

THE CHILDREN'S PAGE.

Interesting Letter on Water Carriers in India.

BY REV. NORMAN H. RUSSELL.

I send you this week two pictures of our Indian water carriers; they are different as you see in almost



MOHAMMEDAN WATER CARRIER

everything except their occupation, the reason of the difference will be apparent later on when I have told you who they are and for whom they labor.

India is a land of almost continual heat; the sun beats down with such force that an Englishman at least cannot go out at any time in the year between nine in the morning and four in the afternoon without some kind of protection for his head in the shape of a solar hat. Added to this there is for eight months of the year a high temperature ranging about the nineties and hundreds. With such heat India might well be called the thirsty land and such it is. In the bazaars, on the roadsides, in the railway stations, and at the great religious fairs the cry is "pani, pani" (water, water). Besides this India is largely dependent for her wealth and maintenance on the produce of her fields. To cultivate these or at least many of them irrigation is necessary. For her fields and her many millions of people India needs much water, the supply of which is no small problem. In some parts of India this water supply is drawn entirely from wells, in others from the rivers and streams. The men who draw and carry this water are called in India "bhists" or water-carriers. These water carriers do not of course water the fields; this work is done in many different ways in various parts of India. To describe all these would require a long story in itself so I will reserve this for some other time; suffice to say that in our part of India the water is drawn from wells, and delivered in big leathern bags, carried by bullocks.

The bhisti is the man who supplies our houses, stables and gardens with their daily quota of water. You will see from the pictures that the system is quite different with the two men. The man with the bullock is the one with whom we are best acquainted as he is the water-carrier in general use among the Sahib log or English people. He is usually a Mohammedan.

Mohammedan probably because of the general disinclination Hindus have to carrying or handling anything made of leather of which as you can see, this man's implements are composed. Most of them have a bullock or *bail* as it is called in the Hindu colloquial; over this are placed two leathern bags, one on either side with a hole at the top, by which to fill them, and a smaller one at the bottom kept fastened by means of a leather string, from which the water is drawn. Over his back you will see he has another bag made of the whole of a goat or sheep skin, which has but one opening likewise tied by a string; this is fastened over his shoulder by means of a stout leather strap. His only other implement is a small leather pail about the size of a workingman's dinner pail at home; with this he draws up the water from the well or dips it from the pond or stream. Having filled the two big bags on the bullocks back as well as the smaller one he himself carries he

starts off on his rounds to supply his customers. As a rule the bhisti is employed like any other servant at a fixed salary varying at from two to three dollars a month according to the custom of the district; of course a poor man will pay less, perhaps not more than twenty to thirty cents a month as his needs are smaller and he belongs to a class that pays less for everything. This is one of the strange things about Indian life and trade that you have to pay twice as much again, or twice as much as other people, according to the class of society to which you belong:—first second or third; so that in every bazaar in India you are known and esteemed by the sum you are willing to give for what you buy. The water-carrier has a busy time of it especially in the hot season when more water is needed for all purposes, besides a large supply for the extra work of the *tatti*. This latter is a false door made of grass and fitted into the door frame; it is used only during the day and in the hot season, when it is kept continually wet with water; the hot wind passing through this becomes cool and the temperature of the house is thus kept bearable. As you can well understand the method of water supply by means of leather bags and especially in a hot country is by no means perfect: the bags are not often cleaned and especially when you know that the *bhisti* is not always very particular about whether he puts clean or dirty water into his bags it requires no very strong 19th century imagination to conjure up visions of microbes; often in fact, without the aid of a microscope, one can discern a varied tribe of animalculæ in the water he is offered to drink.

I have told you nothing as yet about the other picture. This man is a Hindu and instead of carrying his water in leather bags he uses earthen, brass, or copper pots. These are suspended one from either end of a long pole, slung across his shoulders, much in the same way as milk used to be carried round in some parts of Europe. The pole is usually made of a split bamboo and has therefore a good deal of spring in it; the pots are suspended by means of ropes, or as in the case of the man in the picture, by lengths of cane. In this way the water is not contaminated by touching leather, which to the Hindu and especially the Brahmin would make it too impure to drink. At the railway stations where the continual cry of the many passengers is "water, water," it is necessary to employ a Brahmin water-carrier so that all castes may have their prejudices regarded, for though all men may drink from the hands of a Brahmin none except one of his own caste may give him to drink.



HINDU WATER-CARRIER.

Many amusing scenes might be described in which the water-man figures as chief actor, especially in his attempts to satisfy the thirsty ones on a long railway journey; no one is of more importance, no one receives more adulation from the passengers than the humble water-man; it is "he maharaj! he maharaj!" or some such title of honor usually reserved for the great of the earth. And after all is it not so? What would we do without the water-man and who, especially in the hot weather, is of more importance? In the Oriental mind at least few pictures are more intensely vivid than "cold waters to the thirsty soul."