A visit to

MAHATMA GANDHI

at Juhu  (near Bombay)

April 13, 1924

(Part of a letter written
to his children)

By

Charles Lee Smith

[transcribed by Megan Mulder, 30 July 2010]
FROM A HURRIEDLY WRITTEN LETTER TO MY CHILDREN—

ON BOARD THE CUNARD R·M·S. "LACONIA."

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The outstanding event of my stay in India is my visit to Mahatma Gandhi last Sunday, April 13, 1924. Early this year he was operated on for appendicitis and as his health was greatly impaired the government released him from prison where he had served two of his four six year term of
imprisonment. He is now convalescing at Juhu, near some fourteen miles from Bombay, where a rich Hindu has placed his fine seaside bungalow at his disposal. Here this most remarkable man of this age (and he may yet be ranked in history as one of the great religious and political reformers of the ages) writes his messages to the people of India, receives daily many delegations from all parts of his country, and is visited by distinguished men.
from many lands. He is venerated as no other man in the history of the world has been venerated during his lifetime, and it is claimed that three hundred million of the population of India are his devoted followers ready to obey any command he gives. They call him Mahatma which means “grand soul” and they look upon him as a “God-man.” He has shaken the British rule in India to its very foundations by his opposition to the government.
He contends for “home rule” (India for the natives of India), “home industries” (no consumption of any foreign goods), non-coöperation with the Imperial Government of India (Indians to hold no official positions, take no part in legislation or the procedures of the courts, pay no taxes, render no military or other state service, keep their children from the public schools and, without resorting to violence, to do all in their power to embarrass the government which he calls satanic.)
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[Letterhead]

He also opposes the sale of liquor and opium, and he is doing all in his power to unite the native peoples of India without regard to caste—Hindus, Mohammedans, Parsees and Christians—in his plan for native control to be achieved without resorting to violence if possible, but he says, violence is better than cowardice, and
And rather than have the uprisings of mobs with uncontrolled force he would prefer organized government with intelligently directed force, though he earnestly hopes that his desired ends may be accomplished by spiritual means. India is in a most critical condition and the situation is tense—the English residents fearing that a revolution may break out at any time. In fact, Gandhi's dearest and most
trusted friend and adviser, Mr. C. F. Andrews, who has been associated with him for twenty years, told me the revolution would have broken out this very month in April 1924 if Gandhi, after his release from prison, had not used his all-powerful influence in holding in check the militant element which is impatient of further delay in driving their present rulers from power. Gandhi is doing all he can to make tolerable the condition of the "untouchables"
“untouchables,” a class below the most menial of the regular recognized castes. There are some fifty million of these miserable beings in India who are not allowed on the highways & in the temples, nor are they permitted to draw water from any well used by the recognized castes who will not touch nor allow one of them to come near them under any circumstances.
Our visit to Gandhi was arranged by Mr. Vilcassin[?] and his sons, rich jewelers and gem merchants of Bombay & influential Mohammedans. With three prominent members of the Laconia Cruise and a trusted chauffer provided by Mr. Vilcassin we left the Taj Mahal Hotel in a new Buick car about 2:15 Sunday afternoon and after a
pleasant ride through the coconut groves & native villages we arrived at the isolated house near Juhu in which Gandhi is staying. After sending in our cards to his Secretary, we were received in a very friendly way by Mr. C. F. Andrews who told us Mahatma Gandhi was then in his bath, so he would entertain us until
we could see him – that an associated press correspondent was waiting to get a promised interview but that we should go in first. In a few minutes we were invited to enter Gandhi’s room where he was sitting in a low chair. As soon as he saw us, he stood up and in Hindu fashion clasped his hands together and then cordially shook hands with each of us.
as we were introduced to him. He is of low stature, small and lean, and does not look to be physically strong, though he has bright brown eyes and a pleasant face indicative of intellectual vigor. His head is shaved except a long lock of hair at the top, his ears are large & stand out prominently, his nose is rather broad, his mouth wide, his face rather somewhat short and frequently lighted with a
pleasant smile, a small moustache and a broad rather than high forehead. He dresses like a Hindu laborer, wearing only a white loin cloth leaving his body and his legs bare. He goes barefooted, but in spite of his dress (or want of dress) he has a bearing and a dignity that makes you feel you are in the presence of a
great soul. His voice is low, pleasant and earnest, & his command of English is most remarkable—He speaks fluently without an accent and uses words which exactly convey his meaning. Without hesitation he answers all questions and gives an impression of sincerity and earnestness. We were with him about an hour and by request of the friends with me I took the lead in asking questions. I told him we knew of his life in South Africa and India
in the service of his country but we wished to hear from his own lips concerning his social, economic and political aims. He replied that he "I stand for truth and love but love is embodied in truth. Spiritual things are the most important of all and we win by love what cannot be secured by force. For this reason I teach non-violence and rather than countenance evil I advise non-coöperation." He then spoke of the evils of the opium trade & condemned the government for using it as a source of
revenue. He lamented the condition of the untouchables and told of their plan to sit by the roadsides night and day until, overcome by hunger and heat, they should die and thus compel attention. But that he said that he had opposed this hunger strike, as that was a form of force or coercion, and that he advised them to sit in relays. He told of his plan to have every family make its own cloth and establish other home industries, of his opposition to machine production which would enslave the workers, and his desire to do away with
the present system of education established by the English which resulted in unfitting the young for the requirements of life, and that he advocated the re-establishment of schools that would bring about the old order of life in India. He strongly opposed the present industrial order and expressed the wish that the existing government system in India be utterly destroyed. Factories and railroads, modern improvements and western ideas
--these, said he, are not best for India at this time. Several times he referred to God’s plan and I asked him to tell us his personal belief concerning God. He replied “I believe in God. I am because God is.” He said he had been expelled from his caste because he mingled with all castes, even with the untouchables, but, said he, “all castes come to me and while
I am not permitted to eat at a meal given by my caste, I believe all the people of India will unite harmoniously to establish a national government, for it is not right for a hundred thousand Englishmen in India to rule the native millions.” He said he now lived a celibate life and hoped his children would remain unmarried but that they were under no compulsion to do so & if they married
they would do so within their caste. He would not say predict when he expected his ideals to be realized in India, but said that spiritual forces were strong and that he could only work and wait. When we bade him good-by, he again gave a friendly hand clasp and expressed pleasure that we had come to see him.

Before leaving, Mr. Andrews presented me with a copy of “Mahatma Gandhi,” by Romain Rolland, & had Gandhi autograph it for me.
Gandhi is now 54 years old, having been born in Porbandar, Oct. 2, 1869, where his father, a wealthy and influential Hindu of the Jain sect, was first minister of State. As was the custom, he was married when a boy. When twenty he was sent to London to complete his education at the University of London and at the
Inns of Court. Before leaving his house for England his mother had him take the three Jain vows to abstain from wine, from meat, and from sexual relations. After completing his studies he entered upon the practice of law and became successful as an advocate. His political career began in 1893 when he went to South Africa, where the [million-and-a-half] 150,000
Hindus who had been induced to go there were being oppressed in many ways. First he tried to have their wrongs righted through the courts but finding that justice could not be secured in that way, he gave up law, his family, his wealth, his influential position to and shared the hardships of his people but[?] using every means by voice and pen.
to create a public sentiment that would make conditions better for them. He met with a large measure of success and won the regard of both the Boers & the English. When the Boer War broke out, he joined the English forces and organized an Indian Red Cross. Later during a pestilence, he established a Hospital and exposed his life in many ways to help the suffering. When the World War began in 1914 he went to England and arranged an Indian Ambulance.
Corps. For his service in Africa & in the World War he was several times decorated by the English government, and He claims that promises were made that the Indians would be given a larger and more important share in the government of their country and that many reforms for which he had labored would be introduced but that
after the War these promised were forgotten and the position of his people was worse rather than better. Then it was he returned the decorations given him and started the non-coöperation movement which led to his imprisonment. During the thirty years since he began his great work in Africa, he has become the political and spiritual leader of India. and The masses consider him sacred, all the elements of discontent in India have rallied to his support, and the radicals of all countries
are co-operating in the movement to undermine English rule in the East. I fear Gandhi, the reformer and the philanthropist, is being used by the Mohammedans with the hope that they can ultimately establish a great empire in India that will be more powerful than Turkey ever was. Japan encourages Gandhisan, as the weakening of British power would make her the dominant empire of the East. The Russian Soviet leaders are giving aid to the revolu-
tionary movement in India as a part of their world propaganda. Less than a month ago, in a published interview Lenin’s successor said “India is the magazine & Russia will light the fuse which will blow capitalistic civilization to Hell.” Everywhere in India, as throughout the East where we have recently been, there [illegible] that of American are evidences of radical propaganda and indications that revolution soon bring about grand changes in the social, religious, industrial, and political order.
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[Letterhead]

The atmosphere is so charged with danger that Englishmen confess to fear that it is not safe to keep their families in India and some are sending them to England. A wealthy Hindu in Calcutta, with whom I had a long conversation on conditions and who is an earnest advocate of English rule in India, said "If the England should cease to govern and withdraw her army, the Mohammedans
would be at our (the Hindus) throats in twenty-four hours.” Another intelligent Hindu who has become a Roman Catholic said to me “Gandhi is not a Mahatma; he is a mischief-maker.” Many Some Englishmen have unkind things to say about him and would have us believe his influence has been overrated, but their bitterness toward him is an evidence that they fear him. Some say it is unfortunate that an “accident”
has not ended his career before this, while others think it is due to the fact that England now has a Labor Government that he was released from prison and given further opportunity to advocate his revolutionary principles. Others say that imprisonment caused him to be regarded as a martyr, and that free he has less influence than when in prison. Many A few Englishmen as Mr. Andrews regard him as divinely inspired—a second
St. Francis of Assisi, while the masses of his own countrymen consider him as sacred as the Buddha. If his ends are achieved by non-violence, he will be pre-eminent among the world's great reformers. If his teachings lead to violence, the foundations of the existing order will be shaken if not destroyed and only God knows what the result will be. If I am not greatly mistaken, we shall see great changes during the next decades—our own country will be involved in the world upheaval.