LETTER XXI.

The Holy City of the Hindoos.

THE journey from Calcutta to Benares was made by rail, and required about twenty-one hours. We followed the advice of our consul and others, and provided ourselves each with a pillow and a *rezae*, or comfort, by means of which we turned our long seats into passable beds, thus extemporizing a sleeping-car. The English cars lack some of the advantages of ours, but have others which we lack. Thus, in our travels throughout the larger part of India, extending over nearly three weeks, we have never had more than four persons in our car. In fact, the whole system of the English railway is based on the old style of stage-coach travel. The ticket-office is called the "booking-office;" the car is a "carriage," and that is divided into two compartments, each but little larger than a stage-coach; the engineer is called the driver, and the man most nearly corresponding to our conductor is known as the guard. The train always runs on the left-hand track, just as the stage always keeps to the left in place of the right-hand, as with us. In consequence the lever of the engine is placed on the left side, and it is out of the left window that the driver constantly looks to see that the track is clear. The tickets are examined and punched occasionally by men called ticket-examiners connected with important stations along the line. These are often natives, as are also

some of the drivers, but the guards are generally, if not always, English. Ability to speak English is a necessary qualification for an important *employé* of the railroad.

Without exception we have found the officials of every rank gentlemanly and obliging. The word *kindly* is often upon their lips. "Will you kindly do this?" is an invariable mode of address. The "baggage-smasher" is an unknown being here. Your baggage, which, unless too bulky, is placed in the car with you, is handled by coolies, who are always at the station waiting for such work, for which they usually receive a couple of pice each. A pice is a little less than a cent.

The telegraph lines are all owned by the government, but such as are needed for the sole use of the railroad are rented annually for that purpose. A dispatch to any part of British India is, like a letter, sent for a fixed rate, and not as with us according to the distance. For six words, exclusive of the address, you pay a rupee, and for one or more over that number double the amount. The natives are largely employed as telegraph operators. Night messages, in place of being at half rates, as in America, are at double rates.

We awoke on the morning of February 22 to find ourselves speeding through a somewhat undulating tract of country, with solitary hills here and there on both sides of the road. We shortly struck the Valley of the Ganges again, and continued in sight of the river at frequent intervals until we crossed it at Benares. The country was level enough for an Illinois prairie, and perhaps no prairie in America could stand such constant use without fertilizers and yield as fair crops. The land here has been compelled to bear two crops a year for over two thousand years, and that too without either manuring or deep-soil plowing. The women gather up all that

is fit for manure, and after making it with their hands into flat cakes, dry it in the sun for fuel. Many houses along the road were thus frescoed, the prints of female fingers visible some distance off. When fit for use, the women carry it in large baskets on their heads, and the donkeys in bags on their backs. None is ever wasted. The two most degraded beings in India, woman and donkey, have the whole matter in hand. It is not strange, under these circumstances, that the men often call the women *donkeys!* Assigned to such work by the low esteem in which they are held, they do it openly and without any sense of shame. Of course no proper respect can ever be felt for woman so long as it is regarded as the proper thing for her to do such filthy work. This fuel is generally used in cooking, and often among the poor for the cremation of their dead. Wood is very expensive, *and is sold by weight.* It is very probable that, as in China, trees are not cut down, but dug up by the roots, so that all may be used.

The crops are mostly good in this part of India, immense quantities of rice awaiting transportation to the famine districts. Wheat, barley, oats, and rice, are the principal grains. A sort of pulse, or bean, is largely grown for the use of the very poor. There were extensive poppy-fields all along the road. The opium is mostly produced from the white poppy. The pod is pierced every evening, and early the next morning coolies pass through the fields and scrape off what has oozed out and hardened during the night. This, after being somewhat prepared, is the opium of the market, which, next to cotton, is the most valuable article of export. The government derives an immense revenue from it. Unhappily its use is not confined to China, where, at the point of the bayonet, the English won the unwilling consent of the Chinese for its importation

and sale, but it also largely prevails among the natives of India.

As in Japan and China, there are no farm-houses, the tillers of the soil all living together in little villages. The houses are usually of mud, thatched with straw. There is no such thing as a door—simply a hole on one side, which one can enter by stooping. Sometimes the houses are made wholly of straw, and in either case one is in danger of passing by a village without noticing it. A sure way of finding out whether it is a village or not is by observing whether the mud-walls one sees are plastered with fuel put there to dry. If so, he may feel assured of woman's presence, and know that the place is inhabited. The principal tree in sight is the mango. It is usually of good size and beautiful shape. A mango orchard is quite like an apple orchard. Its shade is very cool and refreshing. The fruit has somewhat the taste of the peach, but is not so good to an uneducated palate. The people are very fond of it.

Changing cars at Mogul Serai, within a few miles of our destination, a branch road brought us to Benares. Before entering the sacred city we must first cross the Ganges. Taking a gharry, we crossed over on a bridge of boats. The sound of music floated down the river, and we saw the brightly-illuminated boats of the worshipers of some idol, in whose honor a festival was being held. The darkness and distance shut them out from our view as we drove rapidly to the European part of the city, where we found comfortable quarters in the United Service Hotel, owned and managed by native Christians. Even in the starlight we could see the spires of some of the thousand temples of the holy city. An elephant, bearing a number of natives, met us on the way, but the presence of elephants is so common here that our horses did not give him one

foot additional room. In America they would have paid all sorts of honors in the contortions of their bodies, and very probably offered the broken pieces of the gharry as homage.

Before we go out into the city on the morrow, let us consider the significance of its name, the "Holy City of the Hindoos." What Jerusalem is to Jew or Christian, or what Mecca is to the Mohammedan, that Benares is to the Hindoo. If Mussulmans make long pilgrimages to Mecca, and Christians weep at the first sight of Mount Olivet, none the less do Hindoos go into raptures as the temples of Benares burst into view, and with shouts of "Praise, praise to Mother Ganges!" rush down to the sacred river and bathe their wearied bodies in its sanctifying waters. Much of the business of the railroad is that of carrying pilgrims, who, coming in the cars from remote places, strain their eyes for the first glimpse of the holy river, and it is no sooner had than glad shouts herald it to all others on the train, who hasten to swell the volume of praise. But if the Ganges is sacred wherever seen, it is especially so where it laves the foundations of the holy city. It is hardly possible to describe the enthusiasm shown when the pilgrims stand in the shadow of the temples, or rush with their clothes on into the river. Nor, must it be remembered, is this enthusiasm of a recent date. It existed before Christ was born, before the Jews were led into captivity. Benares is more than twenty-five centuries old. She is older than the "father of history," and from earliest times she has been regarded holy, because leading Hindoo gods appeared there and even left their foot-prints.

The site of the city has shifted a few miles during this vast interval of time. The most ancient site is some four miles away, but all the intervening space was doubtless covered with houses. The changing

site may be largely owing to the fickle Ganges, which, like the Missouri, delights to change her bed. In company with the Rev. Mr. Lambert, of the London Mission, we visited the ruins of the ancient city. It is called Sarnath. It is hardly less famous in Buddhist than in Hindoo history. When it was already widely known as a sacred city, Sakya Muni, more generally known as Buddha, or Teacher, came from Saya, a less holy place, that he might have all the prestige of the most holy city as he announced the teachings which were to become the creed of a large part of India, as well as of Ceylon, Burmah, Thibet, China, and Japan. His creed not only dispensed with the vile gods of the Hindoos, which seemed so unsatisfactory, but knowing no other or better, he taught that man had need of none, but that by abstraction and contemplation he could himself reach a divine state. Alas! his followers speedily degenerated from this sublime theory, and now worship *him*. The enormous bronze idols of Japan wear his contemplative face, and are called by his name, Dai Butsu. The Chinaman, when he prays at all, says "Eternal Buddha, save us!" while the Singhalese worship his very foot-print, and pay homage to his supposed tooth. He was doubtless a reformer in his way, opposing both idols and caste. That he had great influence and a considerable following in the Holy City of the Hindoos itself is apparent from the fact that the principal remains are of Buddhist temples and monasteries.

The most striking ruin is what remains of an old tower, ninety-three feet in diameter at the base, and over a hundred feet high. It is made of large bricks, measuring, as I found, ten by sixteen inches. These, save where it has fallen off, are covered with stone, nearly half its height. The stone is deeply carved, and, considering its age, has kept its place

in the wall remarkably well. This is owing to each block being fastened by iron clamps. This is one of four pillars erected at as many points, to mark great events in Buddha's life. One other is still standing less than a mile away. When we remember that Buddha began to teach in the sixth century before Christ, and that two eminent Chinese travelers described these towers in the fifth and seventh centuries of our era, so that they can be readily identified, accept whatever date we may for their construction, we are transported to a remote antiquity. It would seem most probable that they were erected shortly after Buddha's death. The carved stone-work is perhaps of a later date, as appears by the peculiar letters of the inscription. The whole appears to my mind to contain in itself a history of Buddhism and its downfall.

There was first the brick tower, marking with fitting simplicity, the teachings of Buddha, a protest against idolatry; but subsequently this was covered with carved stone-work, with frequent images of Buddha. This degenerated into his worship, and finally into the worship of his image, which was set up in their temples. When Buddhism ceased to be a protest against idolatry it lost its power. It then became a simple question of a war between idols; and Brahmanism, possessing greater vitality, gave the death-blow, and expelled Buddhism from India. Finally the Mohammedans sought to destroy all that remained of their idols. Here and there in India a Buddhist may still be found, and they come once a year to worship here the marble image of Buddha, which remains, strange to say, in a Hindoo temple. Many excavations have been made in different parts of the monastery and temple-grounds, and quantities of images of Buddha, cut in stone, taken from these ruins, we saw in the grounds and cabinet of Queen's College, Benares.

The natives had a tradition that large sums of money or valuables were buried beneath these ruins, especially under the towers. The government finally sank a shaft in each, and made a tunnel to connect with it, and even in one case to pass through it. The tradition still lingers, however, very much like that of Captain Kidd's hidden treasures. The old native, with his sheet around him, who flits like a ghost among the ruins, and who lighted us through the tunnel with a handful of reeds, such as will be used to kindle his funeral-pile, insisted that whoever spent ten thousand rupees there would take ninety thousand away. He had repeated it so often that he had made it into a rhyme in his native language.

We visited the ancient city on the second day of our stay in Benares, but the order in which a traveler sees things is not always the best for their narration. Such being the antiquity and history of the city, we may the better understand the enthusiasm of the Hindoo pilgrims who had just arrived after a journey of four hundred miles. Others, with matted locks, had just come from the mountains, bringing with them the furs and skins which would defray the expenses of the journey. The number of arrivals was unusually large, in view of the minor festival which was being celebrated. After stopping to see an observatory, with its quaint old astronomical instruments, founded in 1680, we passed down the steps of the ghat in front of it, and took a boat for a ride on the Ganges. It was quite like a canal-boat, or house-boat. We sat in chairs on the top, having with us an intelligent Hindoo guide. We first drifted slowly down the river for a half mile, and returning went up stream for about a mile. All the length of our ride, and much farther, the river-bank is crowded with massive temples, from which broad stone steps lead down to the water. The general effect is imposing rather than

beautiful, though perhaps the different styles of architecture make a more beautiful picture than the same style repeated for so great a space. The time was, doubtless a few years ago, before the treacherous Ganges had undermined several of the finer buildings, and while all of them were in better repair, under the patronage of wealthy princes, when the view was beautiful and imposing in a very high degree. As it is, I have never seen a river-front that could compare with it. A stretch of over a mile of tall buildings and different styles of architecture, many of them of elaborately-carved stone, with stone steps in front, covered with pilgrims down to the water's edge, and some distance out in the holy river, was the picture which greeted us as we floated along.

The pilgrims were all at their respective bathing ghats, according to the parts of the country which they hailed from. The Brahmans, or the priestly caste, and their families had a bathing ghat of their own. The bathing consisted in dipping the entire person in the water, or in pouring it over the person out of a brass vessel, such as is universally carried among the Hindoos wherever they go. They carry the water of the Ganges in these vessels, and pour it out for an offering before or even *on* the idols in the temples. They also took up water in their hands and poured it out in their worship of the sun. "Watch and pray" appeared to be part of their creed, as they kept their eyes on us more than on the sun, at which, nevertheless, they tried to look steadfastly for short intervals. There was much washing of clothes, as well as bathing of the person. There seemed to be no incongruity to their minds in using the same water to wash away dirt and sin. In fact, the fouler the water the greater the efficacy, according to the contents of the two sacred wells of Benares, one of which, near the river, was

thronged with people. Its water was foul to a state of fermentation from the flowers which are constantly thrown into the well. It is not over three feet deep, and is approached by steps on all sides, leading down to the water. The people are taught that however black the sin which they have committed, even though it be murder itself, it will be washed away by this water, and so they come hither from every part of the land. It is as great an inducement to sin as the indulgences of Tetzel.

Among the bathing ghats is a burning ghat, where, all the day long, the Hindoo dead are being burned, and their ashes thrown into the Ganges. Our boat stopped a few moments for us to witness the sickening spectacle. Several bodies were already about consumed, while a corpse, wrapped in a white cloth saturated with butter, lay on the bank awaiting its turn in the flames. There were visible upright conical stones along the burning-place, to signify that the suttee had several times taken place there, when the widow was burned alive with her husband's corpse. Bad as cremation appears, it is preferable to being buried without a coffin, as is done by the Mohammedans. I visited one of their grave-yards in Bombay, where the ground was strewed with human bones. The jackals readily dig the body from the sand, and pick the bones. It is preferable, too, to half cremation. Many of the poor cannot afford wood enough to burn their dead, and after charring the body with fire throw it into the Ganges, to be fought over and devoured by crocodiles. Our guide informed us that the bodies of small children were often thrown into the river without burning. It sometimes occurs that where the Ganges is low they lodge on sand-bars and on the banks, and a residence near the river has on that account been found quite undesirable by Europeans.

Dismissing our boat, we pressed our way through

the crowds of worshipers on the steps, and climbed one of the minarets of the mosque of Aurungzebe, the Mogul ruler, who did not hesitate to tear down the Hindoo temples, out of which to erect mosques, and who built this one on the very banks of their sacred river as a perpetual protest against the worship of idols, which could not avenge the insult. From the summit of this lofty minaret we looked out upon the entire city, and could see the towers of Sarnath plainly in the distance. In very clear weather the guide-book promises a view of the Himalayas. We saw the many handsome residences of Hindoo princes and nobles, who prefer to reside part of each year in this holy place. Some who incurred the displeasure of the English during the mutiny, and are held in a sort of custody, are allowed to live here, where there is a good garrison to watch them.

Of course we visited the principal temples. Large and small, Benares has over a thousand. The Well of Knowledge is near one of them, and its supply comes from the water poured out in offerings at the adjoining temples, which, mixed with rice and flowers, runs into this well and makes a compound of the proper fermentation for purifying purposes. It is accordingly doled out for the use of worshipers by a man who draws it from the well. Yet foul as is all this worship, the temples are specimens of the most painstaking skill and ornamentation, and were doubtless erected at considerable cost. One, known as the Golden Temple, has gilded domes, the bequest of some Hindoo of large wealth. As a rule they are not large. They are quite tall, but cover small space. We saw only one that approached in size the temple of Madras, and even this was less than half as large. This was the Monkey Temple. We knew that we were approaching it by seeing the monkeys running loose

and climbing walls and trees, or chattering by the road-side, several hundred yards before we reached the temple.

The temple is dedicated to the goddess Durga, who is the soldier's patroness. Our guide, who belongs to the soldier class, accordingly received from the priest a dab of red paint on his forehead, to signify that he had been to the temple and obtained a blessing from the idol. The large number of monkeys found here give it the name of the Monkey Temple. They are objects of veneration, if not of worship. They are very quarrelsome and noisy. The visitor has only to buy some popped rice and throw it to them to see what a rumpus these divinities can make. There are hundreds of monkeys about the temple, but all that we saw were of one species. They sometimes play very mischievous pranks with the pilgrims who come to bathe in the large tank by the temple. One left his clothing and thirty rupees on the steps once while bathing, which a monkey seized and took up a tree. After every effort to induce him to come down had been tried in vain, the monkey began to throw down the rupees, but threw every other one in the tank. Thus fifteen were lost, but the pilgrim regarded it as a just retribution from the monkey god, who knew his sin, and thus punished it. He confessed that, being a milk-dealer, he had always diluted his milk with half water, so that just half of his gains had been thrown back into the water which had helped to supply them.

It will be seen that I have hesitated to take my readers into the temples. Hindoo worship is too vile to be described. Starting with a high regard for animal life, so that fish is the only animal food eaten by them, they not only refuse to take the life of an animal, but they even worship it. They will worship a sacred bullock even though his horns