

A Living Idol.

BY FRAMLEY STEELCROFT.

[Illustrations from Photos. by George Newnes, Limited.]

THE picturesque figure depicted on this page is none other than Bava Luchman Dass, a Punjabi, and a Brahmin of the highest caste—as, indeed, anyone may judge for himself from the smear of reddish-brown paint between the eyes. And Bava's history is as picturesque as his personality.

From this time forward young Bava was cut out, *volens volens*, for a Yoga. Now, the requisite training is peculiar and severe, but then there is a glorious aftermath of power, and free living, and ineffable laziness. One has to start early in life for this kind of thing, as Bava did. He was at it *forty years* before he received his diploma; which is the paint-mark aforesaid. A Brahmin Yoga, or priest, is able to throw himself at will into various postures, in imitation of certain idols. When he has attained absolute proficiency in this difficult art, he may consider himself provided with a calling which is at once holy and sufficient for all things. For the fully qualified Yoga needs neither scrip, nor staff, nor purse, nor wallet in the journey through life. He just strikes an impressive attitude at the street corners, and then money and hospitality are showered upon him in embarrassing abundance. Those upon whom he quarters himself think they are honoured indeed; and the rich merchants vie with one another in offering him presents and money. Literally, they idolize the Yoga.

Be it observed that Bava is straight-limbed as a Greek athlete—even if he hasn't the



NO. 1.—BAVA LUCHMAN DASS, THE LIVING IDOL.

When he was but four or five years old, the great mutiny convulsed the Peninsula from the Himalayas to Cape Comorin. Consequently Bava's parents suffered. "They were in a starving condition," to quote the words of the interpreter; and they sold their child to the mysterious priests that inhabit the Black Caves of Central India. The purchase price is not known.



NO. 2.



NO. 3.

physique. It is important to remember that not a single bone of his body is, or ever has been, broken.

No. 2 photo. shows the Yoga in his customary attitude of supplication at the street corners—awaiting worshippers, in fact. His complicated arms are supposed to be calling down all manner of blessings. For himself he has no need to pray, being already a deity. He is merely awaiting his call to the Brahmin Nirvana, supported meanwhile by the offerings of the faithful. It should be understood that the Yoga's posturing forms no sort of entertainment. His worshippers do all the entertaining, which usually takes the substantial form of free rations, the best room in the house, and liberal offerings of a miscellaneous kind. Not the least interesting or momentous episode in the Yoga's chequered career was his meeting with a certain rich Bombay merchant. They met at the Holy City of Benares, where Bava was reaping a grand harvest. It occurred to the merchant that, if the English people could not be induced to idolize the Yoga, they might at least pay handsomely to see him go through his forty-eight postures. 'Twas a brilliant notion ;

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but would that high caste Brahmin cross the *kala pani*, or black water of the ocean separating India from the West, and mix with unclean barbarians ?

Alas ! he would ; it was merely a question of vulgar £ s. d. By a series of wonderful events, more startling than the magic of a Hindu sorcerer, the Yoga found himself translated from the mysterious Black Caves of Central India to a side-show at the Westminster Aquarium. Aye, and from there to the photographic studio of THE STRAND MAGAZINE. The third posture is a peculiar one—posture and motion combined, in fact, for the Yoga moves rhythmically up and down on his left knee-joint. Bava Luchman Dass is no showman himself ; he is too sad-eyed and serious for that blatant calling. But, then, consider the circumstances ; why, the only analogy I can think of is Dr. Parker footing it on the slack wire at the Empire.

The applause of multitudes is thrown away on our living god. One amiable gentleman who saw the third photo. taken compared the Yoga's posture to a broken umbrella ! And yet the human idol made no sign. Possibly he was praying for the irreverent scoffer.

In a serious article like this it is out of



NO. 4.

place to record much of the flippant talk of mere idle spectators. Whilst the Yoga was posing for No. 4, on one occasion, a Cockney was heard to exclaim that "it was a fine mode of pedomotion for a man cursed with corns." Others made bets as to whether the holy man could or could not beat Mr. Harry J. Lawson's latest motor car up a stiff hill!

Certain it is that this remarkable man walks miles on the stumps of his knees. The pace is surprisingly elastic and fast, but there is no ascertainable record. The attitude itself is merely one of eloquent supplication; and if that posture would be out of place under the dome of St. Paul's, we may rest assured that the mere accomplishment of the feat—to say nothing of the sprinting—is exceedingly difficult of achievement.

From what I gathered, I came to the conclusion that when the ghastly consciousness that he was a side-show dawned upon the Yoga, he didn't like it at all, and nothing would induce him to go through his *sixty or seventy performances a day* but the near prospect of a return to his own native land. On landing there, his whilom "proprietor" would advance a certain sum of money, which would insure his regaining caste once more.

During his forty years' probation and practice, the budding Yoga ate very little; he trained, if I may say so without levity, on a very light diet of goat's milk and dried fruit—which is good news for vegetarians. Of course, I had to interview his interpreter, and this gentleman in turn interviewed the Bombay merchant aforesaid. That same interpreter knew no Hindustani—knew no other language, in fact, but his own; wherefore was he called an "interpreter."

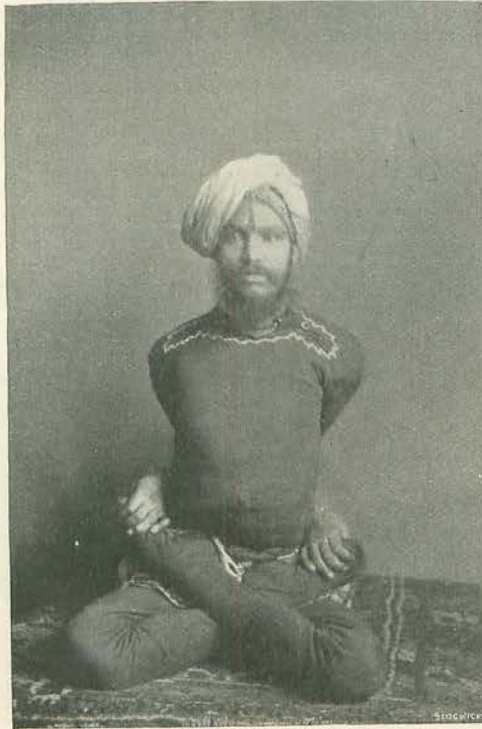
At the same time he knew pretty well everything there was to be known about the

Yoga—except what went on in the Black Caves. That swarthy mystic is a living testimony to the brotherhood of nations. Who would suspect him of partaking of tea and muffins at five o'clock? True, he made both himself in a peculiar manner, and called his little cakes by another name.

The posture shown in the next photograph (No. 5) is taken up for the obvious purpose of arresting the attention of the passer-by. Like all the other attitudes, it is the posture of a graven idol, and never fails to inspire awe and public benevolence. Only remember that presents are *not* made to the Yoga as alms are given to a beggar; rather as offerings made before the shrine of a god.

And he is mindful of his dignity, even whilst sojourning among us barbarians. He wouldn't dream of lighting his cigarette from yours, lest he should be defiled. Indeed, when he first came to England he would wash himself in a curiously un-Oriental manner, after being accidentally touched by one of the audience. "I happened to touch his tea-cup one day," remarked the interpreter to me; "and when my back was turned he took and smashed the vessel to pieces." He brought with him his own attendant—one, Monor Dass; and, likewise, his own provisions—rice, lentils, curry, barley, fruits, and so on.

Poor fellow! he huddled himself up over the writer's fire, with a look of misery on his pinched face. He took a childish interest in such products of Western civilization as clocks and electric light; but he was indifferent to the raucous bellowings of those who exploited him. Outside his show hung a framed cheque for £500, which anyone could claim who emulated the Yoga's fearful and wonderful contortions. "Might as well make it £5,000," said a small, fat man, admiringly; "nobody could ever do them



NO. 5.



NO. 6.

tricks." One is inclined to believe the small, fat man, on looking at No. 6. One asks one's self, "Is it worth while to lead such a complicated existence even for the sake of ranking as a demi-god—or even as a whole god?"

Nowhere did Bava Luchman Dass (how like a mild expletive is his name!) meet with such an enthusiastic reception as at our great hospitals. And, of course, he was taken to the hospitals, partly in the interests of science, certainly; but primarily in order that these stirring words should be blazoned large on his show bill: "DOCTORS DEFIED AND BAFLED!" "THE MOST STOOPENDOUS MARVEL OF THE AGE!" I have said that the Brahmin knew nothing of the noble art of showmanship. On demand, he would go through his postures with the utmost ease and perfect gravity, wondering vaguely what was the meaning of the uproarious applause.

At St. George's Hospital an interesting lecture on the Yoga was given to the anatomical students. Whilst the Brahmin went through his postures on the platform, one of the professors demonstrated the apparent impossibility of the feats by means of a hanging skeleton. To the ordinary person the demonstrations were interesting enough, but the lecture was appalling. Referring to the posture shown in No. 2, the anatomist remarked, feelingly, "You will

observe, gentlemen, that the tibia rises at least an inch above the condyles of the humerus."

So far as I am able to judge, No. 7 is the Yoga's customary attitude when buried in deep thought. At such times, his legs are apt to worry him a little—they get in the way, as legs will—so he ties them in a tasteful, fancy knot round his neck and shoulders. How often it happens that at supreme moments the voice of the vulgar grates upon the sensitive ear of the reverent! Once, whilst the Yoga was in this position, someone was heard to wonder whether the Brahmin was puzzling over the amount of last night's takings!

For the most part, the Brahmin Yogas seen in India are repulsive enough. They have been known to stand at the roadside for years, with one hand or leg extended motionless in one position, until the sinews and ligaments wither, and the limb becomes immovably fixed. Their arms, too, are occasionally seen shrivelled to mere parchment covered

bones, with finger-nails growing inches long through the palms.

Others have shrivelled feet and toe-nails like the claws of a bird; and yet others there are with huge callosities on their knees, on which they have voluntarily walked and



NO. 7.

cantered for years, as is seen in No. 4. If in No. 7 the Yoga's mind was apparently grappling with some abstruse calculation, the mental crisis has evidently become more acute in No. 8. "Seems ter be wukkin' wonderful hard," commented one sympathetic spectator in the holy man's audience — "fair goin' it bald-headed, ain't he?" Presumably, this person referred to the fact that the Brahmin had removed his turban.

It is only to be expected that Bava should have a disciple; he had one when I saw him—an earnest, dark-eyed lad in search of an exalted calling—who was already perfect in many of the elementary postures. Master and disciple read the holy books together, between the demonstrations.

According to one eminent anatomist, these marvellous contortions are produced by a temporary dislocation of the joints. That the feats are anatomically marvellous was proved by the fact that when the gentleman who presided at the skeleton tried to reproduce



NO. 8.

success of the photograph.

The fact is that, before the Yoga was sent forth from the Black Caves as a duly qualified practitioner, he was required to remain in this position

continuously for seven days and nights!

And on that memorable occasion he had to contemplate something far less interesting than the opulent pattern of the editor's Turkey rug.

Well might this remarkable visitor to these offices paraphrase his Kipling, and cry:—

If pain be the price of
Yoga-ship,
Lord God I ha' paid
it in.



NO. 9.