

April 9, 1917.—Arose this morning with determination. Romain Rolland is at the Hôtel Byron, at Villeneuve. Telephoned; would he receive me? Yes, delighted, any time. Accordingly took a train at 2:35—cold, raw, windy day—passed through Vevey, Montreux—vast Easter Monday crowds and train very slow, crowded with third-class passengers—bound on “pleasure exertions,” as Octavia used to say, soldiers, and the like. Finally, after an hour and a half, passing the Castle of Chillon, reached the little village of Villeneuve. It was but a little walk to the Hôtel Byron, over a bridge, by a little church, under a row of those curious, stunted, clipped trees, with gnarled branches, the *châtaigniers*, that abound along the avenues in this land, to the hotel—a large hotel in a quiet park, quiet and vaguely second-class, not perhaps wholly so, a slightly faded tint and a perceptible odor. The porter said that Monsieur Romain Rolland was expecting me; and he led the way down a long hall on the ground floor. On the way we met a woman, tall, thin, with coarse black hair, coarse red lips, dark,

unhealthy skin, a black scowl and piercing eyes behind thick pince-nez—a reformer type of woman—evidently an admirer, adorer, thought I, of the kind one inevitably finds near great men, especially greatness of the unconventional sort. . . . She passed hurriedly on down the hall, unconscious, apparently, of our presence. . . . At the end of the long hall, in a corner of this wing of the hotel, overlooking the lovely park, I was shown into a bare little sitting room—and there was Romain Rolland.

As usual in such cases, one must pause an instant, in the slight shock at finding the real personality wholly other than the imagined, to adjust oneself. Instead of the rather fierce, impetuous madman that one was led to expect by the remarkable figure of *Jean Christophe*, here was a slight, timid, sensitive, exceedingly modest man, frail, valetudinarian, one would say. Not quite my height (I am six feet), thin, dressed in dark blue clothes—a lounging coat and a clerical waist-coat buttoned to the throat to meet the high collar that nearly choked its wearer—no cravat, long, narrow pointed shoes—on the whole the aspect of a Protestant pastor. A finely modeled head, with high, bald forehead, the thinning yellow hair combed over the dome. A long thin nose and a scanty yellow moustache—the most sensitive of mouths and incisive blue eyes—a thin smile flitting, hovering on the intelligent, delicate features, coming and going like the varying moods of the lake on a calm day, and yet an impression of great nervous force, of courage, of much reserve, as of one who had lived and suffered, and found, not peace, perhaps, but principles by which to be guided in an exigency of life.

And this was the author of *Jean Christophe*, the greatest book of the last quarter of a century, and one of the greatest books of all time; this was one of the great personalities of France, the greatest conscience perhaps in all Europe. One could see that he has suffered (there is much of the musician about him), suffered because of the war, whose horrors must be a nightmare to him, suffered too by being misunderstood, and mistreated because he will not run and bay and howl with the pack, and whose patriotism is too high above the stupid, banal hatred of the mob that bellows whenever a Minister waves a flag and pronounces the silly word “boche.” Hardly a miserable penny-a-liner writes his diurnal paragraphs of silliness for a newspaper that doesn’t have his cheap fling at him—him who will rise above all the calumny of the

times and live long when the noisy voices of his time are forgotten.

The interview did not begin well; he was rather difficult to talk to. I expressed my gratitude, my debt for the pleasure he had given me, and he inclined his head with that wan, nervous smile. Did not seem, indeed, to be sure of me, as though perhaps he had been so pursued and so hounded that he had grown suspicious—as who wouldn't—in a world of spies and insane persons!

And then the woman whom I had seen in the hall came in, and he presented her simply as "my sister." He told me afterwards that she had come on from Paris to spend the Easter holidays with him.

We talked awhile about *Jean Christophe*, but not long; he told me he had planned it all before writing it, that it was all down in his mind before he began to write; it had taken him a long time, how long he did not say. The talk turned soon on the war. Romain Rolland had been talking to soldiers. None of them likes the war, even the Germans, and he was sure that there is revolution brewing in Germany. "It is growing," he said. He spoke too of the awful fatalism the war has generated, of the "*je m'en fichism*" in France "don't worry; let what comes, come."

"We were too happy in France," he said. "Never had men so much liberty as in the last twenty years. And now we must ask ourselves if after the war that liberty will return." He spoke of the reaction towards authoritarianism in all the Allied countries, and was indignant with the censorships.

"Will you have a censor now that you are in the war?" he asked.

"I suppose so," I answered. "We must be in the fashion."

I asked him what books had been written that were worth reading, and he mentioned two: *Le Feu*, by Henri Barbusse, a copy of which I had got in Berne the other day, and *La Guerre Infernale*. He praised each; *La Guerre Infernale* is on the Index in France, but the censor passed *Le Feu*—Romain Rolland couldn't understand why.

Tea was served—we talked—Romain Rolland thawing out, his sister's eyes lighting up with a remarkable intelligence. I wished to know more about them; where they came from, and so on, for neither speaks with the Parisian accent.

I grew to like Romain Rolland, so simple, so sincere, so fond of living and so intelligent, so far above the herd—he used the word again and again.

He wished to know something of my books. I have none with me, and he knows no English. Perhaps he can read Michelin's translation of *The Turn of the Balance* some day. He asked me for a copy. We talked about the whole miserable stupidity of war—sadly, and getting nowhere, as is usual in such discussions. He is a great pacifist, an intellectual, living in a sphere far above that inhabited by the average man. I had to keep my eye on my watch; my train left Villeneuve at 5:23. As the time approached he asked if he might walk down with me. His sister brought his overcoat, a muffler and a great felt hat, and wrapped him up for this promenade. When she left the room to put on her hat, he took my hand, peered into my eyes, and with emotion thanked me for coming to see him. I was quite embarrassed by his eagerness.

We walked along down to the station, under the chestnuts, in quiet conversation. When I told him of a dispatch in today's papers to the effect that Bryan had offered his services as a private, he paused, threw up his hands and looked at his sister in a kind of despair, as a new defection. I explained Bryan to him then.

My train came—and I left them standing, poor lonely souls, waving at me. Lonely, I say, because a great genius is always misunderstood, all the more so in a crazy time like this, with which his nature is wholly out of tune. But I left with that sense of benediction one has when one has been with a great personality, in the presence of a great soul.