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## Box 08, Folder 17 - (Indian Twilight?) "The Retreat" (E.M.S.)

Edwin Mortimer Standing

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The Retreat  
Shahibag  
Ahmedabad

1921

My dear All,

The more I think of it the more sure I feel that some lucky star must have been in the ascendant when I got in touch with the Sarabhais through Madame Montessori. Or perhaps it might be more orthodox to say that my guardian angel must have been putting in a lot of extra work. Anyway I truly and soberly think that in all India, with all its three hundred million inhabitants, I could not have hit on a nicer family to live with. For I do actually live with them, and am a member of the household and not just a visiting tutor.

In one of my previous letters I said something about the children. From a priori reasoning you could have concluded that such charming and delightful children must have wise and devoted parents. And you would have been quite right.

Actually I see more of the children than I do of Mr. and Mrs. Sarabhai. To begin with, Mr. Ambalal - for that is his first name - is away nearly all day in Ahmedabad at his business. Indeed sometimes he goes away for a week at a time to visit extensions of his firm in different cities, especially in Bombay, where he also has a private house of his own.

I am sure that Mr. Sarabhai must have a genius for business. It runs in the family, his father was also a successful business magnate, and built up the family business house. I get the impression that he has the gift of seeing things as a whole, and being able to separate the essentials from the non-essentials, and thus does not get bogged down with too many details: these latter he hands over to others. I have been present on one or two occasions when he was discussing business affairs with some of his staff, and I was struck with the way he seemed to put them at ease, and has the knack of getting the best out of them, picking their brains (as the saying is) but at the same time making them feel that their views were appreciated. But it is equally evident that the final decision rests with him; and he has the quiet assurance of a man who knows what he wants to do, and how to set about doing it.

In a manner of speaking Mr. Sarabhai lives a sort of double life. When he drives off to Ahmedabad, two miles away, in the morning in his Daimler (or rather one of his chauffeurs drives him) he is dressed in European attire, with coat, and trousers, socks and shoes, and looks like any Indian gentleman that you might meet in Lombard Street or Oxford Circus. But when he returns at the end of the day he sloughs off his more formal attire and dresses in Eastern style, with dhotees, white shirt, bare feet and sandals. He seems able to shed his business preoccupations along with his business dress, and - thoroughly relaxed - becomes

completely one of the family. Very often on his return, accompanied by the faithful Tippie, who greets him with a wag of her long tail, he will go for a stroll round the garden and compound with the children; or sit and chat with Mr. Gidwanne, a friend of the family and a very frequent visitor; or read the newspapers and journals (including the London Illustrated News).

The Sarabhais are fond of entertaining and are practiced and accomplished hosts. There is never any lack of conversation on these occasions, for both Mr. and Mrs. Sarabhai are very sociable persons, and enjoy exchanging ideas on all sorts of subjects. Very often politics form the most engrossing subject matter for discussion, since (as you probably have seen in the papers) India is going through great political upheavals and new developments under the guidance of the great Mahatma Gandhi - who, by the way, lives in Ahmedabad and is a friend of the family. But it is by no means always politics which form the subject of discussion but sometimes philosophy or art; for Mr. Sarabhai is a man of wide general culture. Both he and his almost inseparable friend and business partner, Mr. Bakhubhai, are blessed with a sense of humor, which keeps discussions from becoming acrimonious. In fact, Mr. Sarabhai is one of the most genial and affable persons you could wish to meet and I sometimes think his engaging manner must be one of the reasons for his success in business.

Although, as I mentioned above, he usually keeps his business

and his home life in two separate compartments, sometimes they intermix. In the middle of a meal he may suddenly think of some matter which is important and urgent. On such an occasion he will suddenly clap his hands and tell the servant who answers it to go and fetch Mr. Mascheronas, his secretary. The latter duly arrives with notebook and pencil; and then and there Mr. Sarabhai will dictate a letter, sometimes in Gujerati or it may be in the most excellent English. Having got this off his chest he turns his attention once more to the family and the meal.

In some ways Mr. Sarabhai is an extraordinary mixture being at the same time a representative of two entirely different cultures, the East and the West. He speaks English easily and fluently - I believe he can even think in English so much is he at home in it. He drives off to business in his Daimler - the largest of his four or five cars - and his house is fitted with electricity, hot and cold running water, and other Western amenities. Not only that, but he has his own business house in London, in the City, too and from which cables are constantly coming and going (he spends as much as 2000 this way annually). Yet, at the same time, he is a genuine Asiatic; and the mystic East is his true spiritual home, as will be seen from the following incident. The other day in conversation, quite casually as though there was nothing extraordinary about it, he told me he was going to get a special pair of spectacles made with misty

lenses. "What ever for"? I replied in some surprise. Whereupon he went on to explain along these lines. "You see, Standing, I don't like to feel myself completely immersed in business all the day in my office. I would like to be able to get away from it all for a few minutes to meditate on something deeper and more permanent, yet at the same time I do not want to make myself conspicuous by doing this. So if I put on these glasses I won't be able to see through them clearly and will thus not be distracted by external things, and can go off into a meditation without anyone being aware of it. How typically Eastern! I thought. Can you imagine a London stockbroker, or any other business magnate hitting on the same idea?

Even before I came to India I read somewhere (I think it was in one of Kipling's short stories - the Miracle of Puran Bhagat) that it can easily happen in India that a successful man of affairs, who has married and reared a family, may do something that no Westerner would ever think of. One day, suddenly an unannounced, he will dress himself up as a Sanyasi - that is a wandering hermit - and quietly disappear to be "swallowed up by the great grey formless India" (the phrase seems to stick in my mind). And he will spend the rest of his mortal existence, with no more luggage than his staff and begging bowl, as a wandering Sadhu, or holy man, "seeking enlightenment". I sincerely hope that Mr. Sarabhai won't suddenly take it into his mind to do this one day; for personally I should miss him very much, and

so, of course, would his family and friends. I am told that at this very moment there are some six million such itinerant holy men wandering about the sub-continent of India. (Equal to the population of Ireland).

They are revered and supported by the common people, and even the poorest will not refuse to put something in the outstretched begging bowl, which is their only means of existence. (In practical England they would be arrested by the police for "having no visible means of support").

Mr. Sarabhai's wide cultural interests are reflected in the thousands of books he has collected which adorn the shelves of the Retreat library. It is, in fact, such an extensive library that he employs a full time librarian (see illustration p. ) who is at present busy with the task of making a complete catalogue. Almost every time Mr. Sarabhai goes off on one of his longer business trips he comes back with some new and interesting classic to add to his library. One time it might be a translation of Dante's Divine Comedy, another time the Koran, or again it might be a work by Tolstoy - you never can tell what is coming next! Bharati, by the way, takes after him in this respect. She is already an omnivorous reader - and that in two or three languages. So, now, if at any time, I am trying to find her round the house or garden the first place I look is in the library. Often enough I find her there, curled up in an arm chair oblivious to the rest of the world - as I did only

the other day buried in - you would never guess what!....The  
Adventures of Huckleberry Finn!

I must stop now for it is time for the post to go out.  
I will tell you something about Mrs. Sarabhai next time.

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