

One Hour with Gandhi

By LOY LONG, '25

EARLY in 1933 Mahatma Gandhi organized a society which proposed to remove untouchability from Indian life and give the poor, down trodden out-castes a chance to live as respectable human beings. He even coined a new name for these unfortunate people which has no caste connotations. Today they are "Harijans"—God's children. The society, now known as the "Harijan Sevak Sangh" has become a national organization with branches throughout the land.

It has been my good fortune to be associated with the local Sangh as one of the organizers and as a member of the executive committee. We have surveyed the living conditions of more than nineteen thousand of the depressed class people, proposed a housing scheme for them to the municipality which has been accepted and begun, started night schools, dispensaries, and begun the building of a general hospital. When Mahatmaji visited Poona in June, 1934, a delegation of twelve from Sholapur made the trip of two hundred miles, as did ten other delegations of the Bombay Presidency, in order to present a purse of one thousand rupees to him for the extension of Harijan welfare work.

June the 24th will remain one of my memorable days, I never would have been satisfied to return to the U. S. A. without having seen Mahatma Gandhi, for I recognize him as the man in India who more than any other is making history in our time. I went to Poona as a regular member of the Sholapur delegation and was the only non-Indian among the one hundred and fifty Harijan Sevak Sangh delegates who were to meet Mr. Gandhi that afternoon. We assembled in a college building at 2:30 to discuss the problems which had arisen while carrying on our welfare work in our respective centers. My mind was hardly on the discussion because Mahatma Gandhi was expected to arrive within an hour.

The room was not large; most of the people were sitting on the floor, though others filled two settees and the windows. One chair was reserved next to the settee whereon I sat for Mahatmaji. At three o'clock and thirty minutes past, there was a clattering noise at the entrance of the room, and in walked a little man, clad in the simplest cloth, and took his seat within six feet of me.

When the eager crowd started to rise to pay their respect to the respected man, a leader requested them to remain seated that there might be less disturbance. And this they did, but there was a gasp of respect and honor and love breathed into the atmosphere as he sat down in his chair, at the side of the room. He seemed not even to notice where he was, nor that any one was near. After walking quietly through the crowd, slightly stooped and slow, looking neither to the right nor to the left, he seated himself, crossed his right leg over the other, and kept it there for the next hour. Every now and then he would draw his upper body cloth a little tighter over his small shoulders and press it down over his chest.

Though he was stooped, and quiet, and slow, he did not give the impression of carrying the burden of the world upon his shoulders. In fact he did not seem to be aware that he was in the world at all. At first, I was reminded that even now he is more spirit than flesh. His frame looked so frail and weak that I marvel how it can contain so great a soul. His face was smooth and brown, not wrinkled nor black, and the flesh covered up the bones, but his full round lips would not cover up his few remaining teeth. His teeth seem to have fallen out with each other, and parted company, each moving farther to the side leaving at least two spaces between. And they all point upward instead of down. How like the great soul to arrange it so they, like his mind should keep the upward look!

He was wrapped in two pieces of home spun cloth. Nine feet of coarse white kadi was drawn tightly around his lions to make a pair of pants; and another piece of hand made cloth about six feet long covered him almost as well but more loosely than a shirt. And there he sat cross kneed, twiddling a large silver watch in his fingers on his lap and watching the watch at first instead of the crowd. Humility and love was all that I could see upon his face.

At first his eyes had the far-away look. Behind his oval silver rimmed glasses, his brown eyes seem to be wearing out. There was a rim of gray within the brown like is often found in the eyes of those growing old. For nearly sixty-five years they have served him well, so why shouldn't they show signs of wear?

At first they were the far seeing eyes of age, serious but unworried, with only a bit of life in them that one could see; but when he smiled they changed in a wonderful way, and became the eyes of youth, humor and mirth.

Mahatmaji has a smile worth going to Poona to see. It springs from deep within, then sends advance agents to put a twinkle in two brown eyes, and a flush on his cheeks. Then follows a funny wrinkle of the lips, and it spreads all over his face. His is a hearty laugh that begins with a healthy smile. The glee seems to be coming up the throat because it contracts the muscles and shortens his neck, but it is caught in the roof of his mouth and then given to the listening crowd through muffled lips. It is a choaked little laugh, beautiful to see coming from one whose responsibilities are so great. His smile and his laugh are worth while because they open the gates to his soul, and let others share with him the joy and peace there are inside. I am glad that I have smiled and laughed with him.

And his voice like his frame is badly worn with his days. It is small, soft and mellow but full and firm. In a moment of enthusiasm it might even fill the whole room, but most of the time it hardly reaches the drums of the listeners' ears. When he speaks he seems to be thinking out loud as he arranges the thoughts for his speech. His words come easily but slowly from what surely must be a book-like brain filled during his life long search for truth. I am glad that I have heard his voice and had his words fall upon my ear.

None of the crowd interviewed him personally, and none shook his hand but all meet him and were met by him in that Poona hall where his spirit and greatness were felt by everyone. I have not touched him, nor even the hem of his garment, nor do I care, because I have felt his love and his spirit in a better way. My soul has communed with his. I have met the greatest man of our day.

There is an undescrivable beauty about being so simple and humble and so great that the leaders of the land and statesmen of the empire have to come to him for his word. So approachable is he that even the least would be as welcome in his presence as the highest of the great. I have been blessed by him, not by a personal word said exclusively to me, not by a western hand-shake, but by sitting for an hour by his side. I was only one of a crowd, but one so much in accord with his mind and heart that I must have gleaned more than the rest. They talked, and asked questions, some foolish and some wise, but I listened and watched and caught as much of his spirit as I could. Because of it I'll be a better man.