

BENARES THE BLESSED!

Sights, Scenes and Incidents of Indian Life.

The Pilgrims to Benares—The Sacred Washing in the Ganges—"The Well of Knowledge"—Monkey Worship.

Travelling in an Indian railway is peculiarly different from railway travelling in the Western world. The scenery, the carriages, the fellow passengers, the atmosphere, all strangely add to, or detract from the pleasure of the long ride. To Benares, a distance of 425 miles from Calcutta, we are in the Ganges Valley. The scenery is attractive though with a marked sameness throughout the entire distance. No fences, hedges, or ditches, no farm-houses or barns, for the natives live together in villages; no well-kept highways with their busy traffic, no horse teams to be seen in the wide fields on either side, but as far as the eye can reach there is the same level country speckled with myriads of natives, or "ryots," as farmers are called, at work, some threshing grain by means of hump-shouldered cattle treading it, some winnowing it by standing on a mound and tossing the grain and chaff into the air so the wind may carry off the chaff, some ploughing with a bent stick, some gathering in grain on the backs of their cattle, some drawing water for irrigation from tanks by bullock teams, in fact, in farming districts, the cattle are employed in nearly all the labor. Now and again we leave the rice fields for a deep wooded jungle, but only for an instant, then probably a native village, swarmed with children, is passed, with its hundred or so mud-walled or brick flat-roofed houses or huts. Occasionally a rolling ridge may be seen, then a small stream of muddy water, looking as if there were four hours more of the intolerable heat would completely dry it up. The railway carriage has colored windows to shield the passengers from the glare of the sun, and to cool the air within is provided with a "tattie"—a large revolving wheel of woven grass in an open window, which, when turned, brings up water from a tank beneath it. This ingenious contrivance serves a triple purpose. It keeps the passengers' eyes from turning red, it cools the atmosphere within its moisture, and it ensures the occupants of the carriage a chronic stiff neck, neuralgia, rheumatism or lumbago for the rest of their natural life. The fellow passengers on the train are a varied assortment in the third class carriages, which are all open at the sides to give plenty of ventilation, are some hundreds of devotees huddled together with their food, drinking and cooking vessels, and the little extra clothing required on their pilgrimage to the Holy City. In the second and first class carriages are the wealthy Indians and the few European travelers. In our carriage a young Hindu, dressed in white muslin, attempted to enlighten us in the mysteries of his religion and the preparation of betel nut, a red mixture which they chew like tobacco, but after a whole day's ineffectual efforts he gave up. He had a difficult task considering that all communication with the natives on our part was carried on by means of signs. We tried to cheer some of his heavily bearded men, but since then have the same weary and anything red (except wine) that a bull has to a razor. We could not, however, induce him to partake of our hospitality in the shape of fruit, cakes or water on account of our "caste" differing from his. He allowed us to inspect a beautiful amulet he wore, in which were some valuable precious stones, a large diamond might aptly be the proud centric-piece of a ducal coronet. The atmosphere in the day time is stifling, in the evening pleasantly cool. The windows are all closed to keep out the hot winds and dust. Fortunately the train rushes along with comparatively few stoppages, and when it does draw up for a few minutes a dozen naked coolies crowd about to sell us fruit or dirty cakes, while our ears are continually greeted with the cry of "phawnee, phawnee" water, water, from men with long skirts and shawls slung over their backs, filled with a fluid substance they are pleased to style water.

Reaching Muzrai Junction we are transferred to a branch line running up to Benares the blessed, at whose station the train in due time arrives. Taking a "chara" or "char" is a crowd of the strange old bridge of boats over the Ganges which is shortly to replace one of the finest bridges in the world. This sacred Hindu shrine, its mosques, temples, palaces and tapering domes stretching before us, which we saw in the distance of the Ganges, is no other than the Holiest city of Hindostan—the Hindu's Jerusalem. The river here is half a mile wide and very deep, and along its margins for three miles are flights of steps or "chauts," pagodas, temples and rest-houses for pilgrims. There are, it is estimated, over 1000 tapering pagodas, and these with the minarets of half as many mosques, give a truly picturesque appearance to this wonderful old place. We drove direct to the only English hotel kept by an elderly gentleman of the "scotch" family. The mention of Benares must ever remind my traveling companion and myself of the hospitality and kindness of the Rev. Geo. Bullock, Presbyterian missionary, to whom we had letters of introduction. In the evening we called upon him, and he kindly undertook to guide us about the city and explain its strange sights. So by five o'clock the next morning, the carriage was started on its rounds. The first place visited was a large tank 200 feet square, in which many of the people were performing their religious ablutions and ceremonies. Mr. Bullock informed us this place is used specially for ancestral worship. Close by the tank is a temple devoted to "Hanuman," the monkey god, also one of the large printed stone figures, badly carved representations of these animals. Leaving here the next place of interest is a Hindu college, but unfortunately the pupils are on holiday. The interior school arrangements would not be very inviting to our American youth. A small room 20 x 30 with no ventilation except from an opening overhead to give light, was

the principal class room. Seated on a marble quadrangular platform raised a couple of feet above the floor a hundred or two lads are obliged to swelter through the hot day with their teachers sitting about on mats instructing them in the wisdom of the Hindoos. No school furniture, nothing that would indicate that it was a place of learning. In one corner is a bucket and a dark deep hole from which water is drawn with a rope to satisfy those who thirst for more than knowledge. Next we proceeded to an old observatory where the learned Brahmins and the kings and rulers many centuries ago with great bulky stone arcs, circles, dials, and other peculiar instruments, predicted eclipses, and otherwise became acquainted with the mysteries of the heavens. It is an undisputed fact that Indian pundits (learned men) had a knowledge of astronomy 3,000 years B. C., and it is a question yet undecided whether the Indians, Chinese, Egyptians or Chaldeans were the earliest astronomers. From the observatory the river is reached and what a scene open out to our astonished eyes. It is the hour of the holy merriment, when the pontifex and the pilgrims gathered from all parts of India are going through their religious exercises. From this city there is a road right into the Hindu heaven. A short time in the sacred atmosphere of Benares is the "Open Sesame" to the golden gates of the Hindu future for the million or so pilgrims who resort here every year. No wonder they crowd down, with a burning zeal that pales into insignificance that of Christians, to bathe and go through their merriments and receive the red or white mark on the forehead from the priests to show they have performed their religious duties. Before us is the wide river, its sluggish, dirty water rolling slowly by. Leading down to the edge are some forty steps stretching along for about half a mile, and on planks stretching into the river are the thousands of devotees talking, swimming, splashing, drinking, washing, rubbing, scrubbing, clarifying and purifying both body and soul. But we want to move among the bathers, and we have to start to the great crowd, pulled up and down the river. No doubt it is a pleasing part of their religion, as well as convenient and wholesome, for a flock of ducks on a frog pond could not enjoy themselves more thoroughly than do these pilgrims. From the hot stone pavement a miserable emaciated skeleton of an old man who showed signs of life when touched. Perfectly naked and dying he had been brought to the river's edge that he might have an easier descent to the golden gates. Mr. Bullock, with a desire to alleviate his sufferings, procured some water and was about to put it to his lips, when stopped by some natives who begged him not to touch the dying man, or it would spoil his future prospects. We were then directed to the "Well of Purification." This, our guide informed us has a peculiar history. One of the gods of the Hindu Trinity, Vishnu I believe, was sitting one day contemplating the scene before him when something caused him to laugh so heartily that he fell back on his side, and a great flood of water, here he dug with his own hands a great well some 40 feet long, 20 ft. wide, and 30 ft. deep, and filled it with his perspiration as the result of his labor. Here the devotee is purified forever, the Ganges only washes away the sins of the past. We reverently approached, raised the corner of a tarpaulin covering spread over the steps leading down to the pool, looked down, and just had time to observe at the bottom some half dozen people washing themselves and drinking of the thick black liquid, we involuntarily drew back and got to windward of it. The reason may be inferred when it is stated that for hundreds of years this has been a purgatorial cesspool, if these words can convey our meaning. The only replenishing source is the hot pints thrown in from time to time by pilgrims, who then go down below and wash themselves in about two feet of water that would be nearly thick with dirt. Near here were several groups of fakirs, ascetic religious fanatics who are continually inflicting tortures on themselves while praying, reading or chanting praises to Vishnu. Their sinners at least, their praise-worthy though we laugh at their maudlin appearance and the severe asceticism they practice. One was in a small temple about four feet square and has been doubled up in this coffin for many years, never leaving it, and living in the charity of pilgrims. We thrust our head in the small doorway, the glance is sufficient. Further on, seated cross-legged in a circle are a half dozen more naked, strange, weird-looking creatures with coarse matted long hair hanging down their shoulders, smeared from head to foot with ashes, leaves, Ganges mud, rice, lotus flowers, and in describable filth; their eyes ghastly and sunken, each muttering some prayer or incantation, or naming his gods. One young fakir made himself more conspicuous than the rest by singing with a wild, sad, never-to-be-forgotten refrain a peculiar "little thing of his own," accompanied by a one stringed instrument. This wail a chant haunted us all day, even in our dreams that night we started up with a feeling of sadness as its mournful cadence rung in our ears, seemingly accompanied by the appropriate words.

Oh! where shall rest be found, Rest for the weary soul!

Another of this brotherhood sat close beside the singer with one hand in a peculiarly shaped bag. He was counting his beads so that no one would know how many he had. He was a pretty embodied—with a dim remnant of a human face, unfathomable oracles—at least in that part of them not filled with dyes—and beamed with red and white clay, his body looked as if it had had an accident with a threshing machine. Some of these fakirs sit with clenched hands till the nails grow through the flesh at the back; others hold an arm above their head until it loses all power, or stand in one position until the legs become rigid and unbendable, and an instance is known where one caused seven chains to be fastened through incisions in the flesh for seven consecutive years; thus by self torture they aim to do works of merit, separate the soul from the body and be absorbed into their gods. Near this nest of fakirs is the burning ghats, or places where the dead are cremated. Three or four hundred friends and relatives of the deceased are standing about watching the bodies being prepared for the torch. Even while we wait a small procession brings down some object bound up in cotton swaddling tied to two bamboo poles which when placed on the ground we recognise to be a body for cremation. It is carefully thrown down, the feet and legs in the waters of the Ganges, while the pile is being made ready. It is evidently not a grave matter for a sign of sorrow is not observable in the faces of these philosophic Hindoos. There are altogether six bodies to be burnt and the bodies are really there, the crowd of hard wood and intermixing it with light sticks of bamboo and sandal wood. The pyre when built up a couple of feet receives its prey, then more wood is built about it until the body is perfectly covered with it. The first torch is lit and the body is consumed in about half an hour. The ashes are thrown into the Ganges. The pyre of the wealthy is made of sandal wood, spice wood, incense, ointments, and fragrant flowers, and there we are obliged to draw ourselves up as interesting as a hanging. Ascending to the top of one of the fine minarets of a large Mohammedan mosque we were shown in the distance a particular spot, the supposed birthplace of Buddha. The city is a crowded city with its narrow alleys, flat roofed houses and multitude of human nakedness—a veritable anti-hill. Descending we went our way through the narrow, well-paved but filthy streets, crossing the river as easily as a state sacred bull to pass. In every little shop are great quantities of Benares' brass work, vessels of peculiar design and hand workmanship which Europeans with all their boasted ingenuity could not excel in making. Here a certain pair of silks, gold and silver filigree work, and in precious stones. Before leaving we became the happy possessor of a brass household god—a hideous grinning monkey, with a huge moustache, his tail curled up, and a pair of legs, a pair of very brief trousers, a hat and waistcoat. This is "Hanuman," the monkey god, and plays a very important part in the Hindu religion. But there are two or three sacred places yet to visit. Crossed the small square used as a market place, we saw a "Well of Knowledge." It is covered over by a gilded canopy, and near it are seated some hundred or more noisy pilgrims naming their gods. As far as we could learn, it is a merit to name aloud some particular god a great number of times. The number being tallied by counting aloud, and when those are all gone over they are checked off by removing a grain of rice from one dish to another, and so on ad infinitum. They all appeared to name the same god, but some were secretly counting by keeping deep in their hands a small bag containing a cow's head in shape, and thus precluding the possibility of their neighbors knowing how often their gods were named. Our friend on a former occasion named one of those reticent fellows why he did not name his god, and he freely by showing his fellow worshippers what he was doing with his hands. His prompt reply was, "For the same reason that you are taught by your religion not to let your left hand know what your right hand doeth." "Well of Knowledge" is about 49 or 50 feet long, was presided over by a priest who drew up water by a rope and bucket, and ladled it out to the devotees. The unbounded faith of the believers was not to be easily put out by the sulphuretted hydrogen smell of the brown looking stagnant waters. Knowledge is not attained without noble effort and sacrifice, but we didn't banker after knowledge; in this case it was "a dangerous thing." We satisfied ourselves with the pleasure of seeing others get knowledge and wondering that it did not in every case immediately result in a higher plane of a narrow passage, the temple of the Sacred Bulls is reached. At the entrance-way our party is stopped by the attendant priests, and a long parley ensues between our conductor and them as to permission to pass through. The missionary by gentle persuasion. The form of sundry playful pats on the head and shoulders, and his goodnatured talk in their language, overcomes that difficulty, and we are in the midst of a crowd of bulls and bull-worshippers. The enclosure is about 100 feet square, and the sides are well built marble arched stables, carved and embellished in princely manner; in the centre of the square a large tapering pagoda stands, inside which are the priest's raiment and other sacred articles pertaining to sacerdotal calling. "Chanted" to posts in the stalls was counted twenty-three fine fat, laxy bulls that had never carried a yoke, presented by the Maharajahs, when calves, to fill the places of old ones as they died off with age or the results of high-living and no exercise. These were being fed by their worshippers who took very good care to keep them securely chained. One, however—the twenty-fourth—was permitted to "range the court yard free," slightly modifying Gildsmith.

This one was small, blind, and deformed about the head, but seemed a general favorite, and certainly calculated to arouse the jealousy of the good gods to see the quantities of boiled rice, oil cake, and other delicacies fed to this crooked-headed, ugly bovine by the female portion of the devotees. We learn that he is specially worshipped by women, owing to the belief that from him alone is vested the power to restore health and perfection of womanhood to the sex. But alas! new world curiosity has got us all into trouble. Our travelling companion has overstepped the bounds of Hindu propriety by overstepping

the threshold of their sacred pagoda. Led by curiosity to see what was inside, he stood within the open doorway and began to take stock. This is not permitted, an unbeliever, and only the Brahmins among the Hindoos are thus privileged. Inside of ten seconds the three of us are surrounded by a furious mob, yelling, gesticulating, threatening, pulling and hustling. We are unable to stand our ignorance of their laws personally, but fortunately Mr. Bullock intercedes beseechingly on my brother-in-law's behalf. We resort to pecuniary considerations for the damage done but on that point the natives being in India we did not cause the situation to open the door. They were implacable. Our conductor told us to gradually work our way to the gate, while he tried to pacify the crowd by addressing them. As every word spoken by him and the infuriated natives was incomprehensible to us, we did not feel like stopping to take notes, but beat a hasty retreat to the gate followed by a howling jabbering crowd. Fortunately there were no blows struck, but we were none the better for the severe jostling and scare, and fell: the crowd was so dense that we were unable to get a reverential dignity when fooling round a Hindu pagoda, or it might be worse for us than Mark Twain's experiment of tickling a mule's heels to see him wag his ears. The sacred Monkey Temple is a short distance from the main part of the city. This at one time contained a great number of sacred monkeys, fed and pampered as the sacred bulls are, but their numbers are growing beautifully less. They know and take advantage of the sacred light in which they are held by the natives, and it is common thing for a pack of monkeys to raid a small village and carry off food and any attractive article they fancy. A guide told us that he saw three monkeys attack a man with a load of sugar-cane, and force him to take to his heels, leaving them in possession of the sweetest morsel of which they are so very fond. We next direct our way to the Sanskrit College, known now as Queen's College, which has an English department, comprising mathematics, poetry, history and political economy. The principal, a German, kindly showed us about through the various departments, where were numerous Hindoos, a few Mohammedans and native Christians, and some English youths at work, all numbering about 600. The assistant teachers are natives, most of the highest level of the Brahmins. It appeared a little *fa dy* for an M. A. to be going about in a white muslin petticoat and a large red blotch—the priest's mark—on his forehead. This old college boasts the largest and best collection of Sanskrit manuscripts extant. The Hindu scholars are excellent mathematicians and pre-eminently superior to the English youths in mental philosophy and metaphysics, and according to their account, western scholars are following in the footsteps of their sages who lived three thousand years ago. But it is near eleven o'clock and as we do not attempt sight-seeing after that hour until five, we repair to our friend's bungalow, a large, cool, comfortable house, to have breakfast. Life in this Hindu city must be burlesomous. To live here after your morning such strange spectacles of humanity as we saw this morning surely does not give that happiness that flows from a contented mind. The entire British population, including soldiers, children, railway and civil servants does not exceed 200, compared with a stationary population of a quarter of a million of natives, which is augmented to nearly half a million in the pilgrimage season. Mr. Bullock and his co-workers in India did it very slow turning these deep-rooted Hindu idolaters to Christianity; but we visited a neat little roomy population of a quarter of a million of natives, which is augmented to nearly half a million in the pilgrimage season. Mr. Bullock and his co-workers in India did it very slow turning these deep-rooted Hindu idolaters to Christianity; but we visited a neat little roomy population of a quarter of a million of natives, which is augmented to nearly half a million in the pilgrimage season. Mr. Bullock and his co-workers in India did it very slow turning these deep-rooted Hindu idolaters to Christianity; but we visited a neat little roomy population of a quarter of a million of natives, which is augmented to nearly half a million in the pilgrimage season. 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