

## WHEN CASTE FLEW OUT OF THE DOORWAY

By Margaret Applegarth

You would not have supposed that caste could ever fly out of that particular doorway, but all on account of the boy who fell into the well and a second boy who fell in after him, things were curiously changed. But slowly. Oh, so slowly! For the Haughty Brahman Father was the haughtiest man on earth, you really had to spell him in capitals: his haughty eyes hardly ever fell on a man of another caste without a feeling of utter disdain filling his soul, and his equally haughty sons stalked through the streets sublimely conscious that they, and they alone, were well-beloved of heaven.

Did not the sacred writings say this very thing: "When the great god Brahma created all that was created, from his head sprang forth the caste of Brahmins. It is they alone who are great and worthy therefore to be worshipped by the lesser castes of men, who sprang only from the feet and hands of Brahma," and so forth and so on. I may not have quoted exactly, but the facts are all exact.

The Brahman wore a sacred cord around his body, the *poita*; no outcast man dared walk on Brahman streets; no Brahman ever went into the outcaste village. Between the two there was a great gulf fixed. And Fingiah was an outcaste!

He had the unspeakably horrid task of carting away the carcasses of dead animals who had died of disease. No caste man would dream of touching them—his religion forbade him (for did not one Hindu generation pass it on to another generation that those unloved of the gods became reborn as animals when they died? Would a man risk molesting a possible ancestor? Of course not.) Yet here was poor Fingiah molesting the bones of animals—carting them away, stripping off the hide, and eventually even eating the awful flesh. Indeed, I really do not know how he and other outcastes could have lived without such carcasses to provide their meals; but of course, on diet such as this there was a day when illness came upon the family of Fingiah—and where yesterday

fifteen picked those awful bones, today only one was living, Fingiah. So sudden and swift are India's epidemics.

It was then that one of those perpetually hurried men whom we have sent to India stepped into this tale to doctor Fingiah, saving his life and making such an impression on the boy that when he was well he did what the doctor suggested and redecorated his house.

His house!

Four sticks, for the four corners. A few hand-woven mats, for the walls. A few palm branches for the roof. It was so crude and ramshackle a place, that the word "redecorate" would have amused the Hurried Man, for the hut was too miserable to be made attractive, yet Fingiah mixed buckets of whitewash. He daubed his whitewash all over the inside, until what had been so vile became cleansed and sweetened. The neighbors were tremendously amused—a boy, putting on such airs! A mere boy! Yes, a mere boy, to be sure, but Fingiah purified more than his hut: he cleansed his heart before God, and in doing so lost his livelihood, for can a Christian feed on carrion? on animals that have died of disease? The Hurried Man said "No!" Fingiah sighed. The ways of a new religion were extremely deep and difficult for an ignorant boy to follow, so the Hurried Man sent him to school.

Fingiah was stupid. He was all thumbs! He was all knees! The teachers almost gave him up, when one day, his own Hurried Man heard Fingiah sing—it was ravishing.

"That boy has a matchless voice!" he said, and hurried away.

The teachers whose business it was to stay behind were left nodding their heads in assent: Fingiah plus a matchless voice must not be left stupid. Something must be done with such a talent. They began to polish Fingiah. He took a lot of polishing. But one day, quite by chance, a Lady Teacher overheard Fingiah telling a story to a brand new pupil, and Fingiah was singing it—singing a Bible story! It was the loveliest thing. Just any tune; Fingiah was making it all up as he went along, but the story he had not made up. It was yesterday's lesson.