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Box 08, Folder 19 - (Indian Twilight?) "Super Vegetarians" (E.M.S.)

Edwin Mortimer Standing

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C/O Misses O'Connor
Summerford
Vincent Hill
Mussoon
United Provinces
India

June 25, 1922

Dear

I am afraid this letter to-day
will have to be in the form of
an article I wrote recently.

I have not had time to write a
proper circular. The article is
titled "THE SUPER VEGETARIANS".

Sincerely yours,

Mortimer E. Standing

THE SUPER-VEGETARIANS

There was a time when I used to be a vegetarian, and earnestly ate nut rissoles and marmite sausages. In those days, if I looked at a dish of lamb cutlets, I was haunted by the spectral bleatings of woolly innocents being led to the slaughter; a mutton chop was to me a menace; and if I saw a bottle of Bovril I sighed with genuine sympathy, 'Alas, my poor brother!' For were not the animals our 'younger brothers'? Were they not even as we ourselves--climbing the ladder of evolution to higher and better things? What right had we to cut off their innocent lives before their destined hour had struck?

Then by the hand of destiny I was brought in contact with the Super-Vegetarians. The Super-Vegetarians are a sect of Hindus, usually known as the Jains. It so happened that my work in India threw me into intimate contact with these interesting people. I found them not only interesting, but exceedingly kind and hospitable, and in many other ways unusually charming and refined. In fact their code of ethics with regard to the animal world was too refined for me altogether. I became aware that I was only a beginner in these matters, a despairing amateur in the presence of

professionals; I was not even an 'also ran.' In the presence of such high and austere consistency I gave up the competition; and, realising the direction in which my ideals were leading, fell back--not without relief--on the flesh-pots of Egypt.

The root principle of the Jain religion is the doctrine of Ahinsa or Harmlessness. It is founded on the belief in the transmigration of souls, i.e. that the same soul comes to earth many times in different bodies. For instance, it might come successively as a beetle, a man, a crocodile, a horse, a scorpion, and so on during countless incarnations. Hence all life, especially animal life, is to be held sacred. It goes without saying, therefore, that the Jains are strict vegetarians. They will not even eat eggs, and many will not drink milk. Some of the very strict ones hardly eat anything more than fruit and nuts. Another of their peculiarities is that they will neither eat nor drink between sunset and sunrise, lest by mischance they might swallow a fly or other insect in the dark--and this of course is for the sake of the fly!

They are much more than vegetarians. This amazing respect for all forms of life affects not only the food they eat, but influences their life in many other ways. For instance, though their house may be swarming

with an Egyptian plague of flies, they would never dream of doing anything to mitigate their discomfort by the use of fly-papers. I remember once staying in the house of a wealthy Jain (almost accomplished gentleman, by the way, with a University degree), where the compound round his house was infested with monkeys. Though they ravaged his garden and stole his fruit, he would never allow anyone to shoot at them. He had two men permanently employed whose sole duty it was to drift about all day, scaring the monkeys away by shouting at them and throwing stones (but not to hit them). Even this was not a sufficient protection; for the second day I was there, on going into my bedroom, I was surprised to see a large black-faced monkey emerge from under my bed. One might almost have supposed that I had intruded into his apartment to judge by his angry looks and the nonchalant way he strolled across the room to the open window.

In one city where I lived some time there exists a society--not for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, but for the Preservation of the Life of Animals. This society runs various activities, including the free distribution of milk for monkeys and rice for ants. But the most striking of its undertakings is displayed when there has been a specially long season of drought. At

such a time it happens naturally that many lakes and rivers begin to dry up, and the fishes, turtles and other aquatic animals therein are in grave danger of dying for lack of water. To prevent such a calamity this society, which has ample means at its disposal (the Jains being a very wealthy sect), engages a number of servants to transport these creatures overland to larger lakes and rivers. By providing for such acts of charity the subscribers acquire much merit. Not content with saving the lives of fishes (which they transport in buckets), they have been known at times to turn their kind attentions even to crocodiles. They carry these slung on to long poles, having however first taken the wise precaution of blocking their jaws up with a log of wood. There was a curious sequel on one occasion to an act of kindness thus bestowed on a crocodile. The men employed, having carried the crocodile several miles overland, let it loose again in a large river, climbed out, and found a resting place in an enclosure belonging to one of the cotton mills adjacent to the river. The mill, by the way, belonged to a Jain, and the spot chosen by the crocodile happened to be the place where his workers used to eat their midday food. You can imagine the surprise of these people the next day on finding the crocodile in possession of their

luncheon ground. They drew back in alarm, not wishing to take any risks. Not so, however, a young and inexperienced puppy with an enquiring mind which happened to be there. Unperturbed by the ferocious spectacle it waddled up to the monster to investigate, when suddenly --well, the crocodile was not a vegetarian! The body of the puppy disappeared in a flash, while its soul (according to the Hindu belief) was transferred to another body. Very probably, in its next incarnation, it has come back as a baby, destined to grow up into an intrepid explorer who will go big-game hunting in the jungles of Africa.

I remember once, in a conversation with Mahatma Gandhi (who belongs to the Jain sect), discussing this question of re-incarnation with him. He assured me, with the utmost sincerity, that if he were confronted by a crocodile and could not escape without either killing it or being killed by it, it would be his duty to let the crocodile eat him rather than, by taking its life, violate the principle of Ahinsa. He also added with his characteristic sense of humour that he could not predict whether, in a sudden emergency, he would have the moral strength to carry out his convictions, but he hoped he would. Personally I think it quite likely that Mr. Gandhi would not violate his principles even in such a predicament.

I used to visit him at his Ashram or Settlement, sometimes, before he was put into prison; and one of his secretaries, whom I know very well and whose veracity I would never question however strongly I differed from him in principle, told me the following incident, corroborated by several others who were present. One evening, as they were sitting in the garden at their evening meditation, a large cobra came out of the long grass and made in the direction of the Mahatma. His followers, fearing for the safety of their leader, made preparations to seize and remove it. He motioned to them, however, to remain still, as he did himself. The loathsome thing crawled right across his bare knees, and then slid quietly away into the jungle about its own poisonous business.

As a general rule the true Jain will not kill a snake, however deadly. What they do usually is to capture it alive with a sort of long forked stick and force it into a jar. Then they carry it--or more usually their servants carry it--to a safe distance and let it go. In practice this amounts in many cases to dropping it unobtrusively near somebody else's compound.

Many of the more modernised Jains, however, do not carry out the practice of Ahinsa so strictly as this. I know one, for instance, who eats eggs. He allows him-

self to do so because he says it prevents the chickens from growing up only to be cruelly slaughtered by his less enlightened countrymen who are not Jains. But then he was a lawyer! This is a profession, one might remark in passing, which is adopted by a good many Jains. A number of the ordinary walks of life are closed to these people on account of their peculiar beliefs. For instance, no Jain could take up a military life, or go in for agriculture, since both these occupations involve the taking of life. A considerable number have become bankers, and not a few of the leading cotton manufacturers belong to this sect--these being innocent employments from their point of view.

The researches of modern biology have caused the Jains much searching of heart. I heard of one gentleman who bought a microscope, and was so horrified by the revelation which it gave him of countless minute forms of life in earth, air, and water, that he smashed the instrument. He was horrified for he realised for the first time how many such organisms he must have unwittingly destroyed, and must continue to destroy, in his ordinary course of life.

The Jain who related to me the above incident takes a much more lenient view of things. He told me himself, without any pangs of conscience, that he killed

half a dozen black scorpions in one afternoon, as they came crawling one after the other on to the verandah out of the rain. His wife, however, is much more orthodox than he, and every year he waits till she has fone off to the Hills in the hot weather to arrange for an annual slaughter of rats, mice, and other small animals that live in the bungalow as uninvited guests.

There is a convenient doctrine amongst the Jains that a man may acquire merit by doing virtuous actions by proxy. Thus there are certain wealthy Jains who give money so that persons, brave or desperate enough to earn it, may sleep in beds swarming with the most disgusting vermin, in order that the latter may enjoy a hearty meal. It is with a somewhat similar thoughtfulness in view towards the 'lower forms of life!' that the priests of the Jain religion--according to the tenets of their order--are never allowed to take a bath. On two occasions I had the doubtful privilege of meeting some of these holy men, and I confess that I took care to seat myself at a very respectful distance. These priests are the salt of Jainism; but under these conditions one can easily understand that the salt is apt to 'lose its savour.'

Perhaps the most astenishing thing about the orthodox Jains is the fact that, along with their meticulous

care to preserve the life of animals, there often goes the most callous disregard for the sufferings of human beings outside their own particular caste. Of course there are exceptions, but they are exceptions, and must be so, from the nature of the case. For the philosophy behind this Super-Vegetarianism is a cold and lifeless system of abstractions--austere, legal and ponderous in its method and application. It knows nothing of the exuberant simplicity of simple faith, still less of the genial warmth of Christian charity. In their vivid appreciation of their brotherhood with crocodiles, they seem to have lost sight of the brotherhood of man.

E. M. Standing.

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In the presence of such high and austere consistency I gave up the competition; and, realising the direction in which my ideals were leading, fell back - not without relief - on the flesh-pots of Egypt.

The root principle of the Jain religion is the doctrine of Ahinsa, or Harmlessness. It is founded on the belief in the transmigration of soul, i.e. that the same soul comes to earth many times in different bodies. For instance, it might come successively as a beetle, a man, a crocodile, a horse, a scorpion, and so on during countless incarnations. Hence all life, especially animal life, therefore, is to be held sacred. It goes without saying, therefore, that the Jains are strict vegetarians. They will not even eat eggs, and many will not drink milk. Some of the very strict ones hardly eat anything more than fruit and nuts. Another of their peculiarities is that they will neither eat nor drink between sunset and sunrise, lest by mischance they might swallow a fly or other insect in the dark - and this of course is for the sake of the fly!

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