

THE MISSIONARY WORLD.

A SACRED CITY.

The "sacred," or rather loathsome, city of Benares lies on the north side of the Ganges, at a place where the bank slopes high above the stream and bends crescent-shaped to the north. Wide flights of stairs or ghats lead down to the brink, and succeed each other in rapid succession for a mile or so all along the river-bank. These lead to temples or to the huge caravanserais which have been built by the various rajahs of India, and which are the lodging-houses of the pilgrims who come from the raja's dominions. The river-bank, high naturally for the Ganges, has been made higher by the ruins of centuries, which have served for the foundations of the modern buildings. The whole place has that general look of disrepair which is common to all Hindu religious places, and which arises from the selfishness of pagan devotion. It is an act of merit to build a temple or caravanserai; but when these are once built, the succeeding generations prefer to win merit for themselves by building new temples to increasing the merits of others by keeping the old buildings from tumbling into ruins. The river has undermined the bank occasionally, and brought down the buildings standing near. Two large ghats have sunk and houses and temples on the high bank above have either disappeared bodily, or are represented by heaps of rubbish, or stand with huge cracks in the walls. At other places huge basements of pillars are seen, almost and wholly submerged. One wishes that, if the people were only safely out of it, the Ganges would make up its mind to it, and with one good "spate" sweep the whole abominable thing away bodily.

We got a boat, and went slowly along the river-bank a few yards from the water's edge. At the foot of each ghat wooden landing-stages stretched out into the river, supported on bamboo scaffolding; and from these, or from the lowest steps of the long staircases, the crowds of worshippers were bathing. Some took water in the hollow of the hand and threw it lightly on forehead, hair and breast, repeating the sacred formulae as they did so. Others were washing their clothes. Others, almost naked—the men with waistband only, the wo-

men girt with the ends of their saris—plunged forward in the water and threw up the soles of their feet to the surface, or ducked down in the water. All made a point of drinking the water. Young children squirmed and screamed as they were ducked by fond parents; the boys shouted and leapt from a height into the water. The religious rito was great fun to them. All along the banks, priests at the receipt of custom, sat on wooden platforms, under great umbrellas made of reed matting, ready to paint the sacred marks on the foreheads of pilgrims who had bathed. Some ghats are reserved for high-caste people, and there Hindu ladies and gentlemen are seen bathing in the same way, and vigorously drinking the water.

Three great spaces on the river-brink are used as cremation grounds. We saw the process in all its stages—the body lying on the bank, wrapped tightly in white or red cloth, while the pyre was building; oblong pyres of wood in flames, the head of the corpse barely visible; men raking the ashes of wood and human remains into the river. Most people are too poor to pay for wood enough to burn the body thoroughly; the poorest cannot afford to buy more than will only lightly scorch the corpse. In these cases the remains, slightly charred, are thrown into the stream. The set of the current continually carries these back to the side of the river. We saw at three different places a partially burnt human head floating where the people were bathing and drinking. The whole thing was so repulsive to me that I would gladly have thrust out into the middle of the river and got out of the neighbourhood; we had begun, however, and had to go through with it.

On our return voyage we floated down in mid-stream, and saw the distant effect of houses, temples and palaces crowded together from river-bank to sky-line. Hindu architecture repels me, and it did so especially at Benares. The meanest Moslem mosque is to my mind a more beautiful building than the costliest Hindu temple; and I confess that as my eyes wandered down the sky outline they rested somewhat complacently on the slender minarets of the mosque of Aurungzeb, rambling Hindu temples beneath it.

We landed and went to see the city. I had read and knew

something about the loathsome *arcana* of Hindu religion; but I did think that when I had privately warned the guide to keep us away from the worst, things would not have been so bad as they were. Our guide, a Moslem, obeyed gladly; but it was impossible to take six steps in that brutal, lustful place without being confronted with the most obscene symbols. The priests, sometimes repulsive-looking, at other times grave, noble-looking men, came round us, begging and inviting us to look now at this, now at that shrine. The streets were the narrowest of narrow lanes. Cows and dogs, monkeys and donkeys, all sacred wandered about, and added their share to the filth and to the smells of the place. We finished the day with the cow and the monkey temples. The former, which we entered, is a square, covered court, with the shrines in the middle, painted red. It is a huge byre without the stalls. The worshippers—men and women—when they entered, kissed the filthy threshold, then touched it with their foreheads, then bowed thrice to the shrine, then touched the tail and head of a cow and touched their foreheads with their fingers, and finally bowed to the brutes wandering about inside, while the priests sat serene above the filth and votive-offerings.

Crowds of women, mostly prostitutes, thronged the streets or appeared on the house-tops; old creatures, men and women who had come to Benares to die, sat in corners, or crept and crawled close to the wall; and at every yard or so little niches were cut into the walls to hold obscene emblems. I had read about all this. It is easy to read about it; to see it was so utterly loathsome that it made me quite sick. Yet, as I have said, we did not see the worst. This was the "sacred city" of Benares, this Gomorrah, where Satan's seat is.

The monkey-temple, to which I went somewhat unwillingly, was the cleanest and least objectionable. Near it is an ancient tamarind tree, within whose hollow trunk the sacred monkeys bring forth and nurse their young when not dislodged by cobras. The place swarms with these hideous brutes, which, luckily, have a salutary dread of a white face. The temple is small; but before it is a huge tank, in which the worshippers bathe, while the monkeys look on.

Benares, as we saw it, was not so bad as Corinth was in St. Paul's days. The religions of Greece and Rome, when stripped of all glamour, had sides as hideous as the darker recesses of Benares into which we did not penetrate. Yet Christianity conquered Rome in three centuries, and we have been at work in Hindustan scarcely a third part of the time.

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