

UNDER THE VULTURES' WINGS

BY JULIAN RALPH

I HAVE described some striking features of one Bombay, but there are two Bombays just now. There will be two during the twenty or fifty years that the plague may last—Bombay the Rainbow City and Bombay the Horrible. The latter phase is now uppermost. While the plague lasts Bombay must continue dark and hideous, shaded by the vulture wings of death, tainted in water, soil, air, and food with the bacilli of the pestilence, strewn with dead like a battle-field whereon hunger, filth, and fatalism join hands with epidemic to decimate the human swarm. This phase has already lasted four years. In the menace it offers to Christendom, in the interest it has for men of science, in the extraordinary problem it presents to the white conquerors of India, in the strange, almost unearthly scenes it daily produces—in all these respects it is too important to miss at least a few pen-strokes toward description here. In these I will unite what I saw and heard of the pest between one side of India and the other.

It may surprise the reader that I have said nothing of the white and ruling population of this remarkable city. I purposely avoided it, having gone to India, as I went, earlier, to China, to see the natives, and not those others who can be so much more effectively studied in London, Edinburgh, and Dublin. In Bombay the whites are comparatively few, and are mainly civil and military officers and subordinates, a few merchants, fewer professional men, and still fewer foreign consuls. These do not live delightfully, for during the greater part of each year it is a feat of endurance to live there at all. But to aid them in their boresome effort toward European ways they have a fine gymkhana or sports club with grounds in town; a ladies' gymkhana on Malabar Hill, where the well-to-do and official personages live; the Byculla (social) Club in the heart of the city; the Bombay Club, a fine lunching-place; and the Royal Bombay Yacht Club. The home of this last-mentioned club is one of the most modern,

roomy, and beautifully situated houses of the kind that I have ever seen. Here the elect among the white men and women meet in the cool of the evening, after four o'clock, to sit out in the open beside the water, with the noble harbor, the lofty islands, and the shipping of both hemispheres before them, there to refresh themselves and forgather with their friends.

The head and heart of social life is Government House—the seat of the Governor, who ranks next but one to the Viceroy in the official scale in India. His dinners, dances, and receptions are the chief fashionable events, though very fine balls are given at the Byculla Club. Government House is on a point of land dividing the sea and the harbor, and here is at once a park and a strong hidden fortification. The "palace" buildings comprise several bungalows for the Governor, the members of his staff, his servants, and others, as well as tents for his military band. The long low bungalow of the Governor makes no outward pretence of splendor; and even inside, though every comfort-yielding appliance is there, it is given up to the most useful accommodations for sleeping, eating, and that undue amount of business which makes the present Governor's lot far from an easy one. It is in another building that the state functions take place. This is a very large and slightly ornate pavilion, enclosing a large room surrounded by wide verandas. When it is not cleared for a ball or reception, it is partitioned by the most exquisite and enormous screens of carved blackwood into a suite of drawing-rooms. These are decked with the beautiful appointments and ornaments which the present Governor, Lord Sandhurst, G. C. I. E., has collected in India. Among all these the carved screens are the chief treasures, and after them in value and novelty are the caskets containing the addresses which have been presented to him by English, Hindoo, Moslem, Parsi, and other organizations. Some of these are boxes of carved blackwood, teak or sandal wood—often com-

bined with silver. Others are heavy cylinders of silver elaborately carved, and fitted with massive ornamental ends like the capitals of richly carved ornate columns.

Through the courtesy of Lord George Hamilton, Secretary of State for India in the British government, I was enabled to meet Lord Sandhurst on the pleasantest footing, and enjoyed the spectacle of a formal dance at Government House, a lunch with him, and an afternoon drive through Bombay, during which he told me, as few others could have done, the facts about the relations between the government and the people, about the fearful epidemic which has made his régime most difficult and delicate to carry on, and about the manners and customs of those of whom he always spoke humanely as "his people."

The ball was so brilliantly and beautifully managed that Mr. Weldon and I rubbed our eyes to see whether the view of the palace grounds was real enough to stand even that test. And next day, when I lunched with the Governor, I rubbed my eyes again to see whether the plain bungalows and commonplace park could possibly be so plain and yet have yielded so thoroughly to dexterous and magnificent decoration on the preceding night. It was all of a piece with several other thoroughly Oriental experiences we had which might almost have been torn from between the covers of the *Tales of a Thousand and One Nights*. We drove from the house of our consul, Mr. Mayer, and his beautiful American wife, and suddenly turning in at a gateway of the Governor's park, saw a yellow glow ahead of us in the thick of the grove. This luminous heart of the park soon resolved itself into a series of lines of huge lanterns swung under the luxuriant foliage on either side of the roads and paths. These were covered with a cloth patterned in mosaic, and looking so like a tessellated stone floor that it continued to deceive the mind even after it was handled and walked upon and proved to be carpet. Along its edges were set square glass lamps of a pattern peculiarly Indian, like the globular and gaudy paper lanterns hung upon the trees.

At a tent near the edge of the illumination our hats and cloaks were parted with. By the tent door sat a servant in

the Governor's livery, in charge of a great tray of cigarettes and cigars of many kinds in as many compartments. Near him stood another Indian lackey who carried a brazier of lighted charcoal—a strange but useful character whom we afterwards met walking round and round the park, offering lights to the men who came out of doors to refresh themselves under the trees, where all the smoking was enjoyed. Beyond the tent was the grand staircase of the pavilion, now decorated by the bulky, brilliant figures of Lord Sandhurst's body-guard. They wore a splendid red uniform, capped by enormous red turbans, and as they stood at equal distances along either side of the flight of stairs, with the Governor and his noble helpmeet above them at the end of the purple carpet which lay upon the stairs, the sight seemed to me as fine as anything of its kind that I ever witnessed. The Governor wore the Great Star of India, and Lady Sandhurst exhibited her many fine diamonds. For the rest, the affair was simply a ball. True, its spirit was spurred by a gorgeous military band seated between those wondrous screens of black lace-work in wood, and there were many splendid military costumes to compete with the gay colors worn by the ladies. But a ball is a ball the world around, and one differs from the others only when you are in Vienna, as I once was, and hear the dancers sing the words of the tunes the band is playing, or when a cake-walk breaks the gay monotony of dancing among our colored folks in America.

As I drove away, rounding the curve of the harbor, a long high wall, as of some ancient city, rose before me, and the sky above pulsed with red flashes. Curls of black smoke rose to merge into a dense jet cloud which drew its miles of length over the bay and beneath the blue heavens.

"Marster! marster!" cried my bearer; "see fire! see smoke! Plenty Hindoo man burning up. All plague bodies. Plenty busy. Want see?"

Remember that the incense of the ball was fresh in my nostrils—the odor of the flowers, the perfume of a hundred Bond Street scents. The melody of the last waltz still vibrated in my ears, and I could close my eyes and still see the swaying figures of the belles and soldiers whom I had but just left behind me.

"Want see, marster? Very curious."

"Yes, bearer; jump down," I replied—for I cannot pick and choose, but must see everything to suit the eager variety of tastes, in serving which I am but the handle of the spoon.

Through a gate in the wall the bearer disappeared. We followed, stumbling up some steps in the darkness, and coming upon four half-naked Hindoos crouching before a little fire. These were the men whose business it was to build and light the stacks of firewood for the dead, who now come in such numbers that there is often a "waiting line," though the fires blaze night and day, and without a pause, like those on the altars of the Parsis.

The thick notes of crude bells rung to speed the souls of the crackling dead, the snapping and popping of the firewood, and the soft but very pervasive roar of the great pyres filled the air. We turned and faced nine high-blazing pyres. It was our bearer who counted them aloud, while we stood silent, amazed and horrified. With the first sweep of our eyes we saw the row of heaps of burning wood, the leaping flames, here and there a bared human leg or arm protruding from the pyres, some naked, demonlike figures with pokers superintending the little hell, and other persons seated in the attitudes of grief in the far distance.

Then the journalistic instinct came uppermost, and I studied the scene closely. We were facing a long and narrow yard between high walls. A small shallow ditch ran the length of it near one side. Beside this, in a row, were the pyres, each five or six feet high, and made by banking small rough tree branches and bits of tree trunks between tall, slender iron pillars, two on each side, to keep the pyres in shape. A pair of spreading trees, whose nearer leaves were shrivelled and dried, shivered painfully in the ascending currents of heat, as if they were holding their fingers in the flame and bravely resisting an inclination to shriek with pain. The skull of the man's or woman's body on the nearest pyre exploded at this moment with a loud noise, and again turned my attention to the fires. Several barelegged, barebreasted black men, draped about the upper legs and backs with smoky white cotton, poked at the pyres with long iron rods. Here one seemed to be pulling an arm from the embers; there one was pushing

back a leg which protruded. I speak of black and white in describing these odious wretches, but, in truth, they were reddened by the fire-glow to the color of Mephistopheles's coat.

Back and to the right stood a group of motionless men and women in white, looking at the glowing heaps which shot up flames like fire-fountains. These were the mourners. Over their heads, in the trembling branches of the trees, I now noticed several mysterious bundles, like melons or puddings done up in bags. As we looked on, a polite man came up to our bearer and talked earnestly with him. He would not be put off from whatever he was urging. "He says we are to go away," said the bearer, "and that we can get passes to come again." Go away, I replied, by all means, and at once. Again my eye swept the repellent scene. Above each glowing cube of fire rose red tongues of flame; above these were yellow, fleeting, gaseous sheets of fire that came and went; higher still, the yellow flashes turned to blue. Then came the black clouds of smoke which blended in one grand jet mass that drifted lazily away toward the sea—the common pall of all the dead.

At one o'clock at the palace I could have likened my surroundings to a Moslem's idea of heaven. Now, at two o'clock, I thought I had never been so close to hell. We were hurrying home late, yet without hope of sleeping, haggard by the weird and terrible conditions around us. The night was abnormally quiet. Now that the hideous flames were at our backs, the only life seemed that of the multitudinous and brilliant stars of the Southern sky. Out of nothing, as if from nowhere, there appeared beside our carriage a figure muffled in white from top to toe. It was shapeless, and yet it was human in its suggestion. It glided rather than walked or strode.

Mr. Weldon shuddered.

"Did you see that?" he asked. Then he added, "It was like the figure of Death."

"It would have seemed so at home," said I; "but here Death marches in battalions."

We leaned back in our landau, and during the remainder of the journey saw only the snow-white figures of our bearer and driver high above us, with the stars all round them. They also looked ghost-

ly. And for myself it can truly be said that from that hour, until I left India at the opposite gate, Death rode me as if it were a witch and I was its broomstick. I was forever reading of it, having it discussed around me, seeing the dead, or the smoke of the pyres, or the swollen forms of the vultures that fatten on the pest. Merciful powers! what a monstrous place the plague has made of India!

For instance, we had but started out upon our first visit to the "Bazar," or native city, when we saw some coolies carrying a corpse through the streets, and our boy called cheerily from the driver's seat: "See! Look! Some plague coming out!" The body was simply wrapped in a sheet and carried upon two slender poles, and as its bearers bobbed along with extra businesslike rapidity, its head rolled this way and that in a manner which we agreed was horrible—until we had been longer in India and could differentiate the truly awful and the commonplace. When Mr. Weldon went to the office of the Hindoo Burial and Burning Committee he met four of the dead, each wrapped in a thin sheet, and being hurried along by shouting carriers through the busiest bit of the Bazar.

So it went on. We encountered the dead everywhere that we went, except in one place—Agra. We met them in city streets and upon country roads. We came upon them set down on a busy roadside near a city while their carriers rested from the labor of hustling them along. We found them arranged in rows, with their feet in the river, in two cities. In four we saw them burning. When we visited a lady on Malabar Hill, she urged us to come out again and see the Towers of Silence, where the vultures feed upon the dead Parsis. "The towers are just here, behind these houses, among those trees," she said, sweetly; "so you can come in and see us afterwards." At a dance, when we rested a moment, my partner murmured: "Isn't the plague horrible? We've had seven servants die of it in our house already." When we were at dinner at Oudeypore one evening our servants urged us to hurry and see a woman's body burned on the open ground behind our bungalow. I remember that I saw the husband and children going calmly to the spectacle, and that I asked, "Will they weep and wail while

it goes on?" "No," my bearer answered, in surprise. "What for cry?" On second thoughts I did not see what for, and so I kept silence.

But, dear me! it was not only the plague that made touring grewsome in that resurrected land of a dead people, whose religion is a ghost of one, who preach that life is a dream, whose hopes are embalmed, and whose chief monument is a tomb. There was no plague in half the places where we found death so obtrusive. When we picked up a newspaper we were almost certain (it may have only happened so) to read of some white man's sudden death of cholera or "enteric" or tetanus. Our neighbors at table in a hotel would look up and say, "Heard the news? Peters is dead." "No! Why, I saw him yesterday!" "Yes, he was playing billiards here last night, as well and hearty as could be. He was taken in the night, and died before morning." Or at another time it was Miss Blank who had died. "She got warm while on her bicycle, and drank some impure water. She was dead in five hours."

One day, when we were feasting our eyes upon the wondrous daily morning scene of the ablation of the pious multitude at the sacred city of Benares, a Burmese princess joined the throng. She was as royal in beauty and attire as in rank. It is not given to many tourists in India to catch even a glimpse of a native lady, and that is why we hope to be forgiven for watching her so closely as she picked her dainty way down through the terraced lines of worshippers upon the massive steps. About her slender, shapely form a cloud of silk of the hue of pale heliotrope fluttered and clung. Upon her neck was a circlet of rubies. Gold set with diamonds—few, but brilliant—flashed upon one small wrist. Her feet were slipped in gold. Her face was almost as white as my own—a proud face, yet gentle and exquisitely fashioned. She stepped out of her slippers and into the water.

"What a beautiful picture! How romantic!" you say. Yes, but wait another second; remember this was in India.

She stooped to begin her devotions by drinking from the stream. Then we saw that three feet from her there rested, at the water's edge, the backbone and a



A PARSI.

ing her hair to relieve her sufferings—or his own. After that we can follow one of the Hindoo bodies and see it flung upon one of the pyres which send their smoke unceasingly up from the cremation-yard. In the morning we can drive to the Towers of Silence, standing in a park of the superbest beauty, to which the bodies of the Parsis, six to twelve a day, are brought, to be laid on the grating on a tower's top, and to be shredded by vultures until the disjointed bones sift through the grating and drop into the pit at the base of the shaft."

Mr. Weldon readily obtained a pass, and returned to the Hindoo burning-yard with notebook and pencil. A talkative attendant enlightened him more than either of us had been upon our first visit. He pointed out the little pots of ashes hanging on the branches of the trees beside the pyres, the square wooden boxes nearer to the fires, the group of watching relatives, the well at the near end of the grounds,

and all the rest. He gave Mr. Weldon to understand that the Hindoos only leave their dead when nothing but the ashes remain, and not even then if they have the means to go to the Ganges with these precious relics. The laborers prepare a bed of firewood to a height of two feet, and then the parents or other relatives lift the body upon the pyre. When a man or woman dies and leaves no kin, the servants perform this final office. Upon the body the laborers heap more wood to a height of four feet, and then set fire to it on all sides at once. For a peculiar reason the pyre is made shorter than the body to be consumed with it. This is in order that the lower

few ribs of a human body newly thrown from a near-by pyre. Two crows were perched upon it, feasting.

On an early afternoon, while three pianos filled the Bombay hotel with a lively jangle of music, and we were dressing for dinner, a journalist came to invite us to a plague-hospital.

"There," said he, "you will see the victims lying about on cots with their legs and arms strapped to prevent them from running about. Beside a man you will see a wife lying waiting for him to die; or beside a daughter, a mother watching silently and always calmly; or perhaps a husband resting upon one elbow beside a dying woman, tenderly strok-

ing her hair to relieve her sufferings—or his own. After that we can follow one of the Hindoo bodies and see it flung upon one of the pyres which send their smoke unceasingly up from the cremation-yard. In the morning we can drive to the Towers of Silence, standing in a park of the superbest beauty, to which the bodies of the Parsis, six to twelve a day, are brought, to be laid on the grating on a tower's top, and to be shredded by vultures until the disjointed bones sift through the grating and drop into the pit at the base of the shaft."

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extremities may not be wholly destroyed by the intense heat which does away with the rest of the body. When the rest is consumed, the feet, which have not been burned, are submitted to the fire—now much less intense, and incapable of wholly destroying its prey. When at last the fire has burned out, the mourners repair to the well, and drawing water from it in buckets, quench the embers. These are then collected in one of the large wooden boxes that have been referred to. In the process of collecting these ashes some small bits of bone—relics of the last part burned in the expiring fire—are found and put into a small vase or earthen-ware pot, such as those which swing above one's head like grewsome fruit upon the scorched and withered trees. Rich Hindoos take these vessels to Benares to scatter their contents upon the swift-moving face of the Ganges, waiting usually for some one of the great religious holidays upon which to perform this hallowed act. It is when the relatives of the dead are not able to afford this pilgrimage that they enclose the jar in a cloth and hang it upon a tree, with the dead one's name upon it, until it can be taken to the holy river by some wealthier mourners of other dead, or by some pious pilgrim journeying to the sacred city. The larger box, containing the mixed-up ashes of the dead and of the firewood, is quickly taken to the shore of the bay, and emptied upon the water, to be carried out to sea.

The most peculiar people of India are the Parsis (or "Parsees"—meaning "Persians"), who feed their dead to the vultures upon the Towers of Silence. They fled to India from Persia when that land fell into the hands of the Arabs twelve centuries ago. Their men are the first very singular persons the traveller sees on board the ship which takes him to India, their singularity consisting in their long sallow faces and large eyes, their shiny, patent-leather-looking, tubular hats, and their long and ugly coats. They are most numerous in Bombay, but one meets them in other cities on "Bombay side," and in Madras and Calcutta on the other shore. They are the richest natives of India, and have made and still make their money in trade. They are the only Indians who, as a body, admire and cultivate Western progressive ideas, who treat their women fairly well (according

to our ideas), and who permit their widows to marry again. Their first rule of life is to practise benevolence, and no people do this more liberally. They maintain nearly twoscore charitable institutions in Bombay alone. They are the only people in the world who do not smoke, and this is because they will not trifle with fire, which is sacred in their belief. They never spit, and they will not in any way contaminate the earth or water, or defile the trees and flowers. That is why they destroy their dead without burning the bodies. They have no beggars among them; they are monogamists; they are not caste-ridden (or rotted) like the Hindoos, for they acknowledge but two classes—the priests and the people. They keep New-Year's day not only as a religious fête-day, but, much as we do, as a day for general visiting. Their women are not imprisoned with their servants or otherwise degraded, but may be met anywhere and everywhere to the same extent as English women in India. So often are these women comely, and so beautifully are they clad—in such soft and exquisitely colored silks—that, as one writer says, "they appear as houris floating about the earth in silk balloons, with a ballasting of anklets, necklaces, ear-rings, and jewelry." It is no more than fair of the Parsi men to let this be as it is, for they are the ugliest men that crawl upon this globe.

An English lady advised me to go and see the rich Parsi young women riding bicycles on the road beside the sea at four o'clock of any afternoon. What an idea! The bicycle has so revolutionized young womanhood in England that men who return there after a short absence cannot credit their senses as they note the change in the maidens and their home government. What will it do—or not do—in India? Truly that modest-looking toy has worked as much of the change in this swift-booted century as many of our most important inventions. It has proved a steed which leaps the highest bars of prejudice, runs away with the deepest-rooted conventions—even outpaces the plans of women for their own emancipation. I try to fancy what it may do in India, but, after all, it has only a few thousands of Parsis upon whom to work. Man is an older engine than the "bike," and yet he has not been able to force his way through the wall which custom has

built around the Indian woman. Youth and love are a stronger team than "a bicycle built for two," but they have not succeeded—after centuries of desire—in tearing off one slat in the shutters through which the timorous inmates of the zenanas still peep out into the outer world.

One afternoon we set out and found our way to the water-side drive by following three of those tropical birds, the Parsi girls. One was clad in dark green, one in yellow, and one in pink, and as all wore the thinnest silks, all fluttered in the breeze like so many—like nothing in the whole world but what they were—Orientals in their loosely worn gossamer silks. Twenty-four hours earlier I could not have distinguished a Parsi from a Mohammedan or a Hindoo, but in one afternoon, spent where they were monopolizing a drive and promenade, I learned the pattern of those bright birdlike faces. If I met a Parsi to-morrow on the Saskatchewan, I should know him. All have long narrow faces, large white eyes, very long beaklike noses, and a color which is the tone of a dark olive lightly rubbed over with burnt cork. We often see that shade in young Southern Jewesses at home.

When these three Bombay butterflies lighted on a park settee, we sat opposite to study the mysteries of their dress. The outer robe of each was all in one piece, like that of any other Indian woman, and yet it was not drawn tight around the legs, and it revealed no glimpse of either limb, or even of either ankle. If Bombay is

"a city of Adams and Eves," it must still be admitted that the Parsi women are Eves after the expulsion from the Garden, when shame developed modesty among them. "Nuns in gay colors" is a better nickname than "Eves" for these women. Each girl's length of silk was wrapped around the outside of her legs one and a half times, and then was carried from the left heel over the head and right shoulder, and down again in front, where it was tucked in over her left hip. Under this covering, which she and the wind could mar or make complete, as either willed, each girl wore a white linen waist,



A PARSI PRAYING.

pinned almost as tight as a corset, and under this, again, a thin shirt of white lawn. The outer robe of silk was, in each case, trimmed with a narrow figured border. All wore low shoes, colored stockings, and white bands tight around their heads, beneath the hoods or veils they made of the ends of their robes. As they were wealthy, and had never carried burdens on their heads, their bodies were limber, they sat bent over, they walked as badly as most European women.

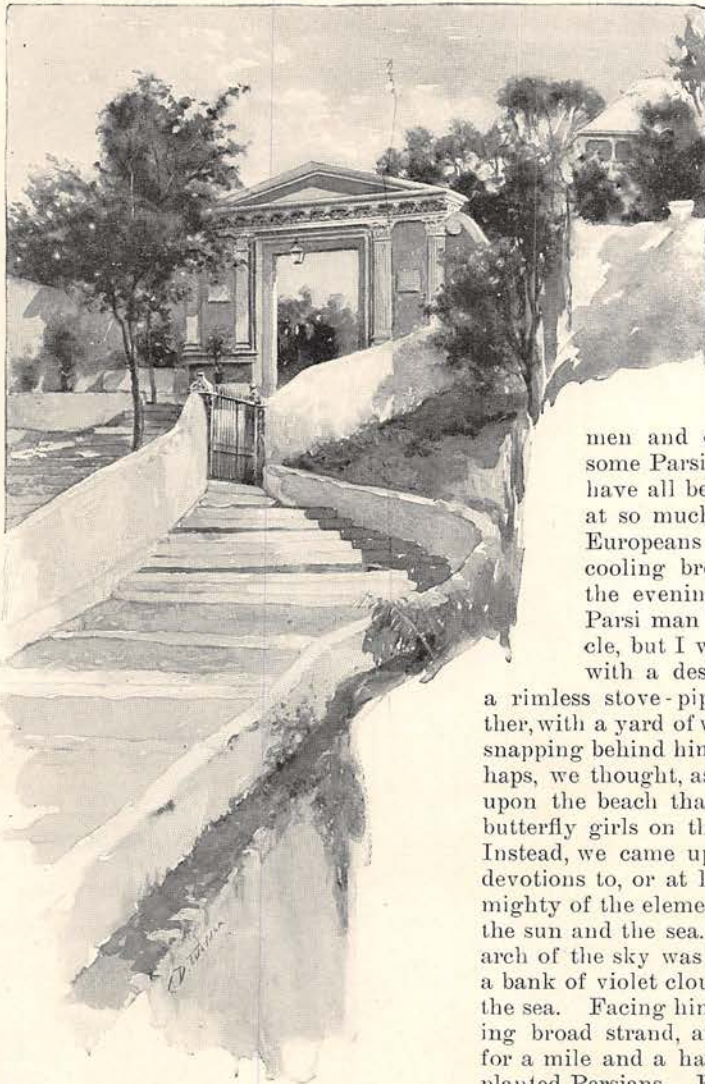
We saw no women upon bicycles, but when our butterflies guided us into the

Parsi throng, we noticed many children, among whom were little girls who cut figures as splendid as if they had been the children of Solomon. Their little fezzes of velvet, silk, or satin were so elaborately embroidered that some looked like solid gold deeply carved. Many of their little jackets were as beautifully braided, and below these they wore broad trousers of blue, yellow, pink, or green silk, reaching to within an inch of the ground. Over the upper parts of these trousers were tiny transparent half-petticoats of figured lawn. Their magnifi-

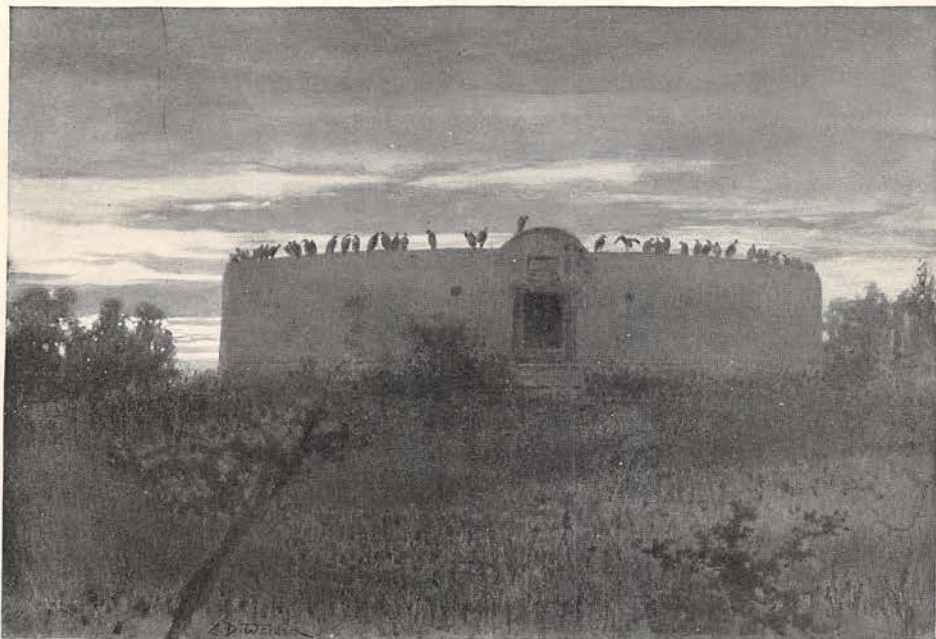
cent little jackets, which were somewhat of the bolero shape, revealed their dainty skirts. These costumes of the little girls were the strongest reminders I saw of the Persian origin of this race of human money-magnets.

On the Queen's Road we saw carriage-loads of rainbowlike women and children, of the tire-some Parsi men, who seemed to have all been made in one mill at so much a gross, and a few Europeans dashing through the cooling breath of the sea and the evening. Now and then a Parsi man rolled by on a bicycle, but I will not blot my page with a description of a man in

a rimless stove-pipe hat of patent-leather, with a yard of white cotton coat tails snapping behind him, on a bicycle. Perhaps, we thought, as we strode on, it was upon the beach that we were to see the butterfly girls on the spider-web wheels. Instead, we came upon the men at their devotions to, or at least before, the most mighty of the elements—fire and water—the sun and the sea. The splendid monarch of the sky was seeking his couch in a bank of violet clouds along the edge of the sea. Facing him upon the far-reaching broad strand, at irregular distances for a mile and a half, were these transplanted Persians. Each began by taking off his tubular oil-cloth hat to the sun,



THE GATE LEADING TO THE TOWERS OF SILENCE.



THE TOWERS OF SILENCE.

and putting it back again, as we do to salute a lady. Then each produced a brass jar, smaller than his fist, and whose use I could not determine. Putting this down on the sand beside him, each took out a book and began to read his prayers aloud, in a chanting tone. All were dressed like French pastry-cooks, in cotton coats with skirtlike tails—all except one, I should say. He wore a large white turban and a long grizzled beard, and sat on the end of a wall bent over his book, with his legs crossed like a Turk or a tailor. We retraced our steps and saw no bicycling girls, but as we neared the hotel we met a square-built, bearded, rugged tar from a British man-of-war, comfortably tipsy, mounted on a bicycle, and wobbling along so as to be almost on both sides of the road at once. He was not as lovely as a Parsi girl would have been on a similar mount, but he was funnier than all the monkeys we ever saw in Benares.

On one afternoon I was driving to the Parsi Towers of Silence beside the curving edge of the harbor that is likened to the Bay of Naples.

"Look, marster," said my bearer, rousing me with his voice; "here is European gravy garden."

Just Heaven! Could not some unseen force have cloven the tongue of the creature before it came to call a graveyard such a name? And can I never pass an hour, I thought, without some new reminder of death? It was not to be, and so I anticipated my visit to the towers with reflection upon what I had heard of the Parsi behavior toward the dread harvester and his victims. It is said that when a Parsi dies his people leave the death-chamber as if fear of the awful presence impelled them, and from that time on will have no more to do with the body. It is taken to the ground-floor, where every Parsi must be born, and every one must lie in death—in token of humility—and the friends and relatives kneel and pray outside the door of the chamber where it lies. Then it is turned over to menials, who carry it to the Towers of Silence, strip it of its raiment, and bear it to the grating just within the top of one of the broad, low structures. And now it becomes the property of the great fat-bodied vultures which sit around the circular top of each tower, as close together, upon any one which is in use, as they can press their hideous bodies. There are five of these

stone cylinders—one for suicides, one for the rich who can afford the luxury of a private place for their dead, and the others for the general Parsi public.

The largest of these towers is eighty feet in diameter and only twenty-five feet high, dimensions which render it possible for the sun and air and rain to move freely and abundantly from top to base. The grating on which the dead are delivered to the horrible birds slants downward toward the centre and has a large circular opening in the middle. This grating is divided into three rings—the outer one for the men, the middle one for women, the smallest and innermost one for children. The vultures work quickly. In two or three hours only the frame-work of a body remains.

The men who perform the repellent duties required by this custom have but little better standing than outcasts. They are often spoken of as "the hereditary corpse-bearers," but it is not required that a son shall succeed his father at the work, though such a practice prevails to a great extent in all the walks of Oriental life. These bearers are "taboo." A house is provided for them in Bombay, and they live by themselves, without the company, acquaintance, or friendship of their employers and co-religionists. On the other hand, they alone may enter the towers. No priest, millionaire, or official of that race has ever visited the interior of one of these charnel piles.

The towers would not be unpleasing objects were the vultures driven from them and from the trees around them. These gross birds, huge in frame, and so overweighted that they can fly only short distances, burden the palms, fringe the towers, and flop about the lower air in such numbers and so conspicuously that imagination riots sickeningly at sight of them. But the great gray towers are shapely objects, and stand in a garden of uncommon beauty. Broad and scrupulously ordered gravel paths, shaded by palms and fringed with gaudy flowers, lead the visitor far and wide in a park upon which both money and loving care have been lavished.

The plague throws above the surface all this paraphernalia of death of which I have spoken. It is an awful visitation. It has raged four years, still takes 1200 to 2000 souls weekly from Bombay alone, and has extended its scope over a quarter

of India, and out to Zanzibar, Mauritius, Madagascar, and eastern Africa, to Manchuria and Central Asia. It is almost as mysterious and as little understood to-day as when it first appeared. Nothing about it, however, is more peculiar than the indifference with which both the whites and the natives regard it. As but a dozen and a half white men have died from it, the only effect it has upon the English is to disturb those who are in authority, who wish to allay the anxiety of the outer world at once and end the epidemic as speedily as possible. As for the natives, the plague is to them an expression of the will of God, who, first by the famine, and now by this pest, shows His intent to limit the population to a number whose demands do not exceed the food-supply. At first there was great excitement among the natives, who fluttered in and out of their nests like startled pigeons, hastening away in droves, and presently crowding back again. This was not due to fear of the disease, for these better philosophers than ourselves neither dread sickness nor fear death. It was due to the house to house visits of the officials, the removal of the sick, and the inoculation of the sound. More than all else, it was the exposure of the women to these processes that made the trouble—and will increase it if the English do not heed the warnings they have had. The rules of caste, the privacy of the home, and the sequestration of the women are adhered to here more strictly than anywhere in the East, and the violations of their customs outraged the natives, who moved away by the thousands, only to come back when they found that the disease and the obnoxious methods of the white men in fighting it pursued them wherever they went.

When we left Bombay, Mr. Weldon and I determined to avoid all the plague centres except Calcutta, to which we were obliged to go; but though we dodged the plague, we could never, in any single journey, escape its consequences. As we travelled on the railways, we were turned out of our beds at almost every hour of the night, and out of our compartments in almost every daylight hour, to submit ourselves to so-called medical examination. It was not wholly a farce, because every now and then the examiners would set aside some of the native passengers, and we would roll away and



"PLAGUE DOCTOR THIS PLACE."

leave them, presumably to be sent back to wherever they came from. In the daytime our babu or our bearer would notify us that "plague doctor this place," and we would turn out and stand upon the platform until a native, sometimes in uniform, came up and asked, "Where are you from?" As long as we continued to declare Bombay as our starting-point, we were subjected to a light and fleeting touch of the man's fingers upon one wrist. We presently learned to hail from no farther back than our last stopping-place, and the examiner passed us by with some such phrase as "I suppose you are quite well." At night the train would stop, and while we were slowly waking, strange hands would fumble under our blankets to find our wrists.

Through enormous districts we saw the roofs of villages, and even of whole towns, torn up to let the air through the abandoned houses, and we passed the

temporary clusters of mat sheds in which the evicted people were living. Before we reached Calcutta a telegram sent by a tourist agency, and warning all travellers to keep away from that capital, was shown to us. When we reached Calcutta the plague was at its worst there, and we were to find that our taking passage from that city was to rob our entire homeward journey of the best of its pleasures. Thereafter we were "taboo" everywhere. Wherever we stopped, a yellow flag was run up on one of our masts, police-boats were rowed around our ship to keep us from escaping, and not only the peddlers, but it seemed to us even the gulls and crows gave our ship a wide berth. Finally, at far-off Malta, the next to the last of our stopping places, Mr. Weldon and I persisted in going ashore, and were stripped and bathed and had our clothing baked for our pains.