

FRANK G. CARPENTER'S LETTER.

IN THE GANGES

HOW THE HINDOOS WORSHIP THEIR GODS AT THE HOLY CITY OF NEARES.

A Million Pilgrims and Thousands of Brahmins—The Monkey Temple and Its Terrible Goddess—Shiva and the Sacred Bulls—Sacred Bulls—Scenes Among the Bathers—Cremation or a Hot Road to Heaven. Queer Sights and Scenes in the Mecca of Hindustan.

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BENARES, India, June 16.—This is the holiest city on the face of the globe. All who die within 50 miles of Benares, whether they be Hindu or Mohammedan, Buddhist or Christian, have to go straight to heaven. Even to visit Benares is to go to heaven. It is the holiest city on earth. The tomb of Confucius in China, the birthplace of Mohammed at Mecca and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher at Jerusalem all put together have not half the worshippers. More than a million pilgrims annually kneel at these shrines. In coming to them thousands have prostrated themselves again and again measuring their journey by their own lengths, and every pilgrim thus goes around the holy spots near the city, making a circuit of 45 miles. This pilgrimage

down with the lips smacking. When the Mohammedans once tried to take Benares it is said that one of the stone gods of the Brahmins jumped into this well.

With the Sacred Bulls.

Not far from the Golden Temple is the Cow Temple, filled with animals holy to Shiva. This is more like a stable than a church. Imagine a court the size of the ordinary barnyard with a bandstand in the center. Let the court be walled around with the great stables, in which a hundred sacred bulls stand. They are white and dove-colored and as clean-limbed as a Jersey. They have great humps on the backs and their ears hang down like those of a rabbit. They are as fat as butter, and fatter by far than the lean pilgrims, who honor about them, giving them bread and flowers. Here and there a courtyard a bull or cow moves, munching flowers and grass handed to it by the pilgrims. I saw one go up the steps to the altar in front of the god, and bite at a wreath of flowers about a worshiper's neck. The Hindu thought this a favor of the gods and he brought Ganges water and gave it to the bull. I saw one pretty girl hugging a bull. She was a slender brown woman in a form, worthy to be a model for Venus, was clad in a single strip of dark navy blue cotton. She had a red cashmere shawl around her head, which hid all but her great black eyes and her nose and arms were bare and in the former she held a garland of bright yellow flowers, one yard in length. She brought this to the biggest and most beautiful bull in the temple, and chanted a prayer as she handed it to him. The dove-colored beast ate the flowers and as he did so she threw her arms around his neck and gave him a hug. It made me think of a bull of Memphis, who was worshipped by the Egyptians, and also the fair lo, whom Juno turned into a cow because of the flirtations of Jupiter.

These sacred cows and bulls are to be seen everywhere. They are bovine gentlemen and ladies of leisure who go about strolling in the shops and crowds of human beings. They are fed and then they visit a fruit stand or vegetable seller's and take a bit of such food as they fancy. The people do not strike them or hit-treat them in any way. They will not eat beef and to slaughter cattle would not only lose them their caste in this world, but doom them to punishment for all time to come.

Outside the Golden Temple stood men peddling flowers for the bulls, and also necklaces, anklets and other jewelry for women and men. There was a score of beggars, and the men, half and blind were led by the bulk of their cows. One poor fellow, all skin and bones and faked except for a breech cloth, had lost his arms at the hips, and he begged the red stump at me as he nodded his head to the brass plate on his knee. He was delighted with the one-fourth of a cent which I gave him.

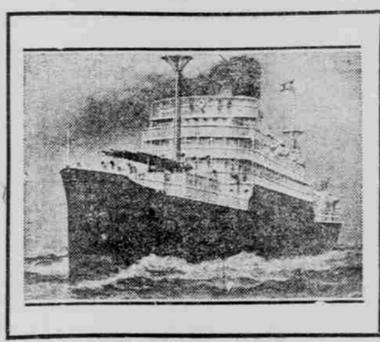
On the Holy Ganges. Benares is holy largely because it lies on the Ganges. That river is more to the Indian than the Jordan is to the Christian. If a Hindu prays within 100 miles of his banks, that prayer will wipe out the sins of three past generations, and if he has his head shaved he will have 5 million years in Paradise for every hair that floats off in the stream. Bathing in the Ganges washes out sin, and this is so from its source, where the river flows out of the top of the god Vishnu, high up in the Himalayas, to where it empties at last in the Bay of Bengal.

There are hundreds of places along the Ganges which are especially holy. Two hundred thousand pilgrims annually visit the river, and I saw thousands bathing in it at Calcutta. Some pilgrims make journeys almost from the source to the mouth, being years on the way. Just now many are coming to bathe at Benares. The road and the pilgrimage traffic to Benares is enormous. The city is now filled with pilgrims. In some respects the scene makes one think of a camp meeting, a great Hindu water festival where the people come to rest their bodies while saving their souls. It is in a sense of the Ocean Grove or Chautauque of Hinduism. The town has more than 200,000 people, and it is visited by the pilgrims from all over India. The rajahs and princes have villas here, and the river is walled with temples, houses and palaces. The buildings belonging to clubs. These buildings will the river for three miles, and they have steps going down into the water far out into the stream, which are filled with bathers who wash their sins.

Among the Bathers. If you have any doubt that the Hindus believe their sins are washed away by the Ganges, come with me to the river. We shall take a launch and ride down among the bathers and see whether their actions prove their belief. The mornings here are cold and raw. We put on our overcoats and shiver as we sit on the deck. It is the duty of the Hindu worshiper to take a bath before breakfast. The sun is just rising, but we find the stream full. The steps are crowded with worshippers, clad in the thinnest of cotton. There are shaven old men and women, wrapped in a single breadth of dirty white stuff, standing waist deep in the water and holding up their long thin arms, with their chattering teeth they mutter prayers to their gods. Now and then they duck down into the water, coming up gasping and looking colder than ever. Such a sight for you and me would be a "death." It may mean death to them, but here death is salvation.

There are also plump girls and young men, the nut-brown skins of the maidens shine as the water trickles over them, and their bright eyes flash at us as they whisper their prayers. They raise their arms toward heaven, showing gold rings from their wrists to their elbows and thence to their shoulders. Some wear gold nose rings, and others have ear ornaments which hang to their shoulders. Not a few have their faces. They may be high-caste Hindu gentlemen. Women, as a rule, do not bathe with the men. They are huddled off in groups by themselves. They come down in parties, each carrying a brass jar to take back some water to aid them in their worship at the temples.

As we go down the river we see that the bathers keep on their clothes as they enter the water, although these clothes are often no more than a breach cloth. The Hindus think it indecent to go naked into the Ganges, and they were very indignant at some Englishmen who bathed here not long ago perfectly nude. They call the river Mother Ganga and when they step down into it speak of being embraced by the goddess. The women bathers are usually clad in only one garment and this a cotton sheet which clings to their bodies. As they leave they turn their backs to the men and, removing the cloth, wash it and themselves while they pray. They do not seem to care for the exposure of anything but their faces and a woman may pull the cloth from her bosom to cover her eyes. As to the old women,



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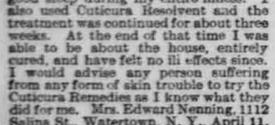
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How the River Saves the Dead.

As our boat goes onward we pass temple after temple, on the steps of which sit half naked priests with boxes of red paint before them, marking the believers with the signs of the gods. A little farther on we come to a break in the buildings. There is a gulley in the heart of the city lined with what looks like bonfires or campfires. Now we are nearer and can see that the wood of each fire has been piled up in a square, and on the top of each lies a corpse. Those are the bodies of the dead who are being burned on the banks of the Ganges, and their ashes may float upon the waters and their souls go straight to heaven. I have seen cremation in many lands, but nothing like this. The bodies are burned right out in the open, and the nearest relative of the dead lights the fire. The wood is usually arranged by Doms, a certain caste who, according to the Hindu rites, can start one's soul best toward heaven. They work for a price and at so much they furnish the fire for the burning. We can see some standing about.

Cremation in India.

We land from our boats and stop a while watching the scene. There are ashes and fires everywhere. Here a woman lies on the pyre. She is clad in white cotton and her shaved head rests on a dirty blue pillow six inches in thickness. Her arms are folded. She is as thin as a skeleton and is probably a widow. Next to her is the corpse of a well-to-do merchant. It is also in cotton. The Doms take it, strip off the clothes and prepare it for burning. The pile of cordwood is ready. It is two feet high and about six feet square. They first spread white cheese cloth upon it and then raise the naked body and lay it out at full length. They cover it with cheese cloth. It has now a mosquito netting above and a mosquito netting below that is all. More wood is piled up, kindling sticks of cedar are inserted and a shovel of coal is brought from that fire at the right. Oil is poured on the fire lighted and the cremation goes on until nothing but ashes is left. The relatives throw these into the Ganges and the ceremony is over. The caste which superintends the cremations is said to be rich and one of them has made a half million dollars in burning the dead. They have various charges for each body, according to the wealth of the owner.

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