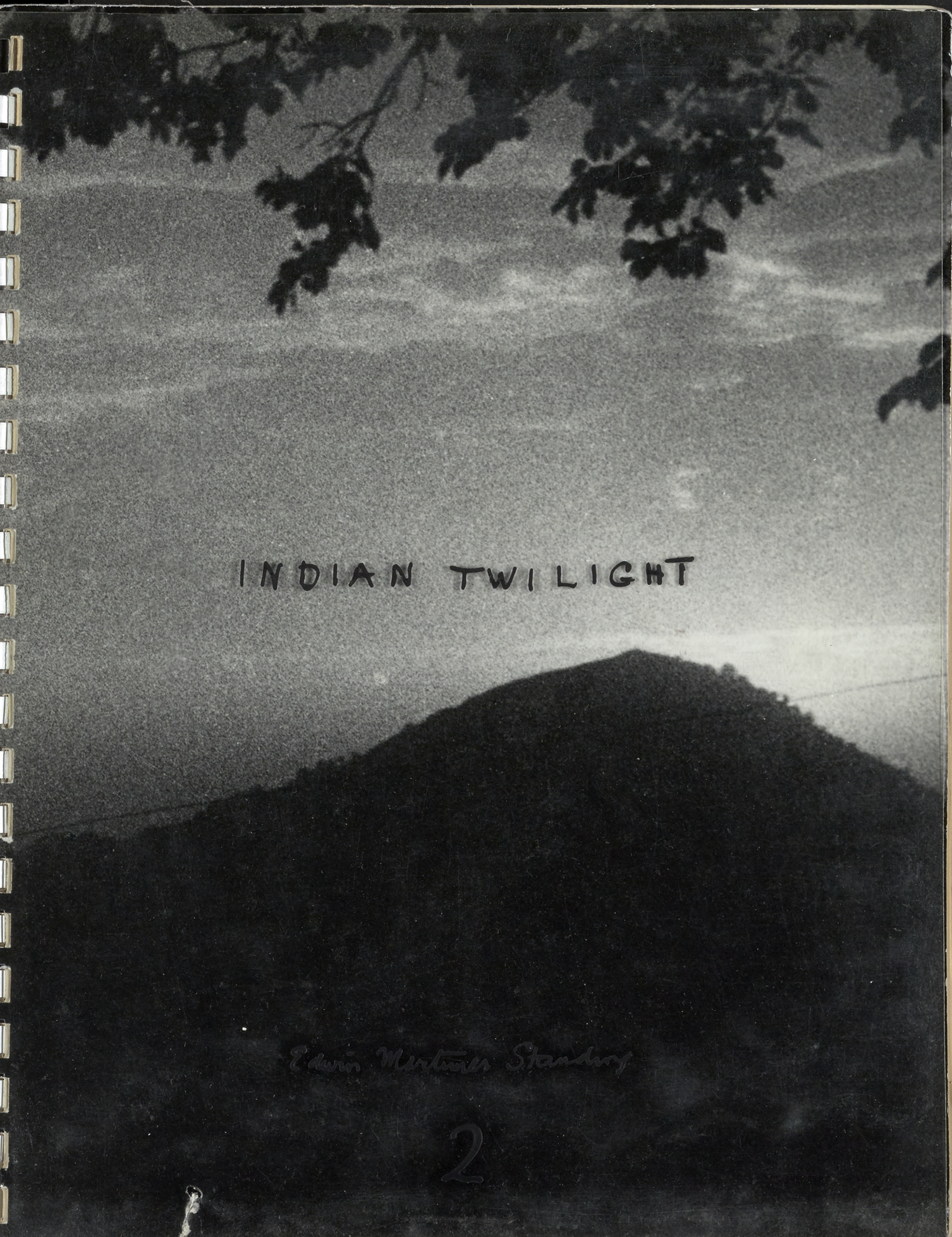
July 2022

Box 08, Folder 02 - "Indian Twilight v.2" (includes photographs) (E.M.S.)

Edwin Mortimer Standing


INDIAN TWILIGHT
Edwin Martinez Standing
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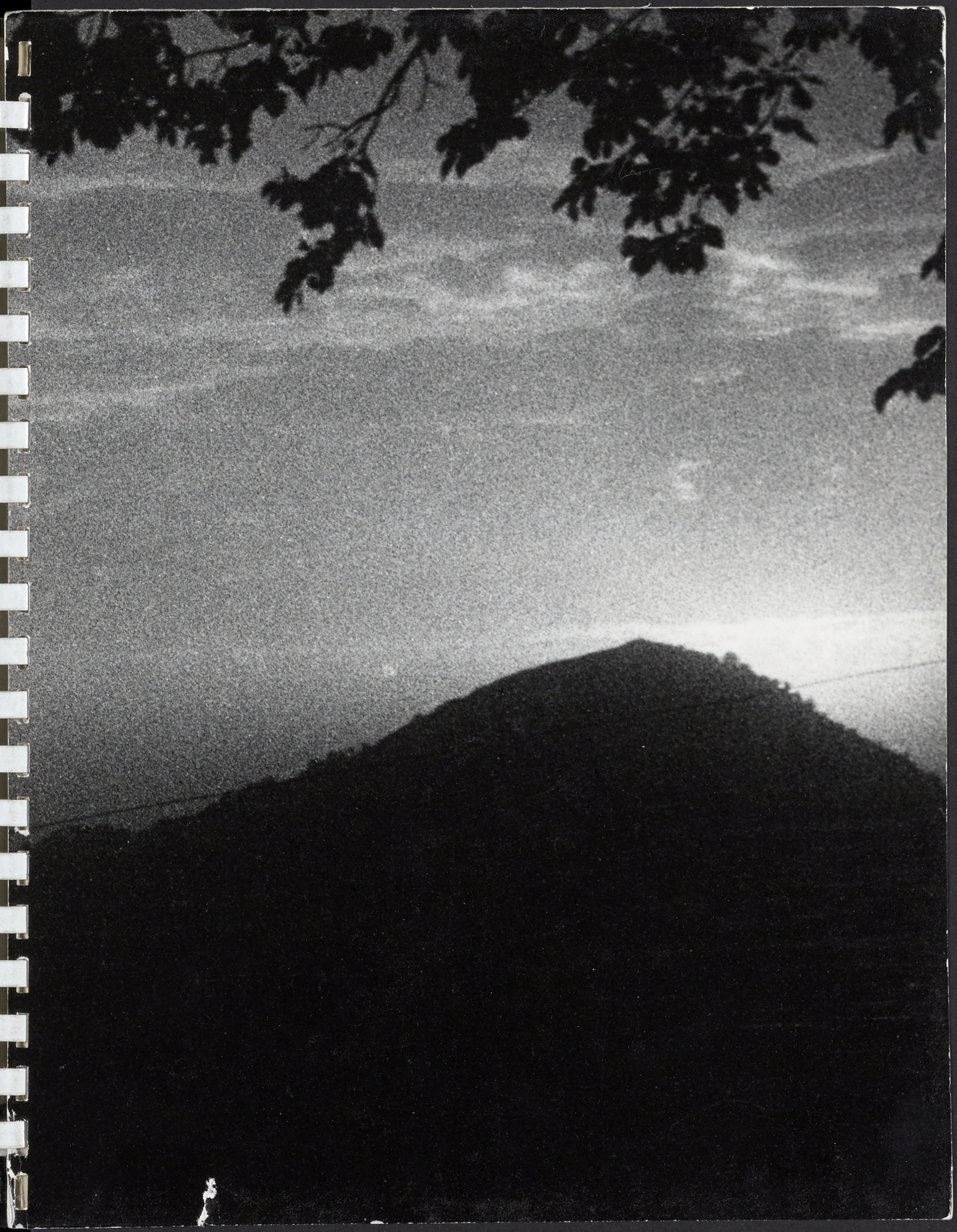

Letter VI

"BOMBAY VIEW"

Bombay View,
Matheran,
Nr. Bombay.

May 15th, 1921.

My dear all,

We have at last migrated to the hills. It was a great business getting here, - completing the Great Trek which had already begun when I wrote my last letter. It rather reminded me of one of those patriarchal migrations one reads about in the Old Testament, - except that we had the assistance of a convenience that Abraham wotted not of, to whit the railway. After the buffaloes, calves, ponies etc. had departed there was a great debate as to whether the six puppies and Tippie their devoted mother should also come; but finally, much to the chagrin of the children, it was decided to leave them behind.

We went by the night mail to Bombay, and all had sleeping berths, and I was given a carriage all to myself. Our supper on the train that night was one of the most curious meals at which I have ever assisted. The whole party (except the other teachers who had their meal to themselves) managed to crowd into one compartment for the supper which the cooks had managed to conjure up, in some mysterious manner, from Heaven knows where, and all piping hot. It was of course Indian food; but I am getting used to that. All the children - including the cousins - sat in rows along the upper berths, looking for all the world like a string of hungry sparrows on the branches of a tree, whilst the grown-ups squatted Buddha-wise below.

Indian meals have a delightful simplicity about them. As a rule they are not served up as a series of separate courses seriatim, one after the other; but you are presented with a circular silver tray about 18 inches in diameter. On this the waiters come round and place little piles of all kinds of food. For liquid items on the menu, such as soup, you are provided with little silver bowls, which are also placed on your tray. There is no need for a menu card to tell you what is coming, as all the items are spread out in front of you - contemporaneously, as you might say - before you begin. Thus you can see the whole situation at a glance, a procedure which has distinct advantages. You do not find,

for instance, some new dish turning up at a later stage of the meal, which you would like to "tuck into" but "space forbids." Another curious convention is that you are supposed not to end up with the sweet dishes. Of course with us, all the dishes are strictly vegetarian on account of this reincarnation business; for we - like Malvolio - "fear to kill a woodcock lest we dispossess the soul of our granddam".[1]

The food, even the most messy, is eaten with one's hand, or rather one's fingers; and, for some reason I have not yet fathomed, it must always be the fingers of the right hand, never the left. After the meal a servant generally stands by with a carafe and pours out a thin stream of water in which you rinse your fingers; and to complete this "lavabo" another hands you a little towel.

I have not yet got accustomed to this eating with my fingers, so as a concession to my squeamish incompetency I am given a spoon and fork. And usually too, when I dine with the family in the Retreat, I am provided with a table and chair, as I cannot manage to sit cross-legged on the floor for any length of time without getting cramp. Our meal in the railway carriage was, in fact, more simple affair than usual - like a picnic. Mr. Sarabhai and his friend and business partner, Mr. Bakubhai, were both in great form - like a couple of schoolboys off for the holidays at the end of the term (they reminded me rather of Tweedle Dum and Tweedle Dee). After supper I stayed up a long time discussing politics with the "youngest grandfather", who I find is also a magistrate; and retired to my own compartment well past midnight.

Train journeys in India are usually such long affairs that one takes one's bedding with one as a matter of course. I slept well, and looked out of the window in the morning just in time to see the "dawn come up like thunder"[2] over a wide stretch of water with mountains behind, and strange craft mirrored in its stillness.

On arriving at Bombay the six masters went off on their own, and the rest of us went in cars to Maldon House, Mr. Sarabhai's residence in Bombay (a modern European building) where we all had baths followed by breakfast. I had intended to do some shopping, but was advised against it as there is a good deal of plague in Bombay at present. After an early lunch I tried to get in a bit of a siesta,

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[1] "As you Like it"- Shakespeare

[2] Kipling's "Mandalay"

as we were to continue the journey later in the day, and it was fearfully hot and sticky (as Bombay generally is). But sleep was out of the question, for the indefatigable Leena created a succession of minor earthquakes caused by rolling her tricycle downstairs.

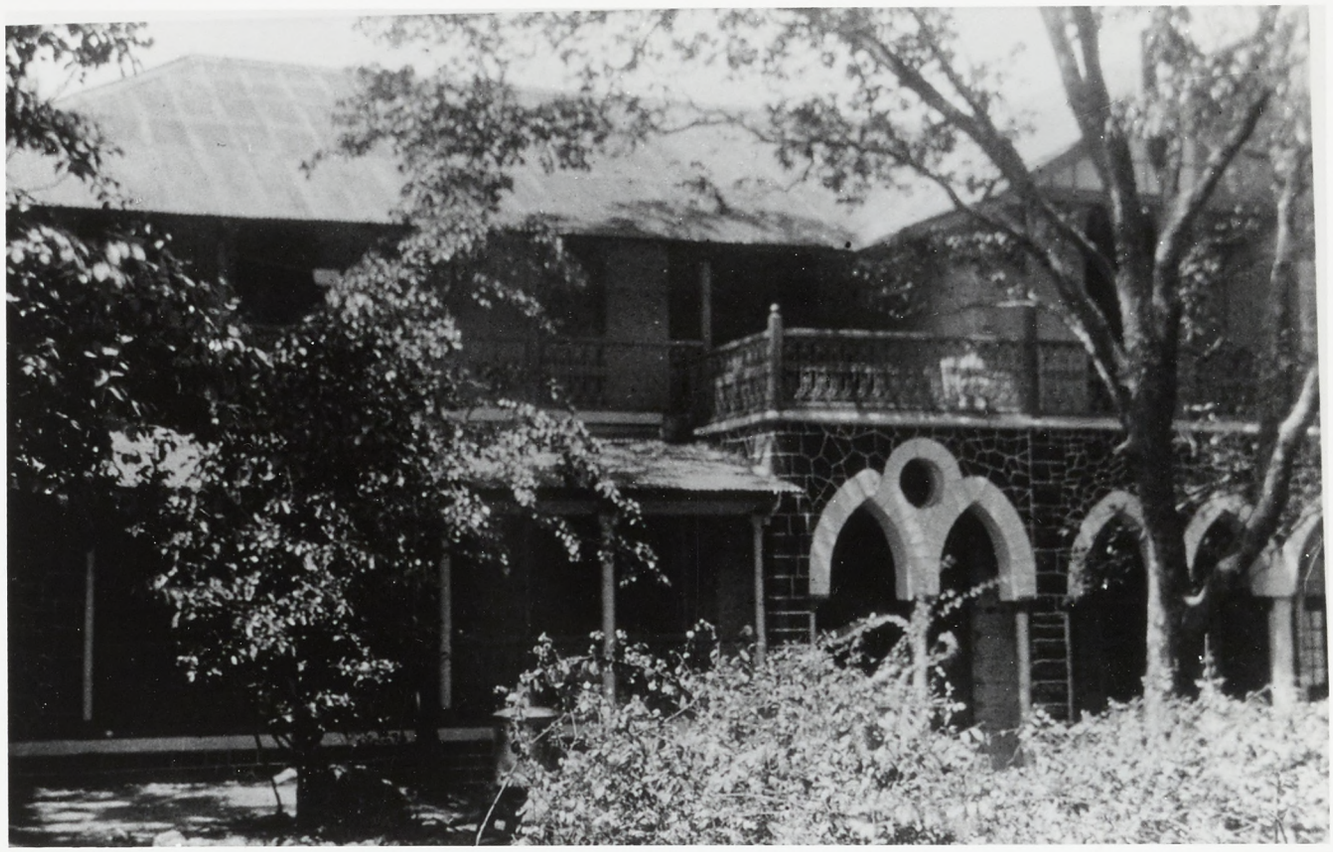
By 3 p.m. we were on the move again, and set off from another station. After a couple of hours run we changed into what seemed like a quaint toy railway with two engines. Almost at once we began to climb in a quite astonishing way, up and up the bare face of the hill. The train turned and twisted on itself to such an extent, that it seemed almost at times to tie itself into knots; whilst the views across the plain we had just left became ever more wonderful the higher we climbed. The journey brought back many "Jungle Book" reminiscences. One place looked exactly like the valley running out into the plain in which Shere Khan was trapped and killed. As we neared the top, the train plunged into the jungle, from which it never emerged even when we reached the station of Matheran at the top.

There we found a whole regiment of horses and ponies and rickshaws waiting outside the station; for no motors or even bicycles are allowed in Matheran. Consequently everyone is bound to use one of these means of conveyance or else foot it - (except monkeys, who swing along from tree to tree in true Bandar Log style).

Matheran is like a submerged town, because it is almost entirely hidden by the trees of the jungle, which covers the whole plateau at the top of the mountain like a green tuft. Dusty red roads go through this wood in all directions, all looking almost exactly the same, and making it as difficult for the new-comer to find his way about, as if he were in a maze.

Matheran consists of a railway station, a few stores, a bazaar open on Sundays - and sixteen square miles of bungalows all concealed from each other by the ever present jungle.

We were all glad when the journey ended with our arrival at Bombay View, another of Mr. Sarabhai's houses, in which we are to stay until the rains come. Faithful old Mulji, my boy, was waiting for me and had a good dinner prepared for which the main dish was roast chicken. Needless to say I did <u>not</u> eat this in company with the family. I felt indeed very carnivorous after my three days exclusively vegetarian diet



House in Hill Station of Matheran - near Bombay.

- and eating meat made me feel like a cannibal! so great is the power of social suggestion. (It reminds me of what old Nietzsche said "You say that conscience is the voice of God in your soul! Foolish man, it is the voice of other men!") Anyway, cannibal or not, I laid into that chicken in spite of the possibility of it being my reincarnated great grandfather.

Mulji, by the way, is not a Hindu, and has no scruples about finishing up whatever is left after my meals. He is a Christian - a Presbyterian. But - mark you - no ordinary Presbyterian, as he has carefully informed me many times. "Master me, Presbyterian, me Scotch Presbyterian", always with tremendous emphasis on the Scotch, as though there were some profound and subtle theological distinction involved.

He is always known as Mulji Boy, though in fact he is married with a wife and four children, whom he left behind in Ahmedabad. The Sarabhais engaged him for me because he came with the reputation for knowing how to cook in European fashion and also was supposed to know how to speak in English. His cooking and his English resemble each other in that they are both strikingly lacking in variety. In fact his English is more remarkable than it would be even if he were a real Scotch Presbyterian from the Outer Hebrides. He speaks with a sublime disregard for Tense and Case. Indeed he seems to live in a sort of Eternal Now! for he never uses any other tense but the present. Another peculiarity of his speech is that the order of the words in a sentence seems to him to be a matter of complete indifference. In spite of these difficulties we manage on the whole to understand one another quite well. The other day he was telling me about his family, and it ran like this:- "My children is calling Eunice, Ruth, Salome, David - all names, Gujarati Bible. The children - oldest is going to High School, Ahmedabad - two more is going to another school. My wife is going to High School too. She is taking baby with her every day - give baby to other woman - my wife is going in class-room. If baby cries much longer - half hour no stopping - other woman is sending for my wife. She leaves school-room - looks after baby - stop crying - come back to the school-room". Great idea don't you think? - mother and daughter setting off for school together in the mornings! but it might be a bit embarrassing if the daughter were put in a higher class than the mother!

Mulji, with all his shortcomings, is a faithful and loyal soul. He is a bit slow in the up-take, and has a

Mulji Boy

Mulji in ceremonial attire!

curious way of cocking his head on one side just like a dog, when he is not quite sure of your meaning. And like a trusty dog, too, he sleeps on a mat outside my bedroom door up here at Matheran. At Ahmedabad he goes home every evening to Eunice, Salome and the rest of them. He always wears trousers like a European (instead of dhotis) while his head is adorned with a funny little red fez cap, but without a tassel. This omission I imagine is intentional, to prevent him from being mistaken for a follwer of the Prophet instead of a disciple of the Great John Knox!

Letter VII

Bombay View,
Matheran.

MATHERAN

May 17th, 1921.

My dear Everyone,

We have now settled down in our new quarters (up here in the hills) to a fairly regular sort of existence, which I suppose will continue for about a month - i.e., until the rains come. Our life is regular, but by no means monotonous.

My daily programme is more or less as follows. At about 6 a.m. Mulji comes into my room to awaken me from slumbers. For this operation he has developed a wonderful technique. In the middle of my dreams - or to be more precise - inserted sideways into my dreams (as you might insert a knife between the shell of an oyster) he somehow or other insinuates his voice. At first it seems to come as from an infinitely distant land, and I am only half conscious of it, the other half being still asleep. "Master", he says very softly; and then "master" a little louder; then a louder still "MASTER!" - and I am finally awake. It all happens gradually and without any sudden jar - almost like coming back from an anaesthetic (but without its unpleasant connexions). I open my eyes and there he is standing respectfully at my bedside. He certainly has developed the art of waking a person up to its most perfect form. (I only wish I had as perfectly mastered the art of getting up!)

My friends! the Theosophists would, I am sure, highly approve of Mulji's technique; for according to them, it would give my astral body, which wanders about at large as I sleep, plenty of time to fly back again from the astral plane, to take up its abode once more within my "denser vehicle" - which, being interpreted, is me, corporeally speaking, as I appear to the world.

Having seen that I am well and truly awake Mulji then tactfully retires for a while to let me adjust myself to the stark fact that another day has dawned in this "vale of tears" with all its waiting duties. In about ten minutes he returns with shaving water, as though to indicate that time for

meditation has ended, and that for action has arrived.

At 7 a.m. he summons me to breakfast - a very simple affair like a German Frühstuck. It is the only meal (except afternoon tea) that the family takes in the European dining-room, and in European style, i.e., sitting on chairs around a table.

At 7.30 a.m. my official duties commence with a wonderful manoeuvre which is dignified with the name of drill. Behold me then as Sergeant-Major in front of my platoon, which consists of the three eldest children (Mrudula, Bharati and Suhrid) together with a variable and motley number of camp followers - young cousins, and the like, who happen to be staying in the house as visitors - who come up to swell the ranks if the spirit happens to move them. This performance appears to have a special fascination for the servants, some of whom, neglecting their duties, stand and watch, as though spellbound, from odd angles of the verandah or garden. I believe they think it is some form of religious rite, one which goes one better than that of the Mahommedans, for the sons of the Prophet, as you know, give themselves up at certain moments of the day to pious gymnastics to the glory of Allah and the good of their souls!

We were all very much amused the other day to find Vikram, the baby, aged 18 months, in a corner all by himself, going through the strangest contortions. On more careful observation we discovered that he was putting himself through a drilling performance, based on ours, but all on his own. He is the quaintest little morsel of humanity you could imagine and manages to get a lot out of life in his own original way. Just at present he spends a large part of his time solemnly trailing round the house, his little feet hidden in the largest shoes he can find. I don't quite know what he thinks he is doing - perhaps he imagines he is sailing in a sort of double canoe. Whenever he chances to meet me, he pulls up and looks up solemnly at me with his great brown eyes. Then we proceed to go through a serious ritual. First he points at his own feet and says "shoes"; and then I point at my feet and say ditto. This edifying conversation goes on with variations for a surprisingly long time, until quite suddenly and without warning he weighs anchor and sails away in his double barque. Of late we have managed to vary the proceeding a little by pointing to other parts of our anatomy and saying "head", "hands", etc. In this way he is extending his English vocabulary.

But to return to our daily programme. At about 7.45 a.m. or as soon as the other masters arrive (they are staying in an Indian hotel in Matheran) school proper begins with a function called Prayers. This somewhat strange ceremony resembles a mixture of a Quaker Meeting and a concert. We all squat in a circle; and after a short silence the Music Master starts twanging on one of his weird instruments; and after a while the others join in singing a sort of hymn. The children don't seem particularly interested, except sometimes in the singing, so I am going to ask Mr. Sarabhai if he has any objection to my telling them some stories at this time, out of the Bible, and also teaching them a few prayers in English.

Three of the upstairs rooms, with their corresponding verandahs, are used as school rooms. Only one of them - mine - is supplied with tables and chairs. We have been very busy the past two or three days making - all together - a large plasticine map of France.

At 10.40 school is over for the morning, and at 11.30 we have lunch, a meal which I usually take by myself (cooked by Mulji). Dinner in the evening, on the other hand, I usually take with the family, putting up with the Indian food (if I don't happen to like it) for the sake of the company. For I confess I am not one of those strong, silent, self-sufficient persons who never get tired of their own company: I do - quickly enough - except when I am working. Did not Aristotle say that in order to live alone one must either be a beast or a god!

After lunch most of the grown-ups including myself retire to their rooms for a siesta. But the children don't rest at all during the day. This I think is a mistake, especially for the younger ones, for they all seem to go to bed very late. In fact there seems to be no fixed time for any of them to go to bed. They simply stay up till sleep over-powers them; and as each one drops off an ayah, or a servant, comes in, picks them up like a parcel and carries them away upstairs. During the day, however, the children's energy seems simply inexhaustible, and especially during the afternoon siesta period, when they seem to pervade the whole house "upstairs and downstairs and in my lady's chamber". And in <u>my</u> chamber, too! In fact I suffered an invasion only about a quarter of an hour ago. Leena, Gautam and one of the cousins came with a petition: "Please, Mr. Standing, may we have some plasticine to play with?" Experience has taught me that it is best to exercise a sort of governmental control over this commodity, because all sorts of disasters follow in the wake of unrestricted

access to supplies. Yesterday Baby (Vikram) somehow or other managed to get a large piece of plasticine firmly embedded in his hair, and it required almost a surgical operation to extricate it.

Afternoon school begins at 3.30 and goes on for an hour and a half, and is largely devoted to such subjects as music, handwork and "Stories". Tea - at 4 p.m. - is a pleasant social occasion at which everyone is present - children, grown-ups, visitors and all. At 5 p.m. the whole family re-assembles in front of the bungalow together with visitors, tutors, ayahs and servants, with rickshaws and ponies, for a collective outing. The children, meanwhile, have all been washed and dressed in their smartest clothes, and the ladies have put on their most becoming saris. The sari, by the way, is a long piece of fine cloth, silk or "chiffonous" material (if there is such a word) which is worn somewhat in the manner of a Roman toga, except that it must always go over the head as well. These diaphanous garments are of various colours, often decorated with highly ornamental borders, so that the effect of a whole group of them together is very pleasing.

We form quite an imposing procession as we set off - numbering at least twenty persons - the rickshaws and ponies bringing up the rear, in case any one feels too tired to walk all the way. Our objective is always one of the "Points", as they are called, places where the jungle comes right up to the edge of the Ghat or plateau on which Matheran is situated, affording the most wonderful views. To reach a "Point" the way always leads through the jungle, along the red dusty roads, and is full of interest. The dappled shadows remind me of the Just-so Story of "How the Leopard Got His Spots"; and the troops of monkeys swinging along the trees, looking down and gesticulating, make one think, of Kaa's Hunting. The views from the "Points" are often quite breath-taking in their majestic splendour. Without warning you suddenly find yourself at the edge of the world - a vast precipice beneath your feet. Some of the "Points" stick out like platforms, having precipices on all sides except one. Down below, thousands of feet away, one can see little villages, clinging like martin's nests to the side of the precipice, where the Bhils or mountain people live (how, I can't imagine!). In the distance one sees more and higher mountains, girt about with curling mists, - which shows that the monsoons will not be very long in breaking. Over the vast abyss, tireless vultures sail and sail with motionless wings, watching with telescope eyes for Death to strike far down in the valley below.

Family group at Matheran: Jaishanker, Vasubhen, Mridula, Saraladevi, Indubhen, Gautam, Bharati, Subhadra, Ranjit, Suhrid, Vikram.

When we arrive at the "Point" the whole party sits down in a large semi-circle to enjoy the view. Sometimes someone is asked to sing. If it is one of the children it is generally Bharati who has a very beautiful and well-trained voice, young as she is. Though I cannot as yet properly appreciate Eastern music, the general effect of it, under these circumstances, is very impressive indeed for it seems to fit in with the calm of the sun-set and the solemn grandeur of the landscape. (I learned, by the way, the other day, that Indians have special kinds of music for different times of the day; and for the different seasons. Thus you would not sing the same song in the morning as you would in the afternoon, and a song to be sung at sun-set would be different from either. The song must always be something which corresponds with the atmosphere - or "Stimmung" as the Germans would say - of the occasion.)

As the sun gets nearer the mountains on the other side of the abyss the party breaks up and we make our way homewards through the lengthening shadows. The darkness, when it does come, comes very suddenly (like Colerige's "With one stride came the dark!").

One day I went for a walk with "the youngest grandfather" who, I have discovered, is a Bombay University graduate and something of a philosopher*. We became absorbed in a deep discussion on Time and Space - he being a Kantian and I a follower of Bergson - and we got so worked up about it that we lost all practical consideration of both "Time and Space". In other words we discovered we had lost our way completely in the maze of jungle roads all looking alike. Darkness had suddenly descended upon us, and we were brought to practical realities with a jerk, for all kinds of unpleasant creatures come out of the jungle during the night, especially panthers. Though, as a boy, I always had a great admiration for Kipling's Bagheera, I found myself disliking the idea of meeting him in a social way. We were both relieved when we met a man coming towards us with a lantern, who turned out to be one of a party of servants sent out to search for us.

Dinner is about 8 p.m., and usually rather a long-drawn-out affair, but a very interesting and pleasant social occasion. People don't seem to dress for dinner in Indian households; if anything they undress, or at least put on a looser and more comfortable attire. For instance when Mr. Sarabhai goes to business in the morning he usually wears European dress, but in the evenings for dinner he generally changes into Indian costume - i.e. dhotis instead of trousers, and wearing his shirt outside instead of

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*My mother's father, later known as Sir Harilal Gosalia; diwan of Barwani and Dhrangadhra States prior to his retirement.

tucked in, and so on. The children generally come down to dinner in their pyjamas, all smelling fresh and fragrant after their baths, like flowers.

Dinner, up here in our Matheran house is a picturesque occasion. Imagine a big room with no furniture in it except a large lamp placed on a stand in the centre of it, and long mats placed on the floor all along three of the sides. As you enter you leave your sandals (or slippers) outside, and then you make your way to your place on one of the long mats and sit down in front of one of the large circular silver trays which are placed - one for each person - in three long rows parallel to the mats. The diners, who squat on the mats thus form a frieze of border decoration along the bottom of the three walls, whilst the waiters come in and out from the fourth side.

It would make a wonderful picture for a painter! such beautiful soft lights and shadows, such brilliant contrasts. The white glow of the lamp shines on the multi-coloured saris of the ladies, the gleaming silver trays, and the bronzed torsos of the waiters (who are naked to the waist) as they glide swiftly and silently in and out with fresh supplies. On three sides of the room are long windows, looking out on to the night, making it appear as if above the heads of the diners were hung three long deep-blue tapestries studded with stars.

It comes with something of a surprise to hear these people, dressed as they are, in such a setting, and eating with their fingers, quietly discussing the latest political exploits of Lloyd George, or the prospects of the settlement of the coal strike, or the policy of the new American President, or the Italian exchange, or the Principles of Self-Government, - and all in the most excellent English. (Not that they usually speak to each other in English, but they do so out of courtesy when I am present, so that I can follow the conversation and join in it. They all speak English so easily and so fluently that it is no great trial to them).

No coffee is served after these Indian meals. Instead a servant goes round with a tray on which there are four little piles of dry spices, - one of cloves, one of cinnamon, one of betel and I forget the name of the fourth. But there are cigarettes, at least for the gentlemen. Not for the ladies, however. Out here in this "uncivilized East" it is not regarded the thing for ladies to smoke in company, or otherwise except may be the hookah. Conversation -

A Meal - Indian Fashion

(The shadowy form on the left is the waiter, who moved during the taking of the photo): Suhrid, Bharati, Leena.

interchanged at times with Indian music - generally goes on till about eleven o'clock.

"And so to bed", as dear old Pepys would say.

Letter VIII

Bombay View,
Matheran.

MATHERAN

May 26th, 1921.

Dear All,

The chief event of the past week - as far as our family circle is concerned - has been The Coming of the Puppies! I think in one of my letters from Ahmedabad I spoke about the faithful Tippie and her offspring. It had been decided that it would have been too much of a good thing to bring all those six puppies in addition to the numberless baggages, ponies, buffaloes and children; so they were left behind.

Last week, however, Mr. Sarabhai had to go to Ahmedabad for a few days on business. In a weak moment he said something about bringing the puppies back with him. So now for the past four or five days we have been living in an atmosphere of expectation. Nearly all my English lessons have taken the form of getting the children to write letters to their father begging him to be sure and bring them back with him. They form a continual source of conversation and speculation - whether they have grown and how much, how they will like the journey, and so on. Leena in particular is in a state of almost feverish longing to be re-united to her beloved Robin.

At last the fateful day arrived; and we all went in a body - some 20 persons great and small - to the railway station to welcome the puppies and Mr. Sarabhai, (to put them in their order of importance!!). I was secretly dreading lest - by accident or design - he had not managed to bring them after all, and dropped several precautionary hints to this effect, to prepare the children in advance against the possibility of such a catastrophe. But they would not entertain such a thought for a moment. "Papa has promised and so papa will bring them;" and not Destiny or Providence or the Three Fates or any such "odd branches of learning"[1] could interfere with one of Papa's promises.

As the funny little mountain train drew into the station the excitement of anticipation reached an almost delirious

[1] "Merchant of Venice" - Shakespeare.

pitch. Papa's carriage overshot the part of the platform where we were standing, and as it passed he was assaulted by a chorus of voices exclaiming "Have you brought the puppies?" It was an anxious moment; but he smiled back and nodded his head in the affirmative.

Followed an amusing procession down the platform and out of the station. The six puppies were seized and borne along like trophies of victory by as many jubilant children. As you may imagine this scene made quite an impression on the bystanders; and even lordly English officers, who are so high and mighty (in their own estimation), that they pretend not to be affected by anything "native", could not resist the charm of the picture and smiled admiringly in spite of themselves!

Progress home from the station was a slow business, as each of the six puppies wanted to go off in a separate direction. So finally they were all captured and put in a rickshaw with Leena, who was half buried by them. This did not worry her in the least. In fact she looked in a perfect ecstasy of contentment as she strove to keep the wriggling creatures from falling out. It was "fulfilment" at last, after all those days of waiting and hoping, and her expression made me think of those lines from Othello, "My soul hath it content so absolute that not another joy like this in unknown Fate!"

At lunch Mr. Sarabhai entertained us with an account of the horrors of his all-night journey from Ahmedabad to Bombay in the company of these six restless, omnivorous, thirsty, exploring, whimpering "centres of perpetual motion". It was almost too awful to bear thinking about. How they all set up a chorus in the middle of the night to the discomfort of his fellow passengers; how he was obliged to take each one of them out of the carriage separately for a drink - (and other duties!); how on arriving at Bombay they had spread themselves all over the crowded railway station in every direction; and how several of them had narrowly escaped being massacred by a savage brute of a dog on the platform. These, he said, were but a few of the trials which had beset them on their journey, and tested the strength of his paternal affection!

If before we had been living in an atmosphere of expectation, now we were having reality itself - and with a vengeance! The six young scoundrels seemed to be here, there and every part of the house at once - an omnipresent, yapping, scampering, struggling, devastating tide of barrel-like

Leena with some of her beloved puppies.

little bodies on stumpy legs with enormous paws. They are possessed with one common inspiration - to explore the universe and do in it as much mischief as they can in the shortest possible time.

The first morning they devoted their energies to demolishing a row of plants in pots which adorned the stone steps that lead down from the verandah to the garden. They dug out even the roots of the plants, and spread everywhere a deposit of black soil. This was only by way of getting into training.

After that they made a raid all over the house collecting sandals and shoes. Sandals are particularly handy things from a puppy point of view, as they are not so heavy as shoes, and one can easily slip off with them into a corner of the garden unobserved.

Poor Gautam, the baby, leads a troubled and dangerous life these days. Yesterday I saw a whole regiment of puppies on the look out for diversion - or better still a group of bandits looking for loot - coming swaggering into Gautam's room. With one mind they all converged swiftly upon him and began biting his little bare feet. "Ayah! ayah!" he called in terror, whereupon his Guardian Angel, never far away, swooped down to his rescue and drove off the marauders, to seek new adventures elsewhere.

In the middle of the first night after their arrival I was awakened by the most awful screams and howls. I thought it must be at least a panther going off with one of the children into the jungle. But it was only the puppies who had determined (like Sir Toby Belch and Co.)[1] "to raise the welkin with a song that would draw three souls out of one weaver!" But there was no Malvolio to stop the caterwauling - which continued at intervals all through the night!

There was a great discussion at breakfast the next day. It was decided something should be done about it or we would all be heading for a nervous breakdown for lack of sleep. Mrs. Sarabhai's theory was that they encouraged each other in these nocturnal howlings by all sleeping together. So the carpenter was busy all day yesterday making a separate little house for each puppy! The result was simply too killing - a row of little kennels each with a separate front door, for

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1"Twelfth Night".

"the six young scoundrels set out to explore and upset their universe, reducing it to its primeval chaos!"

"with one mind they all converged swiftly upon him"

all the world like a row of government cottages "under the new act."

Last evening each puppy was solemnly put to rest in its own house (we had put labels over each door - Robin, Charlie Chaplin, etc.). But it soon became evident that, if the night before they had set up that dreadful noise because they were all together, this night they were determined to make a still more dreadful hullaballo because they were separate! Their attitude to each other reminds one of what the Greek philosopher said with regard to women - viz. "You cannot live happily with them, but you can't live at all without them!"

I have spent so much time on the blessed puppies that I haven't left much space for any other news. We all got rather a bad scare the other day when Leena had a toss from her pony. She had to be carried home in a rickshaw and the doctor was sent for. Happily no bones were broken, and she was all right again in a few days. About a week before that Suhrid was out riding with Bharati, Mrudula and Salim Khan, the riding master, when his pony got completely out of control, and ran away with him. The plucky little fellow managed to keep his seat until Salim Khan caught up with him, and pulled in his pony. But it might easily have ended in a catastrophe. Mr. Sarabhai was so thankful to the "Powers that Be" that he donated 500 rupees the next day to an orphanage - which I thought was a very human and very handsome gesture.

Mr. Sarabhai is a most interesting man to talk with; versatile and well informed, and quite an original thinker, too, in his way. He seems also to be a bit what people call "psychic". He was telling me the other day of a strange dream he had - a kind of warning which came true. It was about one of the engines in one of his mills and some danger that was just to happen to it. On making enquiries next day he was just in time to discover a plan to sabotage it. Another time when he was travelling from Edinburgh to Manchester he was suddenly aware that one of his relations had developed typhoid; on getting to his destination he found a cable waiting for him to that effect. (Actually it was one of the Gazelles).

He was brought up a Jain, which is a strict sect of Hinduism, but even as a boy he grew sceptical with regard to its doctrines. In fact he used to ask so many, and such awkward questions, that the Jain priests thought he must be possessed of an evil spirit. So they wrote some mantras, or prayers, constituting some form of exorcism on a piece of

paper. This they laid on his extended tongue, and set fire to it to drive away the devil! But his scepticism only grew worse.

He still believes, however, in the doctrine of reincarnation. In fact everyone I meet here believes in it: they simply take it for granted like the air we breathe. Mr. Sarabhai is a great reader, and is well acquainted with such writers as Tolstoy, Emerson, Dickens, etc. He is in fact a man of culture as well as a business man, and is looked up to as one of the leading citizens of Ahmedabad.

This being so, one can easily imagine how furious he was the other day at something which happened when we were all out on one of our family walks. A young whipper-snapper of an English officer, presumably (I hope) just come out, came riding down the road towards us. It happened, as he came round the corner, that he landed up just in front of Suhrid, son and heir to the Sarabhai millions. The young - I was going to say pup of an officer, instead of turning his horse aside as any gentleman would have done for any child - called out "Challo Chokero" ("get out of my way you brat"), and flicked his whip towards Suhrid as he went by. He must have realised that this was a party of well-to-do and well-educated Indians. Suhrid himself was very neatly dressed in grey shorts and blue blazer, but "with that triple-ringed ignorance which classes nine-tenths of the world as 'niggers'",[1] he simply treated us all as dirt. I couldn't help thinking that if that was typical of the British Raj I don't wonder the Indians were eager to get rid of it, at any price.

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[1] Kipling

Letter IX

Bombay View,
Matheran.

MOTABEN AND GANDHIJI

My dear Everybody,

We are still up in the hill station: but our time here will soon come to an end. It will end when the Monsoon "breaks" and the rainy season begins. "Will the Monsoon break early or late?" - that is the question everyone is asking - so much depends on it.

As far as I am concerned the later it comes the better, for I love being up here; and feel in much better health, all round, than when we were down stewing in the plains.

One feels extraordinarily near to Nature here for the jungle comes right up to us on all sides. It is like being surrounded by a sort of free zoo. The monkeys are particularly amusing. They come right up to the house, especially on the kitchen side, scouring round to see what they can pick up in the way of a change from their usual diet! Sometimes we put out bread for them, or mangoes; and at times they come right up to us and almost take things out of our hands.

The other day I witnessed an amusing little comedy. One of the puppies, off on an exploring expedition, was investigating a large tin trough affair - used for keeping water in. It just happened that a big black bird - like a crow - was sitting on the edge of the trough having a drink. The puppy looked at the crow and the crow looked at the puppy in solemn silence. Each was taking stock of the other with a mingled expression of fear and contempt. Neither wished to take any unnecessary risks. After a while the puppy plucked up courage, took the initiative and began offensive tactics. Thereupon the crow thought it prudent to retreat. But it was by no means a rout; rather it was dignified manoeuvre with short jerks, half hop and half flight, in the direction of the jungle. "Robin" getting bolder followed up his advantage with excited yaps of triumph. But suddenly and quite unexpectedly he found himself the victim of a brilliant strategic move. The crow (whether deliberately or not I can't say) had retreated straight in the direction of a large grizzled old

Robin, getting bolder, followed up his
advantage with exciting taps of trumpet

monkey, who was helping himself to tit-bits out of the dust-bin. Before he realised what was happening poor Robin found himself running almost into the arms of the veteran scrounger. He gave one frightened yelp, turned and ran for his life, whilst the old monkey - after one scornful glance - went on with his scrap-hunting.

This old fellow looked somehow extraordinarily human; he was so absorbed in his task that he allowed me to come up quite near him. He kept plunging his long hairy arm right down into the dust-bin, dragging it out and then carefully examining the contents of his hand to see if he had fished up anything worth eating. He reminded me, in a grotesque way, of someone at a church bazaar diving into a bran-tub! If I came up very near he would slouch off into the road, glaring at me over his shoulder and muttering all sorts of gutteral invectives! Then he would climb a tree and watch me carefully till I went away - at which he would descend and return to his scavenging. The little baby monkeys are the quaintest of all with their little wizened old-mannish faces and large goblin ears.

Monkeys are sacred animals in India like the cow (there is a famous Monkey-God called Hanuman) and no one is allowed to kill them - although they are the most inveterate thieves. I heard a good story the other day about a certain railway station which was infested with these creatures, who inundated the place in their thousands stealing anything they could lay their mischievous hands on. The authorities tried all sorts of ways - short of murder - to keep them away, but all without avail. Then the station-master had a brain wave. He ran an empty goods train into the station and ordered his men to cover the floor of each waggon with grain. When this was done the monkeys came in their thousands, clambered into the vans and began a high old feast. Whilst they were thus absorbed the engine started, and thus they took the whole train load of monkeys some thirty miles into the jungle. There the train was stopped and all the passengers were unceremoniously made to descend. A wonderful picture it brings to the mind's eye, doesn't it? - a whole train full of monkeys. Almost as good as Shylock's remark about Lean's ring. "I would not have parted with it for a <u>wilderness of</u> monkeys!"[1]

But the monkeys are not the only entertainers who just roll up out of the jungle. We have had several visits from

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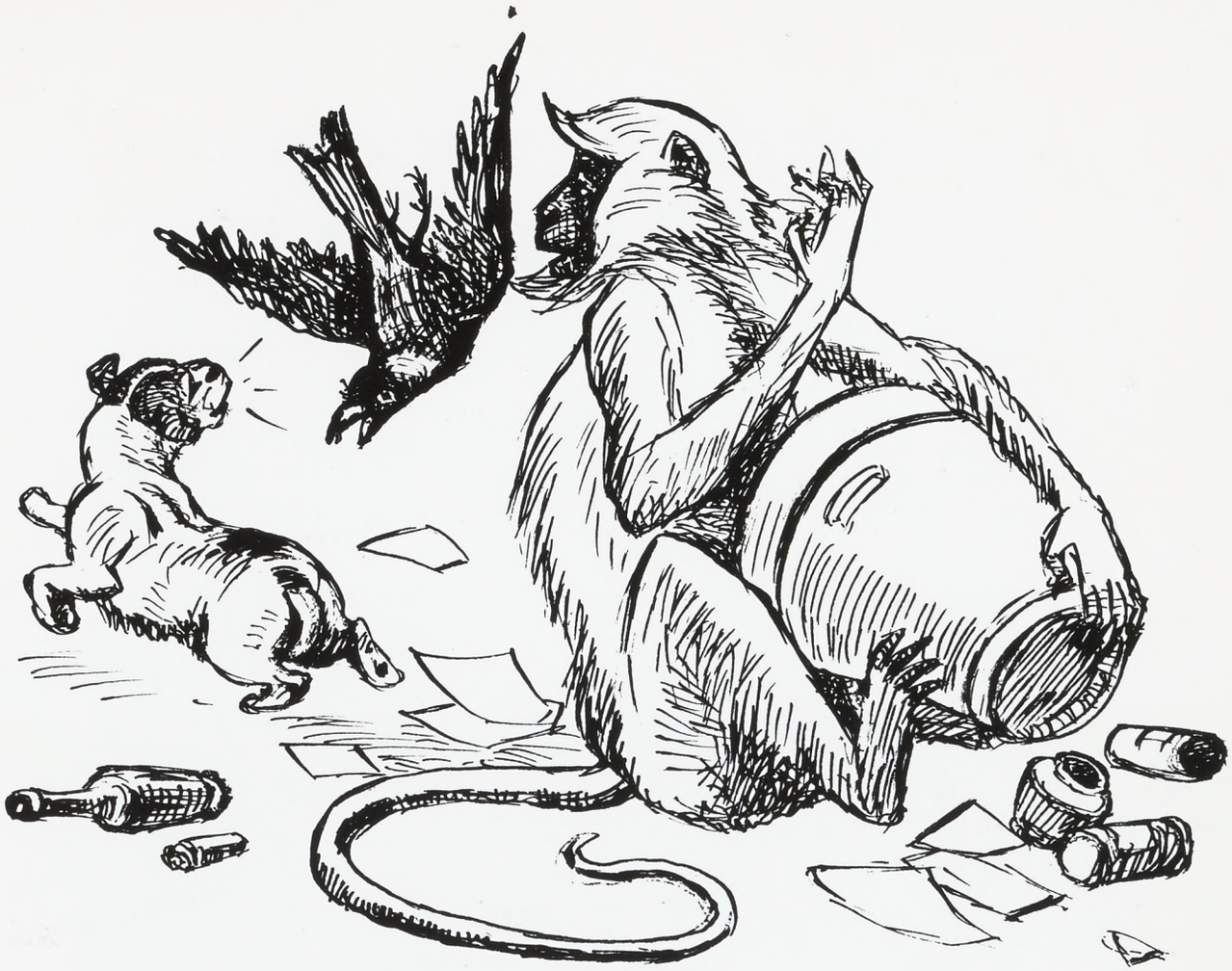
[1] "Merchant of Venice"



He gave one frightened yelp &
turned and ran for his life

strolling jugglers. They are awfully "cute" to watch, as the Americans would say. They just wander about in little companies, from town to town and house to house, giving impromptu performances wherever they can find an audience - or to be more accurate - an audience that will pay! You come out from lunch one day to have coffee on the verandah, and there you will find a couple of men and a boy squatting patiently on the verandah steps, their whole stock-in-trade being nothing more than what looks like a laundry basket and a few dirty looking cloth bundles. It is surprising, however, what clever tricks they are able to perform with these few properties, without any stage illusions to help them, no help from mirrors and lights - not even anything up their sleeves because often their thin arms are quite bare.

They usually start off with a display of snake charming. This begins with a few minutes playing on a sort of Pan's Pipe which discourses the most weird music. After a while a snake or two will emerge from one of their bundles. The other day one of these fellows - not more than about 15 years of age - didn't seem to get his "spell" going very effectively, for one of the cobras went for him, bit his hand and drew blood. However he didn't seem a bit worried, and like St. Paul on the Island of Malta just "shook it off". I wondered if he was going to curl up and die, or do something dreadful, but he was none the worse. So I concluded - not, like the Maltese that he was a god - but that he must have taken the precaution of removing the poison from the fangs beforehand.

One thing which was very striking was when this boy squashed himself into the basket. The lid was then closed down over him, whereupon his confrere took a sword, and stuck it right through the basket in various directions. Blood then oozed out from the basket staining the ground. However on the basket being opened the youth emerged smiling and whole. Their "properties" generally include as well as the snakes a mongoose or two, some pigeons and some big black venemous scorpions.

We get similar visits from travelling minstrels and folkdancers. Their manner of dancing seems very odd from a European point of view; it seems so fiddling and mincing - no swing about it. But really I believe if you understand it, it can be very wonderful, like the Indian music. Its technique, however, and its general aim and spirit is so different from ours that, without special initiation, it is hard to appreciate it.

The entertainment usually starts off with a display of snake-charming

"took a sword, and stuck it right through the basket"

After all these performances there is always a most terrific bargaining. Mr. Sarabhai generally tells his steward what to give the performers, and leaves it to him to fight it out with them. "But the poor little pigeon is tired with so much dancing", protested the musician, refusing with affected scorn the money offered. However when at length he realised that there wasn't going to be any more forthcoming, he and his "orchestra" and the "little pigeon" marched off well content.

This week-end we have had a visit from Mr. Sarabhai's sister - Mota Bhen, (literally 'elder sister') a remarkable personality in her way. She is an ardent socialist, reads Bernard Shaw, Sidney Webb, T.Cole and other such authors, and is well up in the Gospels too. But she is much more than a mere theorist - she is an indefatigable social worker. She has organised and "runs" sixteen schools for the poor children of factory workers in Ahmedabad, - mostly 'untouchables' as the pariahs or outcastes are called. She is a friend of Mahatma Gandhi, and a vigorous supporter of his Non-Co-operation movement (i.e. Non-Co-operation with the British Raj). Generous and open hearted, she is not afraid of new ideas and methods, and welcomes a frank criticism of oriental ways and customs. She is as well read as her brother; and I was interested to note that in a discussion the other day with her brother on "Justice" she quoted with good effect Our Lord's parable of the Unjust Steward. She reads a lot of Ruskin and Maeterlink, and one of her favourite books is the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam which she nearly always carries round with her. She is typically Indian in her interpretation of the latter, and reads into it a deeper and more mystical meaning than I am sure old Omar meant. For instance "wine" does not signify the fruit of the grape but "The Spirit of Life" - and so on. Mota Bhen is, in short, a refreshingly open-minded person, who is quite prepared - like Plato - "to follow the argument wherever it leads".

She is not only a friend but a great admirer of Mahatma Gandhi, and she told me a lot about his past last night. He resembles the early Quakers in that he thinks it wrong to bargain; the price should be fixed and stuck to. Like them, too, he thinks it wrong to try and obtain your way by physical force. He has been much influenced by the Sermon on the Mount - and believes in "turning the other cheek also". He holds a religious doctrine which is also very similar to the Quaker doctrine of The Inner Life. Mota Bhen gave me an extract to read from one of his recent utterances (Bombay Chronicle, May 31st, 1921). It runs: "I have received a press cutting in which I am credited with being a messenger of God;

Mota Bhen - Founder President of the Textile Labour Union, Ahmedabad.

and I am asked whether I claim to have any special revelation from God". More modest than the early Quakers he goes on: "As to the latest charge I must disown it. I pray like any other Hindu: I believe we can all become messengers of God, if we cease to fear man, and seek only God's truth ..... I have no special revelation of God's will. My firm belief is that He reveals himself daily to every human being - but we shut our ears to the "still, small voice." We close our eyes to the 'Pillar of Fire' in front of us. I realise His presence, and it is open to the writer of the cutting to do likewise."

Sound Quaker doctrine, isn't it?! I think he ought to be made an honorary member of the Society of Friends. (I actually heard a Bootham master once get up in York Quarterly Meeting and suggest "that the Society of Friends should elect honorary members - and that the first to be so honoured should be Lord Kelvin").

Gandhi is already regarded as a Saint by millions of Hindus. He lives a most abstemious life - eats nothing but toast and drinks nothing but water and milk. On this spare diet, he manages to get through an amazing amount of work.

Theoretically he lives at Ahmedabad - not very far from The Retreat but actually is only at home about 2 days in every month. The rest of his time he spends going about India, addressing public meetings and writing articles (in three languages - Gujarati, Urdu and English). He has a passionate belief in the Simple Life, to which his followers are also pledged. One of his aims is to help the common people to help themselves - i.e. to become independent so that they can provide for their own wants.

At the present time he is working up a big movement to provide two million charkhas, or spinning sheels, within six months. You can generally tell his followers by the simple white home-spun cloth - or khadi - of which their clothes are made: and also the Gandhi cap - a little white bonnet affair. He has recently been to Simla, where he has had six interviews with Lord Reading, the new Viceroy, the subject being Home Rule for India. He is regarded, and rightly, as the leader of the Home Rule Movement for India.

As a young man Gandhi studied Law in England and became a successful barrister. Becoming deeply influenced by Tolstoy's life and writings he gave up his legal career and went to live in South Africa. Here he purchased some land and founded a sort of socialist community for the poor and

outcast Hindus who had settled there.

Eventually he returned to India, where he has now earned a position of such respect and reverence that by universl acclaim he has been given the title of Mahatma (which means Great Soul), an honour which has not been bestowed on any one in India for many years.

His influence throughout the length and breadth of India is simply astonishing; by the sheer force of his personality he dictates to millions. But he is a spiritual dictator more than a political one.

Gandhi lives in Ahmedabad, and I hope to have an opportunity of meeting him personally when we return to Shahibag.

Letter I

Bombay View,
Matheran.

JAISHANKER AND THE
THEOSOPHISTS

May 1921.

My dear Everyone,

The monsoons haven't broken yet, so we are still up here in the hill station - for which I am devoutly thankful.

Nothing very eventful has happened since I last wrote; and our daily life goes on in the regular routine as I described it in my last letter but one.

This morning I made the acquaintance of my first live scorpion (apart from the ones the jugglers had in captivity). It was an ugly black brute, and it came exploring round the verandah while we were having school. Bezae, the school servant, promptly despatched it. Rather to my surprise, for it is against the Jain religion to take any form of life. But Bezae himself is not a Jain; and the general ruling (from the Jain point of view) is that it doesn't matter if other people take life - that's their look out - so long as you don't do so yourself. I was going to say "that's their funeral", but the matter goes beyond one's funeral. For, by killing an animal - as well as by anything else you do - you are laying up "Karma", good or bad as the case may be, and so helping to predetermine the form and manner of your next incarnation.

The Indians, by the way - even the educated ones - have a curious theory with regard to scorpions. They say that if you get a handful of ordinary dust - like that for instance which collects on the verandah or the path, and moisten it and keep it warm, it will breed little scorpions - by "spontaneous generation"! I must try this some day, and also verify that other tradition that if you surround a live scorpion with a ring of fire, it will get so agitated that it will finally take its own life by stinging itself.

The children I am glad to say are very keen on their school work. The three elder ones (Mrudula, Bharati and Suhrid) who do Geography with me, are at present making a large plasticine map of France. They are coming on well in

their English too. Yesterday I suddenly switched an English lesson into a nature-study one, and gave an impromptu lesson on a bat - Bazae had just captured a fine specimen, which was hanging upside down from the verandah rood. (I wonder why these creatures don't get water on the brain by staying so long in that position!).

The "Gazelles" are still with us - looking as dainty and fragile as ever. I was wrong in saying their ages were 19 and 18 respectively; they are so sedate and so dignified in their manners and deportment, that I could hardly believe it when I learnt that they are both under sixteen. Like Mrudula, if they have any fault at all, it is that they are too serious for their age. They are both studying for their matriculation at the Bombay university.

I am glad to say, however, that during the past week or so they (the Gazelles) have begun to come out of their shells a bit, and are not so shy as they were at first. A better and more appropriate simile would be to say that they are gradually unfolding "like lotus flowers". I have given them several lessons on how to play bridge, and they are picking it up so quickly that they will, I am sure, soon leave me far behind.

Mrs. Sarabhai has not been very well the past two or three days, so I have had rather an extra amount of "duty" lately - i.e. keeping "my" children, plus their three little cousins, occupied and out of mischief. In this the "Gazelles" have been a helpful and steadying influence. One evening I got the whole group - about a dozen - out on the open space in front of the verandah, and taught them how to play such games as Tirza (Twos and Threes), and Drop-the Handkerchief, etc., which were quite new to them. They loved it.

The Gazelles have brought their own tutor with them from Ahmedabad - a learned Pundit called Babu Jaishanker. He is quite a remarkable man in his way, and has quite an extraordinary history. In appearance he is most handsome, very dignified in his bearing, and slow and deliberate in his movements. (I must have scandalised him the other evening careering round like a schoolboy and playing Tig and Twos and Threes with the children). He is very tall and spare, with clear cut features set off by his ample red turban. He wears a long white frock coat and dhothis; his bare feet are shod with thick brown shoes, and he always carries a big black umbrella, - altogether a most impressive Babu.

"The Gazelles" - Vasubhen and Indubhen (Bharati in between)

Jaishanker - (in his latest incarnation!)

His personal history is most interesting, especially to anyone who has ever been mixed up as I have with the Theosophists. He was, in fact, educated at the Benares Hindu University which was run by this Society. There he studied under Mrs. Besant, President of the Theosophical Society, and Mr. Arundale - who afterwards succeeded her in that office. He attended this College for five years, and when he left he was their leading student.

At the end of this period, when his course was finished, the Theosophists (Mrs. Besant and Mr. Arundale) approached him with the following extraordinary proposition. They had discovered - so they informed him - by occult means (everything is "occult" with the Theosophists!) that he was the reincarnation of a great Indian Rishi, (or Saint), who had lived in India a thousand years ago! Mr. Jaishanker did actually tell me the name of this Saint - it was about as long as your arm! - but I have forgotten it. Anyway they announced this "fact" to him; and went on to the following effect:- "We want you to give yourself out to the world as the reincarnation of this Rishi; and travel round India lecturing under the aegis of the Theosophical Society. We will pay your expenses; and furthermore will provide you with a couple of "chelas" (or disciples) to wait on you."

"And did you accept the offer?" I asked him. A quiet smile lit up the serious face of the "Reincarnated Rishi"!

"I confess", he said, "it was something of a temptation to an impecunious student, as I was then, just about to leave college and make my own way in the world. But I refused their offer - for two reasons. First, because I thought there were already too many religions in India, as it was, without starting any new ones; and secondly, because I did not believe their story myself; and it would therefore be cheating the people by pretending I was something I was not."

I commended his decision, and assured him I was confident that he had accomplished a much greater work for India by translating - as he has - Dr. Montessori's educational works into the Gujarati dialect, than by any amount of masquerading around in such dubious company as the Theosophists.

Mr. Jaishanker was much interested to hear of my experiences with the Theosophists. I told him that I, too, had met Mrs. Annie Besant and had taught at the Theosophical School at Letchworth (named after this same Mr. Arundale).

He was even more intrigued when I told him that I had had a colossal row with the Theosophists - over religious questions - and had been kicked out from amongst them in the middle of my third term [exclaiming like Coriolanus "Freedom lives hence and banishment is here!"][1] But all this, as Kipling would say, is another story. Perhaps I shall tell it some day in all its mysterious and "occult" details - but not here.

Mr. Jaishanker was also amused when I told him that at my Theosophical school we were nearly all supposed to be reincarnations of important people in the past - like Julius Caesar, Plato, Seneca, etc. (Mrs. Besant is, or was, Gordiano Bruno). I was supposed to be the reincarnation of Sir Thomas Moore; but I guess they altered this after I had left them "in disgrace": no doubt they covered their tracks by making out they had made a slip when they first "looked me up in the Akashic Record". (The Akashic Record - in case you don't happen to know - is a sort of Cosmic Gramophone Record on which all past events are recorded. Mrs. Besant "and Co." affirm that, by means of their occult powers, they are able to "look up" anyone on this Akashic Record, and find out who he or she was in his former lives).

Pundit Jaishanker's story is interesting and significant in view of the fact that, not so many years later, this same Theosophic crew (Besant, Arundale & Co.) succeeded in getting hold of another Hindu youth for a similar purpose. They had meanwhile learnt by experience, however, and got him into their clutches at a much younger and less critical age - at about twelve years. And in the case of this boy they went one better; for they brought him up to believe and give himself out to be The New Messiah, under the name of Krishnamurti.

J. Krishnamurti (of whom possibly some of you may have heard) as a good Hindu, does, of course, believe in the doctrine of reincarnation or successive rebirths;* but not as the Theosophists hold it - i.e. as an instrument by which they can hoodwink the ignorant and uninitiated, at the same

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[1]"Coriolanus": Shakespeare.

*Krishnaji has long since (after his famous break with the Theosophical Society) gone far and to the utmost on the way of completely throwing away all dogmas and concepts which are not directly experienced by the individual concerned.

time enhancing their own prestige. He honestly admits, however, that this Doctrine is incapable of absolute proof; he regards it nevertheless as the best working hypothesis he has met to explain the apparent inequalities and injustices of life, and the various individual peculiarities and capacities with which we humans are endowed.

Mr. Jaishanker is also well versed in Yogic philosophy, and has treated me to several learned disquisitions on "The Way" - i.e. the Way to Nirvana - that blessed state in which our separated selves are merged in the Absolute, "as the dew-drop slips into the shining sea". (So don't be surprised if I turn Yogi one of these days; and, supplying myself with staff and begging bowl, vanish without a trace amongst the 300 odd million inhabitants of India - as one of the oddest!)

I must admit that Jaishanker quite looks the part that the Theosophists had cast for him. When he sits, squatting crosslegged in Hindu fashion in solemn meditation, he certainly looks for all the world like a statue of Buddha.

Like the Gazelles he tends to be very retiring and withdrawn into himself. But the other day he emerged from his spiritual isolation into the world of practical affairs with great and immediate effect. It happened like this. We were out on one of our family tracks or walks through the Jungle to one of the "Points". Mrs. Sarabhai - who was not well - was not with us; and it just happened that besides our own family, we had quite a number of other children with us that day - visitors - who were very undisciplined, and who did not understand English either.

Our way led for some time parallel to one of the precipices and at no very great distance from it. Some of the children persisted in running dangerously near the edge. I called to them, and the Aunts called, and the cousins - the Gazelles - but all without avail. The young scamps continued to run too near the edge.

It was then that Pundit Jaishanker emerged from his shell and took the matter in hand. He uttered a magic word in Hindustani; sat down at the foot of a tree and waited. The word took wing and flew from child to child, and in a moment they were all sitting in a group round him quiet as the puppies - when they have fallen asleep!

You can easily guess what the magic word was. I couldn't tell what the story was about, for it was told in

Gujarati, but to judge by the eager looks on the children's faces it must have been interesting right from the start. After about ten minutes he picked up his umbrella and rose to his feet - still telling the story. Then he set off homewards, never for a moment pausing in his narration. The children all followed him as though drawn by invisible strings. There was now no straying away from the path, but each child tried to get as near as possible to Mr. Jaishanker. It was a long long story - whatever it was about - and it was not finished by the time we reached home. So the children all begged him to go on, "as it had just come to such an exciting part". Whereupon my learned Pundit sat down, just where he was, at the foot of one of the palm trees in front of the verandah, and all the children squatted round him. People in the East do not bother much about chairs anyhow and as there had been no rain over nine months there was not much chance of the ground being damp to sit on. And so the story flowed on without pause, without hurry, and apparently without effort just as a rivulet in a forest glade,

> "Singeth to itself a tune
> In the leafy month of June".[1]

Every now and then he would stretch out one of his shapely hands with its long tapering fingers to emphasise a point.

After a while the bats woke up and began flitting to and fro and in and out of the verandah, catching moths and mosquitoes. Then the crickets came out and begun tuning up for their tremendous orchestral concert that goes on all through the night.

But still the story went on and on, and still the children listened spellbound in a darkening circle round the speaker. Suddenly it seemed quite dark. Servants could be seen carrying lamps into the rooms and out on to the verandah. Then the Perawallah, or Night-Watchman, appeared on the scene. His job is to walk round and round the house all night carrying his lantern - like a glow-worm. Up in Heaven, too, the angels - God's servants - were lighting their lamps, and soon the stars began to twinkle through the branches of the jungle trees which came right up to the house. But the children did not notice these things; their attention was still rivetted to the stalwart figure squatting in their midst.

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[1] Keats

But even the longest story must come to an end some time. And so did this. As it did so a great sigh of satisfaction went up from the circle of children. And then I knew that the hero had killed the dragon, rescued the princess, and in the end had married her, and everyone was going to live happily ever after. "Thank you, thank you" cried the children in chorus; and no actor on the stage ever received a more genuine acclamation.

Then the Magician - for so he seemed - rose quietly from his humble position at the foot of the coconut-palm, and stretched himself to his full height. He looked very tall and majestic - and mysterious, too, as the soft glow from the verandah lamps lit up his deep red turban, his long white coat, his huge umbrella and his handsome clear-cut bronzed features.

As he faced his grateful audience he joined his hands together (as we do in prayer) and bowing deeply made a solemn "salaam". Then without another word he turned, and strode off down the path under the jungle trees and was swallowed up in the night.

Can he, I wondered, as I watched his tall figure vanishing in the darkness - can he be the Pied Piper of Hamelin, come back again in eastern dress with the magic of his pipe transferred to his lips? Who knows? It seemed to me as good a suggestion about him, anyhow, as that put forward by the Theosophists.

Letter XI

Bombay View,
Matheran.

BREAK OF THE MONSOON

May 1921.

My dear Everyone,

For the past ten days the great topic of conversation has been the monsoon. As the time gets nearer and nearer for the monsoon to break, or "burst", the whole atmosphere - physical and mental - seems to be in a state of intense expectancy. On all sides you hear such remarks as: " I wonder what sort of monsoon we shall have this year": "I hope it will be a good one": or "I hear the monsoon has already broken in Ceylon." "Yes, but they say it didn't break properly", and so forth. It is not only the fact that it is about to rain for the first time for nine months which makes the subject so enthralling, but also because it may be almost a matter of life and death to many people. For a good monsoon means a good crop and a bad one the reverse. If the monsoons are bad for two or three years it may result in widespread famine. It is hard to describe the curious feeling of expectancy that is in the air - rather like you get before a thunderstorm, only much more so, and going on for two or three weeks.

When the first real shower came a few days ago the children were just as excited as English children are at the first fall of snow in winter. As it happened we were having school at the time, but we suspended operations to have a look at this thrilling phenomenon. In fact the children did more than look. They ran into the rain just as they were , and jumped and skipped about in the rain, letting it run down inside their clothes and all over them just like a lot of little watersprites "native and endued unto that element".[1] I hadn't the heart to be stern with them and call them in. I myself hadn't seen a drop of rain since I left Europe and felt quite thrilled at the sight of it - how much more so they after nine months. So I let them "go a splash" for once, and did my best to make peace with their mother when it came to the business of changing into dry clothes.

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[1] "Hamlet".

The effect of just two or three showers has been almost magical. Some of the trees have begun to send out new shoots, and at such a rate that you can almost see them growing - and it seems so strange, too, at this time of the year (in the middle of June).

But it is mostly in the insect world that the effect seems most miraculous. Suddenly the air has begun to teem with flying creatures of all sorts. The other evening we were enveloped in a cloud of huge flying ants, about an inch long, flying heavily in all directions on four rather badly manipulated wings. Their wings - so I am told - fall off after about two days of this "nuptial flight", whereupon their owners 'coming down to earth' take up the hum-drum round of every day terrestial existence on their six legs.

We have seen, too, the most beautiful butterflies, of an almost incredible size. Quite a number of times I thought, on seeing them first, that they were birds, until I noticed their peculiar zig-zag way of flying.

But I think the most beautiful of all are the fire-flies. I have not yet managed to see one of these creatures near to - but only their lights. In fact I am not sure that I <u>want</u> to see one in a close-up; because I can hardly believe that such an exquisite, dainty and fairy-like spectacle could be caused by anything so gross as beetles with wings. I prefer to cling to the illusion that they are "fairy lanthorns" lighting the wee folk to their nightly revels.

> "By paved fountain, or by rushy brook,
> Or in the beached margent of the sea."[1]

And with the monsoon came also the mosquitoes - millions of them. "Ah, there's the rub!" as Shakespeare would say. (How that man - like the Greeks - has a word for everything!)

When the monsoon really gets going - that is when it "bursts properly", it brings out not only the insects but other creatures as well, especially of the creepy - crawly kind, that live in holes, like the snakes and scorpions. They find their homes unpleasantly damp, and come out seeking better accomodation. Last year, one evening, as the family sat in the drawing room here at Bombay View, no less than six big black scorpions came into the room from the verandah one after the other. Although Mr. Sarabhai is a Jain and

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[1] "A Midsummer Night's Dream" : Shakespeare

believes in "Ahimsa" (i.e. the doctrine of not taking life) he said he drew the line at scorpions in the drawing-room and demolished them, one after the other, as they arrived.

We are not going to wait here for the monsoons to "break" completely. Now that the first premonitory showers have come we are leaving and going back to Bombay. This house, by the way, derives its name (Bombay View) from the fact that from one of the Points near here one can, on certain evenings, see the lights of Bombay shining far away down on the plain over fifty miles away.

I shall have to stop now as a great commotion of packing has broken out in preparation for tomorrow's homeward trek down to Bombay and then Ahmedabad. In this commotion I also will have to play my part, and see that all the school materials are properly packed for the journey. So this letter will have to be abruptly cut short.

Letter XII

"MALDON HOUSE", BOMBAY.

Maldon House,
The Fort,
Bombay.

Dear Everybody,

Three days ago we left Matheran - ponies and puppies and all. It was a great exodus. Our party - family, relations, teachers and servants - took up quite an appreciable fraction of the little mountain railway, which, with its many twistings and turnings, took us down to the station at the foot of the plateau, where we joined the main line from Madras to Bombay.

Down here in Bombay it is swelteringly hot; and as yet there has been no rain (though on the mountains the monsoon has already broken). We are lucky, however, in that Maldon House is modern and well built, and is situated near the sea. It has three stories, plenty of verandahs, and is supplied with large electric punkahs in nearly all the rooms. Nevertheless Bombay has a most trying climate, - a moist, clammy heat, which seems just as bad by night as by day.

Since I have begun to write this letter a dove has come and perched on the window ledge only about a yard from my shoulder, and has remained with its gaze fixed upon me most constantly - not to say suspiciously. Perhaps it is a re-incarnation of some one I knew in a former life, or perhaps a celestial messenger. At any rate it makes me feel quite embarrassed with its censorious eye penetrating mysteriously into my actions. I shall begin to believe in Edgar Allen Poe's "Raven" if this goes on.

Yesterday afternoon I took the whole family - even Vikram the two year old - in the car to see the "Hanging Gardens". Happily none of the children fell out, though I confess I felt a bit like the "Old Woman who lived in a Shoe because she had so many children she didn't know what to do!"

To get to the Gardens we had to pass quite close to the famous "Tower of Silence", where defunct Parsees are eaten up by obliging vultures. The Parsees don't bury their dead. When someone dies in a house, a priest arrives and digs

a sort of furrow round the corpse to keep away the evil spirits. When the funeral procession - which is led by two priests - is ready, all those taking part in it are linked together by cotton strands.

Arrived at Dakma (or Tower of Silence) prayers are said and then the corpse is laid out on the round top of this tower, and almost immediately the vultures arrive to begin their gruesome task. We saw these ugly bald-headed creatures in great crowds, some flying in short circles round the Tower, and others sitting like great blobs on the branches of the nearby trees. There is a meal for them every day - sometimes several - as great numbers of Parsees live - and die - in Bombay.

There are, in fact, about 50,000 Parsees in Bombay - nearly half the total number of their sect. They are a very intelligent and up-to-date community. They are pioneers in education, and also have a great influence in the professional, economical and industrial life of the city. Like the Quakers they are a wealthy community, and one often sees them driving about Bombay, and the suburbs, in their magnificient motor cars, their menfolk wearing those funny little hats "from which the rays of the sun are reflected in more than Oriental splendour".[1] There is matter for speculation in the thought that wherever they go in their gorgeous cars, their last journey will always be to the Tower of Silence.

The Parsees are not popular with the other Indians, because they have the reputation of always siding with whatever party is in power. They have a different religion, too, from the Hindus and Mahommedans. They are fire-worshippers, Fire being to them "the sacrament of the Divine Presence", through which they approach Divinity. It is for this reason that they have a special devotion to the sun. If you go down to the esplanade or sea-front, any fine evening just before sun-set, you will see an extraordinary and impressive sight. You will see these Parsees - successful Bombay business men - drive up in their Rolls and Daimlers. The chauffeur stops the car, goes round and opens the door, and the gentleman with the hat from which the sun's rays.....etc., walks solemnly down to the beach. Arriving there he goes down on his knees, and prostrates himself with solemn reverence to the setting sun.

I must confess to having a sort of secret sympathy with them; and that if I <u>were</u> going to worship anything in Nature,

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[1] Kipling :"Just So Stories"

it would be the sun. And I imagine a lot of us Christians have a similar tendency, especially in the spring, when "after the long winter of our discontent" the sun comes forth again in all his majesty and healing strength. That is why I love Francis Thompson's "Ode to the Setting Sun":

"Lo! in this field where the Cross planted reigns
I know not what strange passion bows my head.
To thee, whose great command upon my veins
Proves thee a god to me not dead, not dead.
For worship it is too incredulous,
For doubt - oh too believing passionate!"

I have solved, by the way, the mystery of the dove with the censorious eye. There is a nest up in the corner of this room, which I had not noticed before - hence the creature's suspicions and anxiety.

We had an extra fine dinner the other night to celebrate the happy news of one of the Gazelles - Vasuben - having passed her Matriculation. A person who has passed the Bombay University Matriculation has thereby attained a certain social prestige. It is becoming, however, rather a diminishing prestige - in some circles at any rate, as these educational institutions are state-sponsored. I was recently present at a lively discussion yesterday when someone was maintaining that the value of this distinction had been greatly reduced owing to the popularity of the principle of "Non-Co-operation" i.e. Non-Co-operation with anything British, a movement which Gandhi has set going as part of his great "Swaraj" or Home Rule movement.

To return to the really important things!! There is a great rage for "draughts" on at present. Suhrid especially is madly keen on it, and besieges me at all moments of the day to come and have a game with him. He is a very quick-witted youngster; and his mind at present - when not bent on draughts - seems to be much exercised with the problem of the nature of God and what kind of a life He leads. The other day he said to me apropos of nothing "How small we must seem to God! - just like ants!" Another day he said "When I was small (he is only 7 now!) I used to think that God came down in the middle of the night, and went about in a chariot finding out what people were in trouble, and helping them". Now he has become more sceptical; and he continued, "But now I know God couldn't come down!" "God didn't make me", he informed me recently. "Who did then?" I asked. "No one! I was just natural!"

Kipling, as you know, wrote:

"East is East and West is West,
And never the twain shall meet."

It may be true in some things but certainly not in others - as was strikingly brought home to me yesterday. I came up into my room in the afternoon and found Mrs. Sarabhai, Mrs. Bakubhai (Mr. Sarabhai's first cousin) and four servants looking critically round. Though I did not understand the words they were saying there was no mistaking the well-known feeling that the reform of spring-cleaning was in the air!! I know by instinct exactly the sort of things they were saying. "This room's not fit to live in! - it's a perfect pig sty! He doesn't know how to keep it tidy, and his servant (that's Mulji!) takes advantage of his ignorance and does nothing! Let's make it tidy for once. Men are such helpless things, etc., etc." When I came back half an hour later, the invasion was in full swing. Their excuse, when I caught them red handed at it, was "We thought we'd just tidy up the papers and things as they breed so many mosquitoes!" I knew this was a grossly unscientific statement, as mosquitoes begin their lives as aquatic larvae! - but I knew it was not the moment to enter into a biological discussion. Women are not susceptible to Reason when the fury of the Spring-Cleaning-Bug seizes them - they are aware of only a blind instinct to put things right! So I muttered my appreciation and thanks and went downstairs, to find my friends, the children, wondering whether it would be to play draughts or tell a story - for it would inevitably be one or the other!