THE GREAT SOUL.

By “UNST.”

CAPTAIN X, Indian Medical Service, stationed at Ahmedabad, was worried. He said so in a long letter to me. He had not had leave, it appeared, for years and years and years, and it seemed likely that none would be granted to him for an equal period of time, due to his awful isolation and numerous responsibilities in Ahmedabad. As a very junior officer, he went on to explain, I could not understand the awful stultification, the moral and mental degradation, caused in moderately senior officers by prolonged lack of leave. I, on the other hand, was a very junior officer. I did not require leave, but I certainly needed experience and the broadening influence of travel. Ahmedabad was a delightful spot, if you were prepared to overlook the temperature, the moisture and one or two other inconveniences ignored by youngsters, but devastating to senior captains, short of leave. The club was a nice club; there was shooting, etc., etc., etc. In short, would I come to Ahmedabad and relieve him what time he recuperated his faded energies in the United Kingdom?

At the time I was stationed in Colaba. I spent my time playing the usual games, hacking borrowed ponies on the perilous reclamation from Back Bay, and sailing a jollyboat which I shared with a civilian friend. The last pastime was an impassioned release from an otherwise artificial existence. The coast, with its hushed woods and deserted beaches, is enchanting. The waters in which we sailed were not always kind, and although my companion was an expert sailor we underwent more than one harrowing adventure. In such moments I consoled my lack of experience by doing exactly what I was told, and fervently reminding myself, at intervals, that I could at least swim. Somehow we emerged unscathed from adverse pranks of wind and weather, with a heightened zest for living, decently tempered with a feeling of thanksgiving to Providence. These experiences are pleasant in retrospect. Kind memory obliterates the phases of blue funk.

Over a drink in one of Bombay’s palatial clubs, I informed my friend that the jollyboat partnership would be dissolved for a period of two months. I was going to Ahmedabad. He was philosophical about it.

“Oh, yes,” he replied, to further inquiries, “I’ve been there. It’s the worst place on the face of the earth. The cantonment’s full of monkeys and brahminy bulls. Ghandi lives there too. There’s one consolation. After going there, you can put up with anything. Have you read ‘Condemned to Devil’s Island’? Anyhow, you’ll probably get killed in a riot.”
I did not allow my youthful optimism to be downcast by this obviously exaggerated account, and duly entrained for the Station which had been so delightfully described to me. The journey was not without incident. My bearer, a temporary gentleman of dark hue, apparently had not carried out part of the duties delegated to him, namely, paying the coolies, who, defrauded and enraged, hung on to the train until the next station, where they requisitioned the services of a fluent babu, who explained the whole incident to me in flowery language. Hot and half awake, I distributed largesse, consigned him and his satellites to the devil, made a mental note to sack my bearer at the first reasonable opportunity, and attempted sleep.

I arrived at Ahmedabad station in stifling heat, collected my kit, and made off to the Mess. On the way I mentally compared notes with the despairing word picture drawn by my friend, and found his phantasmagoria to be, as I imagined, an exaggeration. What I could see of the city was filthy enough, in all conscience, but, as I bowled along towards the cantonment along broad roads, green and rolling country unfolded on either side, magnificent in trees and temples, stretching far to the horizon. It was my first sight of the Plains, and I shall never forget the impression of immensity, of size, of interminable distance, they leave on the traveller when he first sees them.

I arrived at the Mess after an interesting drive. The cantonment was handsome, green, and well furnished with stately trees and a wide, open, grassy maidan. One battalion of Indian infantry, and a company of British, garrisoned the place, and with them I made very good friends.

My opposite number, the leave-starved senior captain, was both relieved and exasperated to see me. Relieved, because he could now proceed on leave with an easy conscience, and exasperated, because, he stated, I had omitted to inform him of my arrival. For this reason there had been nobody to meet me at the station. I furiously denied this impeachment: I had written him a beautiful letter on a portable typewriter. Well, he never got it, but a drink in the Mess might solve the problem. We adjourned there, and before ordering refreshments he inspected his pigeon hole. There was the letter. He looked at it, and exploded. What the hell did I mean by addressing a letter like that? No wonder it had been held up. It was a miracle he ever got it at all. I scrutinized the envelope. It bore the inscription, briefly and legibly:—

"O.C.I.M.H. Ahmedabad."

And nothing else.

At the time, I was impressed by the brevity and efficiency of official correspondence. On this occasion the latter quality seemed to have miscarried. Since then I have discovered that it very often does.

I took over the hospital. My Urdu, laboriously learnt in Colaba with the aid of a "munshi," was hardly up to standard, but it was sufficient to
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deal with Indian troops, who were very understanding, and tactfully appointed a diminutive Sikh officer, affectionately known as the "shcool-marshter," to patch up the deficiencies.

I did not find my duties so onerous as I had been led to believe, and found sufficiency of leisure to try out the much-vaunted shooting, which had been held out as a bait by the captain, now jubilantly departed home. The only game bird in season at the time was the florican, or lesser bustard, which served, however, to make my first acquaintance with small game shooting in India.

One of the high lights of my stay in Ahmedabad was "mugger" shooting on the Sabarmati River. At the time I was in possession of a .22 high-velocity Savage rifle I had purchased in a Borah arms shop in Bombay. This weapon had been laughed to scorn by everyone who saw it, but I must say it did me well in my first experience of big game. The accuracy of the sighting, the flat trajectory over a distance, and the extreme velocity, were all of advantage when shooting at a stationary mark, a prize which had to be struck within a handsbreadth area to be brought to bag. Later on I tried the same weapon against blackbuck and chinkara with bad (in one or two cases, alas, shocking) results, so I reverted to a larger bore rifle for that reason, and also because of the chapter on blackbuck shooting in Colonel Stockley's fine book, which eschews small bore rifles for this particular form of sport.

When eventually I reached a station from which one could enter the great jungles I again produced my Savage, but was threatened almost with arrest by scandalized senior shikaris of repute, so I locked up the discredited American and subsisted on hired Mess rifles (double-barrelled and of terrific power, but rather rocky about the breech), a villainous old .500 Express, and occasionally my faithful shotgun charged with "lethal." When I could enjoy the delights of hill shooting I received an unexpected and most welcome present of a .356 Westley-Richards, and the Savage still remained locked up save for infrequent and long-range experiments on empty tins, chatties, and the like.

I still have the little rifle which shepherded my initiation to shikar, and occasionally, in that strange way inanimate objects have, it seems to reproach me for my desertion. I sometimes wonder, if I had had the courage of my convictions and defied public opinion, and even the writings of authorities, whether the Savage would not have proved itself a rifle fit for everything. It certainly let me down over those buck, but I "tailored" them, which one can do with any weapon.

At one point in our exploration of the reaches of the Sabarmati we found the river dried into a chain of pools of varying size, sparsely connected by narrow runnels. In one of these smaller pools we succeeded in capturing some baby "mugger," still with yolk-sacs attached. These,
wrapped in wet sacking and protesting vigorously, survived the journey to the club, where they disported awhile in the fountain. They soon tired of this new environment, however, and one fine day slipped off unseen. Perhaps, considering their dangerous character, their lives should have been forfeit, and I still have twinges of conscience when I think of one or all of them policing the shallows of some village ford.

The Sabarmati, tired of trickling, decided to flood, and one night came roaring bank high to the sea, in a great bore of water. Previous flood levels were not overtopped and existing precautions held good. Some dhobies were drowned near the city, but from all reports they died of their own accord. They had been washing clothes on a sandbank in the middle of the fallen stream. They were in a straight reach of the river and could see and hear the approaching flood when it appeared miles away as a dim blue line, even at that distance muttering and drumming with threatening sound and causing strange reversals in the air currents in the river bed. The dhobies stayed. Perhaps they were very busy. The flood came nearer. The muttering rose to a roar, the drumming to a rafale like heavy guns, and the little puffs and currents of wind to an ominous gale. The dhobies stayed. They were probably annoyed when the rising wind tore the clothes from their grasp, and may have experienced a dim apprehension of the sounding water, bank high and approaching with avalanche speed, but they stayed. The dhobies stayed and were drowned. To such extent can the fatalism of the East be carried.

A less tragic incident was occasioned by the temporary loss of the elephants attached to a travelling circus then performing in Ahmedabad. These elephants, five in number, were great favourites with the local garrison, and very partial to bottled beer. On this occasion they had been taken to the fallen river for their usual ablutions and, on the approach of the flood, their attendants had incontinently fled. The elephants, like the dhobies, stayed. One can imagine them eyeing the oncoming waters and thinking, with their glimmering intelligence, not quite up to dog standard, "Well, we're going to have a good wash for once." They got it.

The leader of the elephant washing party, however, was a man of some resource. He led his minions at breakneck speed to the railway bridge and from there, by some miraculous means, succeeded in rescuing all five of his charges. For this feat he received, I believe, the Kaisar-i-Hind medal. I am not sure of this, but he certainly deserved it.

There is an atmosphere in a club in a small military station in India which is bound to permeate a club in a small station. I am not casting, to quote the famous mis-statement, any asparagus, but those who read these lines will know what I mean. Such clubs need enlivenment, a breath of fresh air, something new, some rejuvenating influence.
The club in Ahmedabad got it. One evening the American gentleman arrived.

When I entered the club before dinner he was the fountain head of a large and well irrigated circle of newly acquired friends. He was "reminiscing."

"When I was in the South African war, the Colonel said to me, 'Here, you, you want to join the cavalry, do you? What do you know about horses?' So over I went to the nearest horse, grabbed its off fore, threw it and sat on it."

An awed silence. The horse must have been impressed. The American gentleman was a man of substance.

"I was sent out here by my firm to say Yes or No. That's what they paid me to say. If I say Yes I've got to make an estimate. If I say No, straight home I go; no estimate required. Hi, waiter."

Drinks were getting perilously low, and the night was warm.

"When I go to do a job anywhere I get in touch immediately with the head man. Then if you want anything and you've got his O.K., it's easy. Otherwise you're liable to lose time. Now, who's the head man here? Ghandi, of course."

The Most Exalted Civilian, who occupied a prominent and rather hypnotised part of the circle, tactfully murmured assent.

"Well, then, he's the man I want to see."

"There will be no difficulty about that," said the Most Exalted Civilian. "I'll fix it up and let you know," he added, rising to leave.

For the first time in the evening, the American gentleman seemed a bit put out. He had, I think, expected opposition: something he could grab by the off fore, like the horse, throw, and sit on. He shortly recovered, however, and radiated hospitality anew.

I soon found myself, with others, included in a dinner party to be held by him in his host's bungalow. His host, a padre, highly approved. He must have had a fairly monotonous existence, apart from such cyclonic interjections. During the course of the evening it was decided that the party to visit the Mahatma should consist of the American, the padre, a subaltern in the Indian infantry battalion then stationed in Ahmedabad, and myself. The evening terminated. Next day we all applied for, and received, official permission to visit Mahatma Ghandi.

Ghandi's 'Ashram,' or college, is on the north bank of the Sabarmati, and quite visible from parts of the cantonment. I was aware of its existence, and had heard, naturally, a great deal about the Great Soul himself, but I did not look forward to the ensuing visit with any feeling of excitement. I have never interested myself in politics, especially Indian politics. My feelings towards Ghandi are, and always have been, completely neutral. I have heard many things against him, but no man
ever enters the public eye without courting calumny. Ghandi’s policy of simplification has been lauded as the perfect system of political salvation for India. It may be. I do not know. Ghandi himself, they say, is a Mahatma, a great soul. He may be, I do not know. If, when he dies, his name appears in the Calendar of Saints, I shall be as pleased as anybody else. On the other hand, if he fails to achieve sanctity, I shall remember him without rancour. As I have already stated, my feelings towards him are absolutely neutral.

It was a sweating hot day when the four of us crossed the Sabarmati to beard the Mahatma in his lair. On reaching the far bank of the river, we discovered that the route to the Ashram was not easily found. We had relied on a preliminary reconnaissance with field glasses from a few miles off. None of us had been there before, and none of us had brought a map. I explained to the subaltern at some length that this was his job, and did not hold forth much hope for him in his forthcoming promotion examination. He replied in adequate terms. Wandered among deserts, or, more literally, lost on a fairly good road on the bank of the Sabarmati. We stopped to interrogate a dhobi, who was battering the life out of some clothes, near a small stream. The dhobi, who seemed mentally on a par with the poor wretches who had perished in the flood, answered our numerous questions only by grinning widely and stabbing an ebony forefinger in the general direction of heaven. Somewhat exasperated, we set an experimental course nearly parallel to the river, and were soon rewarded by various signs of activity. On our right was a low, rambling collection of red-roofed buildings, the Ashram itself, as we discovered later. On our left, the ground, studded with huts and hovels of varying degree, fell away to the banks of the river. Straight in front of us, seemingly immobile, stood a large coloured gentleman, naked except for a loin cloth, bearing a number of cooking utensils on his head with a perfect sense of ease and balance.

We stopped. The American, vastly relieved, and sensing the end of his quest, leapt from the car with surprising agility, dispensing with the usual preliminary of opening doors, and approached the figure on the road.

"Ghandi lao," he demanded.

The Indian evinced less astonishment at this surprising outburst than was shown, rather impolitely, by the European members of the party, and replied in perfect English.

"You ask me to bring Mahatmaji. He is not here. He is praying. He will arrive presently. He will cross this very part of the road. Wait here and you will meet him."

"Having given us our instructions, he salaamed, no mean feat when your head is burdened with about a hundredweight of mixed pottery, and made to depart. The American, however, wasn’t having any. He opened his mouth to utter, I am certain, the words, "Say, wait a minute,"
but, perhaps overawed by his surroundings, achieved only, "Could I speak to you?"

The Indian stopped, turned about, and waited politely for interrogation, which he received in plenty, displaying considerable calm under a rain of questions fired in the third degree manner. We gathered that he was a pupil in the Ashram, got up early, retired early, ate not much, fasted a lot, dug, spun and generally toiled. Very commendable. Again he took leave. Our American friend had been presented with a deal of information. He did not seem impressed.

"That guy's nuts," was his only comment.

He went on, inexhaustible in the heat, to tell us a long story which had something to do with chopping an immense quantity of wood in Minnesota, when the words froze on his lips, his eyes bulged, and his mouth fell agape. A bent figure, muttering in prayer with downcast eyes, was approaching along a path leading from the road to the Ashram. It was the Mahatma.

We were not alone to welcome him. As he came nearer the road, several Indians rushed forward to kneel at his feet and receive some form of benison. He approached, unseeing. It seemed as if he would barge blindly into the middle of us, as we stood there, moonstruck, in the road. The American stepped forward, his hand extended, and his lips wide with an unborn roar of welcome. He was forestalled. An Indian lady, magnificent in a richly embroidered sari, crippled but strikingly handsome, and a man, sound of limb, but certainly the reverse of handsome, materialized. They swooped on the Mahatma, took an arm each, and made to remove him from our contaminating presence. But the American would not be outdone. He followed the oddly assorted trio, and, without ceremony, grabbed the Mahatma by the arm.

"Look here, Mr. Ghandi," he ventured.

The Mahatma, his eyes still on the ground, interrupted him. He was obviously accustomed to such experiences.

"Come and have tea in my house," he said.

There was no welcome in his voice, neither was there repulsion. His speech was toneless, negative and flat, and remained so during the interview. In a daze, we were shepherded into a mud hut. There were no chairs, but one string bed. Ghandi, without further ado, sat on the floor, crossed his legs, produced a spinning-wheel and commenced to spin. The American sat on the bed, which protested loudly. The padre leant against the wall, looking rather like a dying duck. The subaltern stood in his usual manner, at ease, with his mouth open and a look of keen intelligence flashing from his eyes. I sat on the floor.

To start with, there were five of us. Soon there were nearer fifty. Hordes of Indian men, women and children crowded the door, swarmed
at the windows and crawled under the bed. I was terrified lest one urchin, who resembled a human bulldog, would bite the American in the calf and cause an international complication. We remained silent. Ghandi went on spinning. Several more human beings entered the room. Some flies came in as well.

The American, game to the last, attempted a diversion.

"Say, Mr. Ghandi," he said, "I've just been having a look at these mills, and I want your advice."

"I am sorry," the Mahatma answered politely, "I can give you none."

The American had suffered several mild "bouleversements" since stepping ashore on the Indian peninsula, but they must have been "bagatelles" compared to this. He gaped once or twice like a freshly-landed cod. His eyes bulged and he suffered a conversational collapse. There was a ripple in the throng of humanity blocking the open doorway, and a young Indian entered.

"My son," said the Mahatma, and introduced him formally.

There was another ripple and Miriam Slade entered, dressed Indian fashion in a sari of khadr cloth. She went straight to the opposite corner of the room, sat, and gazed on the Mahatma unwinkingly. Of us she took no notice at all. Nobody spoke. The entire situation, which would have been socially reprehensible at a pink tea party, seemed quite in order here. Even so, there was a certain amount of uneasy tension. The Great Soul solved the problem.

"And now," he said decisively, abandoning his wheel, "my son will show you round the Ashram."

Devidas Ghandi led us round the Ashram. We were shown people spinning, digging, planting seeds and performing various useful agricultural and textile work. One thing about the Ashram impressed me deeply. It is the only place where I have ever seen Indians of that type doing a real job of work and liking it. We were led eventually to a shop. The padre bought nothing. I purchased a Ghandi cap and a prayer mat. I regretted this move, for the subaltern, having discovered I possessed some ready cash, promptly borrowed the balance and, with a strong burst of originality, purchased exactly similar articles.

There was nothing more to do than take our farewells to Devidas and motor back. We were sorry for the American, and yet admired him. His mission had failed, yet he was quite prepared to call it a day. He was delighted with his purchases.

"Some guys at home," he remarked, "will be sore when I show them these books."

We drove to the club to partake of very welcome refreshment, which we all needed after an interesting but rather trying day. I returned to
my bungalow to find that my newly-acquired Ghandi cap had been
impounded by my scandalized bearer (I had substituted a respectable old
Mahomedan for the coolly swindling outcast) and condemned to the outer
darkness, or, more literally, thrown into an incinerator. The prayer mat
I had been allowed to keep. It adorned the bathroom. I bathed, changed
into mess kit, and mentally calculated that I might have time for one
short drink before dinner if I hurried. Ghulam Mahomed, my new bearer,
knocked and entered. In his hand was a letter. I opened it.
Captain Y, Indian Medical Service, stationed at Baroda, was worried.
He had not had leave, it appeared, for years and years and years, and it
seemed likely that none would be granted to him for an equal period of
time, due to his awful isolation and numerous responsibilities in Baroda.
As a very junior officer, he went on to explain, I could not understand the
awful stultification, the moral and mental degradation caused in moderately
senior officers by prolonged lack of leave. I, on the other hand, was a
very junior officer. I did not require leave, but I certainly needed
experience and the broadening influence of travel. Baroda was a delight­ful
spot if you were prepared to overlook the temperature, the moisture,
and one or two other inconveniences ignored by youngsters, but devastating
to senior captains short of leave. The club was a nice club. There was
shooting, etc., etc., etc. In short, would I come to Baroda and relieve him
while he recuperated his faded energies in the United Kingdom?
I went to the Mess. I was too late for a short drink, even for soup.
I apologized and sat down, anticipating fish.
"What sort of a place," I asked the subaltern, "is Baroda?"
He was succinct.
"Bloodier than this, if possible," was the reply.
It turned out, however, to be quite a pleasant spot.