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## The Parsis

Malabar Hill, in Bombay, India, an elevated point of land jutting out into the sea, affords one of the most charming views that can anywhere be found. On the top of this hill, made specially beautiful by gardens, may be seen a strange building called 'The Tower of Silence,' a bird's-eye view of which our cut shows. The walls of the building are of granite, about twenty-five feet high, and the huge structure has no windows and but one small door. As you will see, it is open to the sky. It is the place to which the Parsis bring the dead bodies of their friends and there leave them.

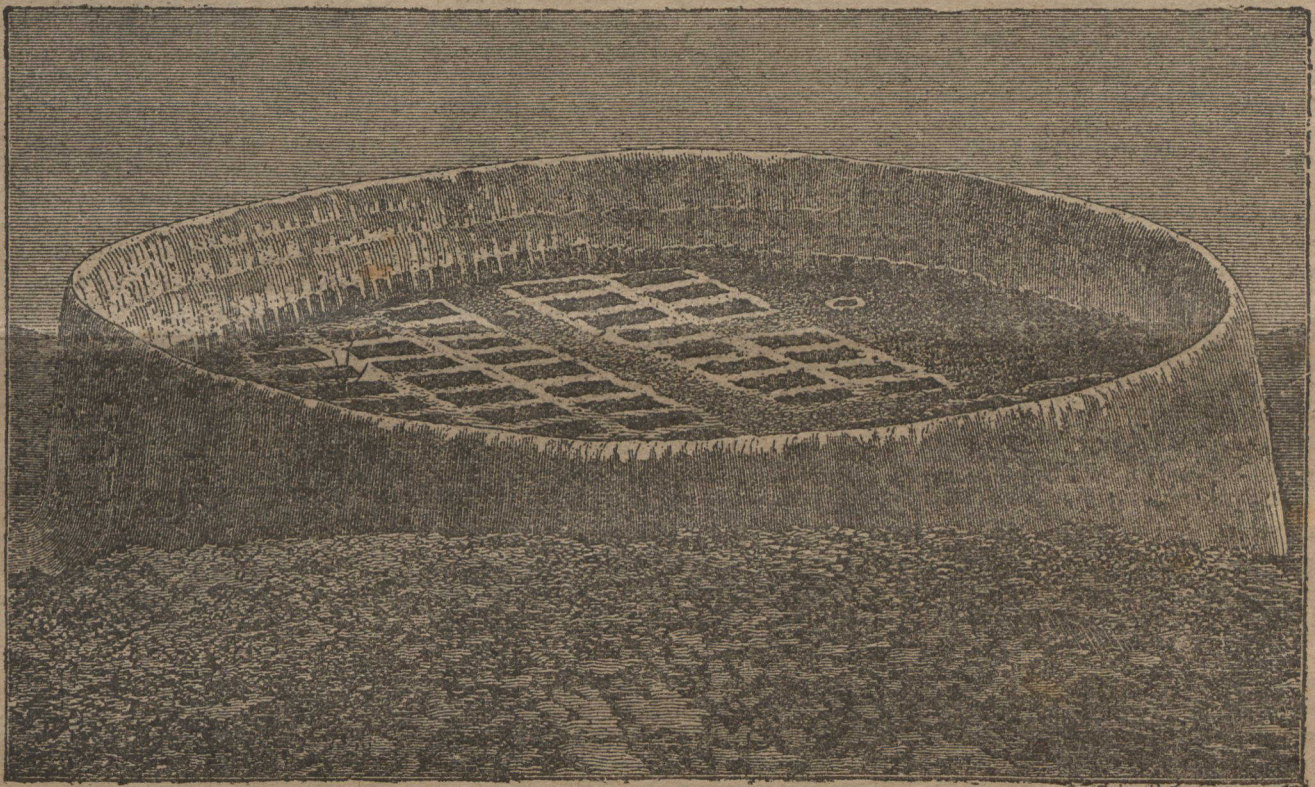
And who are the Parsis? They are the descendants of the ancient fire-worshippers of Persis who fled to India about the

the Zend Avesta, Sir Monier Williams says: 'It is a jumble of a few sublime thoughts mixed up with an overwhelming mass of superstitious ideas expressed in the most obscure and corrupt form of language.'

Among the singular customs prevalent among these people one concerns their very birth. A Parsi must be born on the ground floor of a house, since he ought to commence life in humility and advance upward as he grows older. They are greatly given to ablutions, chiefly with the idea of keeping off the evil spirits. At the age of seven years a young Parsi is subjected to religious ceremony, during which he is bound with a cord or girdle, made up of seventy-two threads, after which he is supposed to be morally accountable. One

attend, but each repeats his own prayers separately. The fruit and wine are then shared by all present.'

The most peculiar of the Parsi customs are those connected with the disposition of their dead. At the time of death the hands and feet are tied and the body dressed in white clothes. A dog is then brought in, which by his keen scent is supposed to drive away evil spirits. Priests in attendance are praying for the soul of the departed. Inasmuch as no Parsi may touch a dead body, attendants deliver it to four pall-bearers, who are dressed in spotless white. A procession of priests and relatives then moves toward the Tower of Silence. After ceremonies and prayers before the door, the bearers alone enter, laying the corpse upon the stone floor, and



year 720 A.D., when their country was conquered by the Mohammedan Arabs. They form a distinct though not very numerous class of people. By the last census there were 85,000 of them in India, 73,000 of whom were living within the Bombay Presidency. They are an intelligent and well-to-do class, much in advance of the Hindus about them. They are fire worshippers, though one of their members claims, 'We do not worship the fire or the sun, we worship him of whom they are the type.' But another Parsi says that in his childhood he did worship the sun, and that should one watch the Parsis of Bombay at sunset he would see them bowing down to it, and would feel sure they were worshipping the sun. Their sacred book is the Zend Avesta, and their prophet is Zoroaster, who is supposed to have been born in the twelfth century. The Parsis are money-getters pre-eminently; they are engaged largely in trade, and many of them are successful and rich. Of

noticeable point, quite contrary to the practice of all other classes in India, is the custom among the Parsis of permitting the girls to go through the same ceremonies and to visit the temples and recite the same prayers as do the boys. They are said to be the only class of people in the world who do not use, in one form or another, tobacco or some similar noxious weed. This does not appear to be from any high principle, but chiefly on account of cleanliness. The Parsis are much given to feasting, their feast days being numerous and marked by much eating and merrymaking. The religious ceremonies which accompany these feasts have been thus described: 'A number of priests assemble in one of the rooms of a fire temple, bringing a portable fire vessel which is placed on the ground with offerings of fruit, flowers and wine. Two priests attend to the sacred fire, while the others sit around and repeat prayers, praises, and thanksgivings conjointly. Laymen also

then retire. All round the place may be seen at any time a swarm of vultures, watching their opportunity, and the moment the bearers have withdrawn, these vultures swoop down upon the dead body, and in a few moments nothing is left but the bones clean and bare. The Parsis deem this method of disposing of their dead, so hideous to us, as preferable to burial in the ground. The Parsi priests are very illiterate, not understanding the prayers they say or the portions of their sacred book which they repeat. But these people are becoming much more intelligent through their contact with the English. Only a few of them have become Christians. Yet one of them who did become a Christian said, not long since: 'As a Parsi I gave alms, I burned sandalwood. I said prayers, I attended ceremonies, but I had no peace in my heart. But from the hour I gave myself to Christ I have been full of joy, and my joy grows greater every day.' The chief reason why so few of them have