



### Playing The English Gentleman

**About the author,** M. K. Gandhi.. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948) had a very modest start in his life. Born in a Gujarati family, he went to an ordinary village school, but made the most of it by not only acquiring modern knowledge, but trying hard to imbibe high moral values. He went to England to train as a barrister, and then landed up in South Africa where he fought a years-long battle to win equal rights for his fellow Indians. With the successful experience of fighting the white people in matter of racial rights, he returned to India where he had to confront layers and layers of malaise like an oppressive caste system, abject poverty, and an intransigent ruling class. As his weapon, he adopted two potent weapons that cost nothing, but hit the British colonizers very hard. The two weapons were truth and non-violence that underpinned his mass agitation against the colonizers. He clung to his principles with doggedness and grit, and could finally compel the British to leave India. Gandhi was assassinated by a fanatic, but lived in the hearts of millions as 'Bapu' –the Father of the Nation. Gandhiji's autobiography 'My Experiments with Truth' continues to be read by people young and old in all corners of the world. It remains a beckon of morality, and spiritual rigour.

**About the lesson..** It's the fourth part of Gandhiji's autobiography 'My Experiments with Truth'. It deals with Gandhiji's initial infatuation and later disillusionment with the British life style

My faith in vegetarianism grew in me from day to day. Salt's book whetted my appetite for dietetic studies. I went in for all the books available on vegetarianism and read them.

One of these, Howard Williams' *The Ethics of Diet*, was a 'biographical history of the literature of humane dietetics from the earliest period to the present day'. It tried to make out, that all philosophers and prophets from Pythagoras and Jesus down to those of the present age were vegetarians. Dr. Anna Kingsford's *The Perfect Way in Diet* was also

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an attractive book. Dr. Allinson's writings on health and hygiene were likewise very helpful. He advocated a curative system based on the regulation of the dietary of patients. Himself a vegetarian, he prescribed for his patients also a strictly vegetarian diet. The result of reading all this literature was that dietetic experiments came to take an important place in my life. Health was the principal consideration of these experiments to begin with. But later on religion became the supreme motive.

Meanwhile my friend had not ceased to worry about me. His love for me led him to think that, if I persisted in my objections to meat-eating, I should not only develop a weak constitution, but should remain a duffer, because I should never feel at home in English society. When he came to know that I had begun to interest myself in books on vegetarianism, he was afraid lest these studies should muddle my head; that I should fritter my life away in experiments, forgetting my own work, and become a crank. He therefore made one last effort to reform me. He one day invited me to go to the theatre.

Before the play we were to dine together at the Holborn Restaurant, to me a palatial place and the first big restaurant I had been to since leaving the Victoria Hotel. The stay at that hotel had scarcely been a helpful experience for I had not lived there with my wits about me. The friend had planned to take me to this restaurant evidently imagining that modesty would forbid any questions. And it was a very big company of diners in the midst of which my friend and I sat sharing a table between us. The first course was soup. I wondered what it might be made of, but dared not ask the friend about it. I therefore summoned the waiter. My friend saw the movement and sternly asked across the table what was the matter. With considerable hesitation I told him that I wanted to inquire if the soup was a vegetable soup. 'You are too clumsy for decent society,' he passionately exclaimed 'If you cannot behave yourself, you had better go. Feed in some other restaurant and await me outside.' This delighted me. Out I went. There was a vegetarian restaurant close by, but it was closed. So I went without food that night. I accompanied my friend to the theatre, but he never said a word about the scene I had created. On my part of course there was nothing to say. That was the last friendly tussle we had. It did not affect our relations in the least. I could see and appreciate the love by which all my friend's efforts were actuated, and my respect for him was all the greater on account of our differences in thought and action. But I decided that I should put him at ease, that I should assure him that I would be clumsy no more, but try to become polished and make up for my vegetarianism by cultivating other accomplishments which fitted one for polite society. And for this purpose I undertook the all too impossible task of becoming an English gentleman. The clothes after the Bombay cut that I was wearing were, I thought, unsuitable for English society, and I got new ones at the Army and Navy stores.

I also went in for a chimney-pot hat costing nineteen shillings - an excessive price in those days. Not content with this, I wasted ten pounds on an evening suit made in Bond Street, the centre of fashionable life in London; and got my good and noble-hearted brother to send me a double watch-chain of gold. It was not correct to wear a ready-made tie and I learnt the art of tying one for myself. While in India, the mirror had been

a luxury permitted on the days when the family barber gave me a shave. Here I wasted ten minutes every day before a huge mirror, watching myself arranging my tie and



parting my hair in the correct fashion. My hair was by no means soft, and every day it meant a regular struggle with the brush to keep it in position. Each time the hat was put on and off, the hand would automatically move towards the head to adjust the hair,

not to mention the other civilized habit of the hand every now and then operating for the same purpose when sitting in polished society. As if all this were not enough to make me look the thing, I directed my attention to other details that were supposed to go towards the making of an English gentleman. I was told it was necessary for me to take lessons in dancing, French and elocution. French was not only the language of neighbouring France, but it was the *lingua franca* of the Continent over which I had a desire to travel. I decided to take dancing lessons at a class and paid down £3 as fees for a term. I must have taken about six lessons in three weeks. But it was beyond me to achieve anything like rhythmic motion. I could not follow the piano and hence found it impossible to keep time. What then was I to do? The recluse in the fable kept a cat to keep off the rats, and then a cow to feed the cat with milk, and a man to keep the cow and so on. My ambitions also grew like the family of the recluse. I thought I should learn to play the violin in order to cultivate an ear for Western music. So I invested £3 in a violin and something more in fees. I sought a third teacher to give me lessons in elocution and paid him a preliminary fee of a guinea. He recommended Bell's *Standard*

*Elocutionist* as the text-book, which I purchased. And I began with a speech of Pitt's. But Mr. Bell rang the bell of alarm in my ear and I awoke. I had not to spend a lifetime in England, I said to myself. What then was the use of learning elocution? And how could dancing make a gentleman of me? The violin I could learn even in India. I was a student and ought to go on with my studies. I should qualify myself to join the Inns of Court. If my character made a gentleman of me, so much the better. Otherwise I should forego the ambition. These and similar thoughts possessed me, and I expressed them in a letter which I addressed to the elocution teacher, requesting him to excuse me from further lessons. I had taken only two or three. I wrote a similar letter to the dancing teacher, and went personally to the violin teacher with a request to dispose of the violin for any price it might fetch. She was rather friendly to me, so I told her how I had discovered that I was pursuing a false ideal. She encouraged me in the determination to make a complete change. This infatuation must have lasted about three months. The punctiliousness in dress persisted for years. But henceforward I became a student.