

1

CONVERSATION WITH NICHOLAS ROERICH

by

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LODGE NO. 8

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I trudged up the hill towards Nagar from Katrain one spring afternoon at the end of the 30's. It was a difficult climb, but I was a pilgrim to the shrine of Nicholas Roerich. I felt that the ordeal of going uphill had been appointed by him deliberately to impose asceticism on would-be worshippers. As he had been a legend to me ever since my visit to Russia, when I read the words of Alexander Blok about him, I was in the mood of an ardent admirer and had come all the way from middle India to Kulu.

At last I got to the big house. The liveried servant took my name. I saw the shadow of ^{Madame} ~~Mr.~~ Roerich move across the window of an upstairs room. The painter came out on to the lawn to receive me. He shook me with both hands. His benign presence bent down like that of a prophet on me. The square beard was a striking feature of his personality. The skull cap he wore, with the long jubba cloak, and the gold chain round his neck, gave him the look of a priest of the orthodox church. The warmth of his reception relieved me of the fatigue of the difficult climb. I wiped the sweat off my forehead and followed him as he took me towards one end of a lovely garden.

There were some iron chairs and he seemed to take obvious pleasure in the nimble sunshine of spring.

I said: 'I have come for two reasons: one because I know that you initiated a peace petition to the Heads of States of the world. And second because I wanted to see your paintings of the Himalayas.'

Dolefully he shook his head. It was clear that even in his remote hideout, he had heard the rumours of the oncoming/second world war. ^{inevitable}

As he kept silent, I spoke from the exuberance of my own passion for peace. I said: 'I have been to Spain to fight against fascism. But I could not fight. I fainted at the sight of blood. And I was put out of the International Brigade. I was allowed to be a journalist.

Nicholas Roerich blinked, smiled an evasive smile, then said: 'Violence is bad. I too have fled from violence.'

Only I said until we can stop the sources of violence in the doctrine of hate, we cannot hope to abolish violence.

The sage was silent for a long moment. Then he said: 'I am not sure, I feel like Gandhi -- violence is bad.'

I said: 'The first person I visited on arrival in India from Spain was Gandhiji. He too said: "Violence is bad." And he wondered why I had gone to Spain to fight. I was "not truly non-violent," he had suggested. When I answered that the fascists must be stopped somewhere, before they plunge us into world violence, Gandhiji had said: 'Oh, they will burn in their own fire.' And I had added: 'Yes, but they will make us roast in the same hell with them.'

Nicholas Roerich's face flushed. Then it became discoloured, a soft purple and later it was pink-white. I realised that he was going through the existentialist agony of knowing that we were condemned to live in a tragic age and could not do very much about it.

At last he spoke deliberately as though to change the subject. He said: 'It is a good escape from all that.' The Russian accent in his voice made the words mellow. 'There is so much beauty in these mountains,' he said. 'The colours change all day. And I find myself wondering at the splendour which the gods have given us.'

Mr. Roerich, I said: 'Are there gods?'

'Strange,' he said, 'that you an Indian should ask me.'

I said defensively: 'Oh, if you mean that Shiva dances I agree. In that way I do believe in the energies --'

Nicholas Roerich leaned towards me and whispered: 'There are these energies. Coomaraswamy is right. There is a cosmic dance of the elements. There are storms. There is the great sun. There is the moon. There is the air. There is the earth. There are so many stars. And all of this is connected in the cosmos. There is change. We are born, we live and we pass away -- to be reborn, perhaps part of nature.'

'So you believe in the Vedanta, Karma, and the transmigration of souls.'

He looked me straight in the face. His square cut beard now gave his face a severity I had not sensed in him earlier. I was over-awed, almost defeated. I was hearing from the mouth of a foreigner the dogma of the Hindu dharma.

I said: 'I believe that we grow and evolve and have inner cycles of rhythmic life as part of nature. I am not sure about God and Karma and rebirth.'

Nicholas Roerich conceded: 'Perhaps there is no god with a beard like mine.' And he smiled.

An elaborate teatray was brought in by the liveried servant. And soon Madame Roerich, dressed in an Edwardian^{long} skirt, came in, looking like a Czarina.

I was overawed and tongue-tied. I stood up and bowed. She graciously blessed me, Indian style, by putting her hand on my head.

I realised how the Indian style benediction cooled down my passional feelings about war, my disbelief in the Supreme God, and my explosive opinions about everything.

During this silence, interrupted by the tea ceremony, which was Russian style, tea with lemon in glasses held by silver tumblers, I felt ~~that~~ the soothing effect of ritual.

'The cake -- we made here,' Madame said.

After the climb, I was hungry and ate the chunk barbarously, in big mouthfuls.

Nicholas Roerich did not eat the cake. He just sipped the tea. Madame nibbled at a small piece, perhaps to keep me company. I relished the tea with lemon. I felt that this delicate flavour was better than the mixture of water and tea leaves and milk which prevailed all over India.

Nicholas Roerich said: 'Have you heard of the tea service of Japan ?'

'I said: 'I had read the book of Okakura -- the book of tea.'

'Oh,' he said, 'a beautiful book.... The Japanese have a strange depth.... They can make the cherry blossom tree, a spray of flowers, a piece of cloth, a jade, into symbols of beauty. They can even make a bow into grace itself. We Indians have forgotten the value of simple things.'

'The reason,' I said impertinently, 'is that our old people mistake everything for god. God is dung, dung is god.' I felt happy he had said. 'We Indians.'

But I was sorry after I made this crude statement. I had wanted to shock Roerich, the spiritualist, into a recognition of the utter decadence of contemporary Indian society.

Surprisingly, he nodded his head. And he said: 'The Indians are going through a phase of utter materialism. In spite of Gandhi, they are slaves to the British -- for money.... Sometimes, I forgive the Russian revolution. Perhaps it was a spiritual revolt, as much as murder. The Czars too had begun to worship the West.'

I was reassured that he was not altogether against the Russian revolution.

Madame Roerich blushed to hear her husband say what he had said. She said: 'We must not forget the bloodshed.'

There was silence between us for a while.

Madame Roerich asked me: 'More tea?'

I waved my head.

'Then let us come and see some of the pictures,' Nicholas Roerich said.

The painter got up and led me into the house. In the hall there were small pictures. All of them of Himalayan peaks. One of them in brilliant saffron colour, seemed to make the mountain burn with Nicholas Roerich's inner fire. It was a picture of a mountain at dawn. There was no sun. And yet the glow was like a fire. I stood by the picture for half a minute.

The painter did not move me on. He stood and looked around.

I said: 'I have been researching in London on looking at pictures and seeing them. Can I sit down here?'

The old man himself went in and fetched a chair.

I was embarrassed and took it from his hand and sat down. Politely he left me along, sailing away in his magnificent robe into the interior.

As I sat, contemplating the colours of Roerich's mountains, with their startling white snows, purple sunsets, and the glow of dark twilights, all unlike the obvious mountains, I realised that he was an expressionist. In the Indian style, which might have been, if the Indians knew how the soul was the body and the body the soul. Unconsciously, Roerich, the European, had done what Tolstoy had done before him; absorbed the idea of the changing cosmos of India and painted it in its chameleon colour. The fusion of the concrete European temperament with the essences of the Indian sensibility had produced an almost ultimate art of landscape of the Absolute, far beyond the homely intimacy of a confined village as in Claude Lorraine, or Constable, or even in Cezanne's Mont St. Victoire.

I went into the second room. Most of the paintings were variations on the same theme. Only, in some of them, there were hooded gnomes and other unearthly creatures, parts of Roerich's fantasy. Pg...6/-

The old man was seated in an armchair in the drawing room.

'You must stay the night,' he said.

I was happy that he had offered hospitality, as I would not have known where to go even if I walked down from Nagar to Katrain.

During the evening, and the next morning, I realised that the synthesis between the occidental and the Indian spirit could produce perfection itself.

Certainly, the grace of the Roerich household, which had so much of the Indian hospitality about it, the non-violence of Nicholas Roerich, and ^{Madame}~~Mr~~ Roerich's talk of spirits, all seemed to cohere together in a new kind of sensibility.

I was not surprised to find that Nicholas Roerich was addicted to greeting the early sun, to long walks in the mountains, and that he loved the people around him.

Before I left, he told me of his long trek with Madame Roerich, and his son George, to Peking by foot and on horseback.

I realised that here was an adventurer into the body-soul and soul-body, one of the great souls of the contemporary world, comprehensive in his outlook, and one who had plumbed the depths....
