

# Believe it or not!

A Modern Book of  
Wonders, Miracles,  
Freaks, Monstrosities  
and almost-Impossi-  
bilities, Written, Illus-  
trated and Proved by  
Robert L. Ripley, or

Ripley,



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## PREFACE

I MAKE a living out of the fact that truth is stranger than fiction. The "Believe It or Not" pictures that appear in a hundred or so newspapers throughout the country are drawn according to that scale.

Yet, I venture to say that I have been called a liar more often than anybody in the world. Ordinarily when one is called a liar—well, to say the least, one feels hurt. (Sometimes it follows that somebody gets hurt.) But it is different with me. I do not mind it a bit. When I am called a liar by a reader of my cartoons I feel flattered! That short and ugly word is like music to my ears. I am complimented, because it means to me that my cartoon that day contained some strange fact that was unbelievable—and therefore most interesting, and that the reader did not know the truth when he saw it. That is the time when I always think of the comment made by Hamlet on a certain occasion:

"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,  
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

I shall not forget the day my cartoon appeared with the illustrated statement that "Lindbergh was the sixty-seventh man to make a non-stop flight over the Atlantic Ocean." Who would believe a statement like that? Three thousand wrote in to tell me that they did not. It is true, however. Who will believe that "a day is forty-eight hours long—not twenty-four"; "that Methuselah died before his father"; that "Buffalo Bill never shot a buffalo in his life"; that "a man died of old age before he was seven years old." Can anybody be expected to believe that "a river runs backward"; "a flower eats mice"; "Napoleon crossed the Red Sea—as Moses did—on dry land"; "Fish climb trees," etc.?

Those who "doubt truth to be a liar" may be forgiven. The mail brings about a thousand letters a week from readers hoping to catch me in error. Which they never do. (Well, hardly ever.)

Sometimes a reader is blinded by the shining countenance of truth and stumbles into error. Not long ago I printed a short sentence in one of my pictures that contained all the letters of the alphabet. This is it:

*John P. Brady gave me a black walnut box of quite a small size.*

• The next morning brought thirteen letters pointing out that I had left the letter "F" out of the sentence. Now, there was no mistake on my part—all the letters of the alphabet, including the letter "F" were in that sentence, but what a strange thing it was that thirteen readers failed to find it and that each of them thought the same letter was missing.

The first "Believe It or Not" cartoon was an accident.

I had been drawing cartoons for the sports pages for some time when, in the course of a day's work, I hurriedly put together a few athletic oddities that happened to be lying on my desk and made them up into a cartoon—never for a moment expecting that it meant any more than a day's work done . . . and for the want of a better caption I called it "Believe It or Not."

It appeared the next day in the old New York Globe, and much to my surprise there was considerable comment about it. The editor of the paper suggested that I make another one if I "could gather together enough stunts." A week later I had enough facts for another one, and it seemed to be more popular than my usual run of cartoons. Thereafter I made a "Believe It or Not" cartoon a week. A year later, I made two a week, and soon the demand came that I make one every day. Now it looks as though I will never do anything else. And I don't care if I do.

I would like to answer the common question:

*"Where do you get all the strange things that you draw about?"*

Everywhere, all the time.

Here and there—day and night; through observation, conversation, and edification. I am constantly searching—everywhere all the time.


Travel, of course, is an unfailing source of oddities—"The world's mine oyster." Once or twice each year I venture forth to foreign lands for pearls to string in the "Believe It or Not" columns of the newspapers. I have traveled in sixty-four different countries, and hope to see them all before I am through. (Oh, yes, there are more than sixty-four countries.)

Sometimes suggestions are sent in to me, but, unfortunately, the usable ones are rare. Someday I hope to meet James <sup>Waldo</sup>Fawcett, of New York, Doc Applegate, of Ogallala, Neb., and J. Dennis Butler, of Alameda, Cal., and thank them for their interesting contributions. They are among the few who know what is interesting to people other than themselves.

I have been drawing the "Believe It or Not" pictures for eight years and find that it grows easier each day. There is no danger of running out of material (as some readers think): the supply is inexhaustible.

"This world is all a fleeting show,  
For man's illusion given."

I have enough "queeriosities" on hand to make a hundred cartoons, and a library of strange facts and curious bits of knowledge enough to fill several books like this one. (A fair warning!)

**RIP** 

# CONTENTS

	PAGE
Preface .....	i
The Ghats of the Ganges.....	2
The Burning Ghat.....	5
The Sun Gazer.....	7
Buried Alive .....	8
The Bed of Nails.....	9
The Ever-Standing Men.....	10
Human Inch-Worms .....	10
A Pound of Feathers Weighs More Than Pound of Gold.....	14
A Gallon of Vinegar Weighs More in the Winter than in the Summer.....	14
The Boy Who Died of Old Age Before He Was 7 Years Old.....	15
The Longest Fight.....	16
The Man Who Was "Seen" to Death.....	17
Henry Lewis Playing Billiards With His Nose.....	17
The Clock of Heaven.....	18
Punishment by Proxy.....	18
Making Whoopee! .....	18
The King's English.....	18
Bye! Bye! Black Sheep.....	18
What's In a Name.....	18
All the Names of God Have Four Letters.....	20
David Rice Atchison Was President of the United States.....	21
The River of Vinegar.....	23
The Boy With Owl Eyes.....	23
The Base-Stealing Record.....	23
One Hundred Years—and a Day.....	25
The First Hundred Centuries Are the Hardest.....	25
Convicted of Killing Himself.....	26
The Sting of Death.....	26
The Man Who Hanged Himself.....	26
Life Is Like That.....	26
"To Err Is Human—".....	28
Christ Was <i>Not</i> Born in the First Year of the Christian Era.....	30
Aesop Did <i>Not</i> Write "Aesop's Fables".....	30
Nero Did <i>Not</i> Fiddle While Rome Burned.....	30
The Needle of the Compass Does <i>Not</i> Point to the North Pole.....	30
The Shortest Distance Between Two Points Is <i>Not</i> a Straight Line.....	30

# CONTENTS—Continued

	PAGE
Napoleon—Like Moses—Crossed the Red Sea On Dry Land.....	31
Selling the World.....	32
The Golden Man.....	33
The Walking Half-Moons.....	34
Commodus Fought and Won 1,031 Battles.....	38
Lindbergh Was the Sixty-Seventh Man to Make a Non-Stop Flight Over the Atlantic Ocean.....	39
Present—But Not Voting.....	40
Pain? You Don't Know What Pain Is.....	42
Guyal Vaca Segual—Fire Eater.....	42
The Horned Kaffir.....	44
The Square Palindrome.....	45
Damned Clever, These Chinese.....	46
Methuselah—Oldest Man in the Bible—Died Before His Father.....	48
Coghlan's Coffin .....	49
The Human Pin Cushion.....	53
The Luckiest Man Alive.....	54
Silent for 30 Years.....	54
"3,675 Feet and 9 Inches".....	54
The Sun That Rises in the Pacific and Sets in the Atlantic.....	55
Bootlegging Human Heads.....	59
"Be Fruitful, and Multiply, and Replenish the Earth".....	61
Mulai Ismail the Father of 888 Children.....	61
The Nine-Year-Old Mother.....	63
The Eight-Year-Old Mother.....	63
The Ninety-Year-Old Mother.....	63
The Great-Great-Great-Great-Great-Great-Great-Grandfather .....	64
The Oldest Parents in the World.....	65
The Great-Great-Great-Great-Grandmother .....	65
Three Children in Three Centuries.....	65
The Mother of 69 Children.....	66
Business for the Pied Piper.....	66
The Progressive Mother.....	67
You Can't Beat the Dutch.....	67
The Largest Number of Children a Woman Ever Had.....	68
An Indian Juggler's Remarkable Feat.....	71
"Words, Words, Words".....	72
The 1792 Family.....	73

# CONTENTS—Continued

	PAGE
Epigram Upon Nothing.....	74
Can You Punctuate This Sentence?.....	74
"That" Word Used 7 Times in Succession.....	74
It's the Katz.....	74
The Longest Word in the World.....	76
There Are 58,366,440 Different Ways of Spelling the Word "Scissors".....	76
The Author Who Never Read a Book.....	76
An American Palindrome.....	78
The Mental Marvel.....	79
Hot Lips .....	80
Pillar Saints .....	81
Two Scandinavians Rowed Across the Atlantic Ocean.....	84
Wedded for 147 Years.....	85
The Land of the Humming Birds.....	86
Jim Corbett Fought in the Prize Ring for 18 Years.....	88
The Fish That Climb Trees.....	89
Red Rain .....	90
The Barking Bird.....	92
The Shark Destroyer.....	92
Man-Eating Clams .....	92
Pranks of Nature.....	93
The Child Cyclops.....	93
The Transparent Man.....	94
The Crab-Toed Tribe.....	94
Yogi Haridas .....	95
The Fork-Tongued Fräulein.....	96
The Glass Snake.....	96
The Left-Handed Family.....	96
The Man Family.....	96
The Half Woman.....	98
The Double-Eyed Man.....	99
The Man Without Ears.....	99
The Family Physicians.....	100
Lion-Hearted .....	100
The Dusty Ocean.....	101
Raining Fishes and Frogs.....	102
The Red Sea.....	102
Manna from Heaven.....	103

# CONTENTS—Continued

	PAGE
Whistling Trees .....	103
Shirts Growing On Trees.....	103
Oysters Growing On Trees.....	104
The Cow Tree.....	104
The Wingless Bird.....	105
The Ways of Spelling Shakespeare.....	106
Nature's Marksman .....	109
Golf Birdies .....	109
Burning Anger .....	109
Figures Don't Lie .....	110
Can You Write the Answer?.....	112
Magic Seven .....	112
Can You Change Five Dollars?.....	113
Palindromatic Figures .....	113
The 100 Symbols.....	114
The Persistent Number.....	115
The Largest Prime Known.....	115
Magic Squares .....	116
"Pi" .....	117
One Problem Never Proved.....	117
Kaspar Hauser Could See the Stars In the Daytime.....	118
Babe Ruth Hit 125 Home Runs In One Hour.....	119
The Handy Letter Writer.....	120
The Book Worm.....	120
A Beaver's Dam.....	120
"The Place of Drunkenness".....	121
The Ideal Landlord.....	121
A Week With Two Thursdays.....	121
Enduring Fame .....	121
The Bobbing Island.....	121
The Fig-Tree Tomb.....	123
Sidis—the Prodigy .....	123
The Illiterate Calculator.....	123
The Giraffe Girl.....	124
God's Heaven .....	126
The Vocal Memnon.....	128
The King Who Was Crowned Before He Was Born.....	130
The 153-Year-Old Bridegroom.....	131



# CONTENTS—*Continued*

	PAGE
The Eyeless Infant.....	132
The Lyre Bird.....	132
Singing Sands .....	134
Oysters That Catch Mice.....	136
A Billion Dollars in London is <sup>o</sup> Worth a Thousand Times as Much as a Billion Dollars in New York.....	137
A Spider is Not an Insect.....	137
St. Patrick was Not an Irishman.....	137
Buffalo Bill Never Shot a Buffalo in His Life.....	138
Sex Appeal .....	139
"The Queen of Spain Has No Legs".....	139
The Note of a Suicide.....	139
The Richest Man Who Ever Lived.....	141
The Crawling Fish.....	141
The Hard-Riding Squire.....	141
The Tracer Bullet.....	142
German Insect Power.....	142
A Remarkable Runner.....	143
Catching the Same Fish Twice.....	145
"One Long Hop".....	145
A Queen Crowned After Death.....	146
The Kaiserpokal .....	148
A Cough in the Car Load.....	148
Hot Dog .....	148
Flaming Youth .....	148
"O P Q R S T".....	148
George Washington Was <i>Not</i> the First President of the United States.....	149
The Hen that Became a Rooster.....	149
The Man of Chains.....	151
A Fleet Captured by Cavalry.....	151
"If You Would See His Monument Look Around".....	151
Mother Goose .....	151
The Ghost Ship.....	152
What Price Privacy.....	152
T I P.....	152
He Who Laughed Last.....	152
A Year and a Day.....	152
The Shortest Poem in the World.....	153
Even Up .....	153



# CONTENTS—*Continued*

	PAGE
It's Not the Heat—It's the Humidity.....	153
The Morning After.....	153
Jakuck Weather Report.....	153
The Fountain of Blood.....	153
A Comma that Saved a Human Life.....	155
The Mental Freak.....	158
The Will of Akbar the Great.....	158
Easy Come Easy Go.....	158
The Cruise of the Skeletons.....	159
The Man Who Drank Himself to Death.....	159
A Good Listener.....	159
The Penitent Eye.....	160
The Last Nod of Homer.....	160
Fare Enough .....	160
What Is so Rare as This Day in June.....	160
The Loudest Noise Ever Heard.....	162
The Earth Moves in Three Different Directions at the Same Time.....	162
"The Holy Roman Empire".....	162
Pa's a Sap.....	162
The Blessed Isles.....	164
The Boozing Bishop.....	164
The One-Armed Paper Hanger.....	164
The River That Runs Backwards.....	164
A Square Egg.....	164
The World's Worst Thug.....	166
Heaven Only Knows.....	166
Solving the Servant Problem.....	166
The Man With the Golden Nose.....	168
An Empress's Agile Ears.....	168
Friday Unlucky? .....	168
Fire Water .....	170
The Cheese Champion.....	170
Whoopee .....	170
A Record to Be Sneezed At.....	170
The Fiji Fire-Walkers.....	171
The \$4,412,000-a-Year Man .....	172
The \$2,000,000 Comma.....	172
Mammy! .....	172
The Last Will of Rabelais.....	172

## FULL PAGE ILLUSTRATIONS

	PAGE
The Upside-Down Man.....	3
An Ever-Standing Man.....	11
A Hindoo Urdhabahu.....	12
A Football Game; A Pumpkin; A Wounded Soldier; A Cat and a Rat.....	19
River of Vinegar; Boy With Owl Eyes; A Lemon; Jimmy Johnston.....	22
Jean Baptiste Mouron Was a Galley Slave for 100 Years and a Day.....	24
Pacific and Atlantic Oceans; Duke Farrell; Paul Hubert.....	27
Inca Atahualpa; Fishermen of El Gran Chaco.....	36
Morimoto; The Murder at Midnight.....	43
Bootlegging Human Heads.....	58
Magdelaine—Charlotte—Jacquette—Renaud .....	62
An Indian Juggler.....	70
H. B. Applegate's Boat; The Rubaiyat; Soveski of Stanford University, Sultan of Djocjockarte.....	77
Simon of the Pillar.....	82
Red Snow; Emmett French; A Letter Delivered 64 Years Late.....	91
The Fork-Tongued Fräulein; Sigmund Klein; H. Hanson; London's Honking Pedestrian; The Glass Snake.....	97
The Beaked Chaetodon Fish; French Biplane; Largest Number; Mrs. Mathilde Kovacs; Miss Joyce Wethered.....	108
The Fig-Tree Tomb; Sidis, the Prodigy; The Peg-Legged Cow; W. C. Perry	122
A Kewawnqdu .....	125
Robert Jones; The Eyeless Infant; Phil Hanna; The Lyre Bird.....	133
Rameses; Mrs. Elliott Lynp; The Crawling Fish; Squire Osbaldeston.....	140
O. T. Wertz; W. J. Brassard; John Radcliffe; A Bull Frog.....	144
Oliver Cromwell; Tom McAuliffe; J. Johnson.....	147
Sankal-Walah .....	150
Finger Nails of a Chinese Priest; The Four-Footed Chick; A Caterpillar....	154
Champion Hog-Caller; A 67-Year-Old Contortionist; The Word "Per- sonality"; Gus Sundstrom.....	157
Herr Heinrich Laufer; John G. Anderson; Smallest Church in the World; California's Lion Hunter; 24-Year-Old Cat.....	162
A Luzonese Dancer; Japanese Plum Tree.....	163
Hirohito; An American Palindrome; Beggars' Newspaper; Walter Hagen..	165
World's Worst Thug; Hopping Toad; Lefty Groves.....	167
7½ Inch Nose; Empress Marie Louise; Terry McGovern; A Telegram; One Pair of Shoes.....	169

# BELIEVE IT OR NOT——

## AN ODYSSEY OF ODDITIES



TO OBTAIN material, and to gather strange facts and to portray queer people that go to make up the daily "Believe It or Not" pictures it has been necessary for me to get about the world a bit.

### "SEEING IS BELIEVING"

I have traveled in 64 countries—including Hell (Norway), and the strangest thing I saw was man. Man may be the noblest work of God—but even the good Lord must have his joke sometimes. The world was made in seven days, and man in a perpetual daze. The Lord placed a funny-looking little fellow on the earth without telling him what it was all about or where he came from or where he was going. This funny-looking little chap has been running about trying to find out ever since.

### "STRANGE IS MAN WHEN HE SEEKS AFTER HIS GODS."

Therefore the strangest places on earth are the holiest. And the strangest and most remarkable city in the world is the holy city of Benares on the muddy arm of the Ganges, India's holy river. Here amidst a crumbling confusion of holy places is a temple—The Nepalese Temple. About fifteen feet up on the outside is a frieze of sculptured figures representing in succession the eighty-one sinful positions.

Sin is the curse of the human race—although it is very popular. The question of what causes sin has perplexed the ages. But of all the doctrines which men have propounded in their endeavors to solve the permanent enigma of existence, probably none has had a more potent influence than that which holds that the spirit is eternally pure and that all matter is inherently bad. The spirit of man is pure but his flesh is wicked, and therefore should be subjected to various degrees of mortification.

This gives rise to the various penances and punishments and ascetic practices so highly honored in all great religions.

## BELIEVE IT OR NOT

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The 81 sinful positions around the Nepalese Temple are counter-balanced by the same number of positions of punishment. These positions of penitence are practiced by an army of ascetics throughout India—particularly in the holy cities of Benares, Allahabad, Lahore, Mysore, and Calcutta. These sects of ascetics are probably the strangest men of mankind. They are sometimes called Faquirs (often they are fakers), Sadhus, Yogis, etc.

They presume to renounce the world and its ways, cast off their clothing and cover their naked bodies with ashes which gives them a weird white appearance; they neither cut nor comb their hair and usually plaster their heads with cow-dung (as evidence that the cow is holy in India) and adopt one of the ingenious methods of self-torture with the idea of keeping themselves constantly conscious of their penance. They are most often found about the holy places and always flock to all the religious festivals in the sacred cities along the Ganges where they are frequently made objects of veneration by the muddled multitudes of India who shower them with food and money. I have never heard one of them ask for alms, and they accept all offerings in stony silence.

### THE GHATS OF THE GANGES

AS I stood on the steps of Dasashwamedh—steps worn smooth by countless thousands of pious ones descending into the water—the sight before my eyes impressed me more than any other in the world.

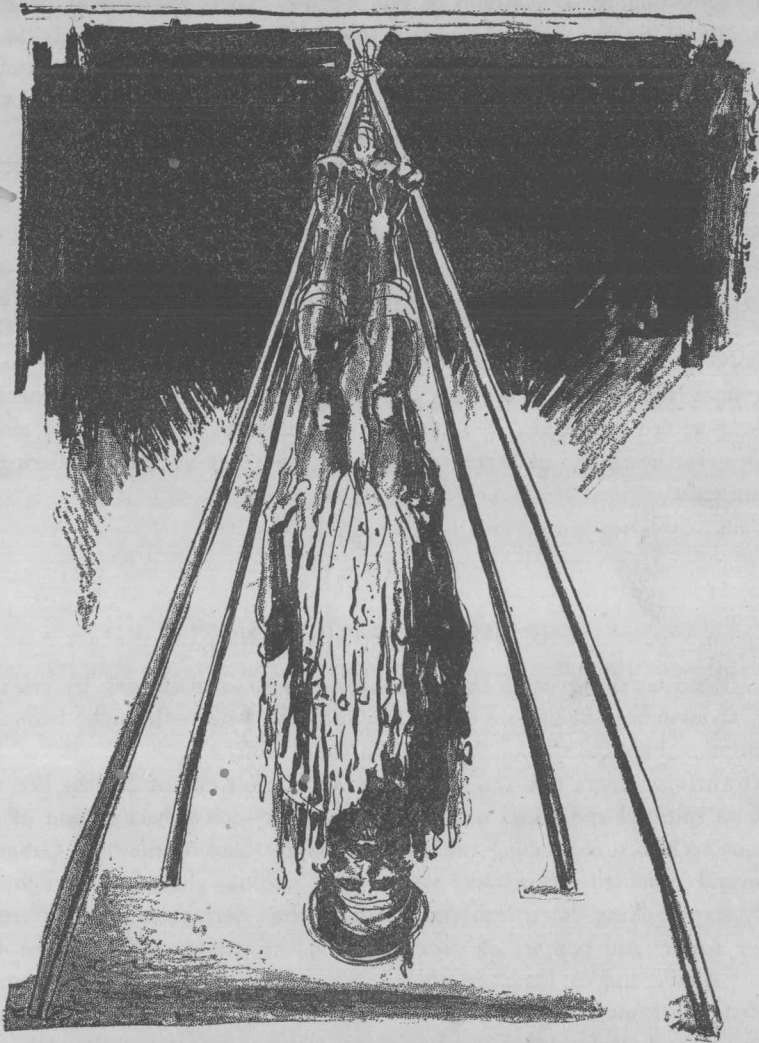
Nowhere on earth can you see such a weird cross-cut of human life with all of its spiritual and social manifestations set in such a background of picturesque architecture as along the crescent-shaped shore of the holy Ganges.

Several miles to either side extend the bathing ghats, wide flights of stately steps sinking down into the sacred waters. Surmounting them are the strange towers and temples of their gods and the palaces and places of their kings. Above and in back are the narrow streets and lanes which connect the ghats with one another—a bewildering mass of mouldering alleyways, too narrow for wheeled traffic, and overhung by crumbling buildings that reminded me of Canton. These are the "Pukka Mahals." And so this is Benares!

Crowding my way down the steps of the ghat, among the weirdest collection of humanity on the face of the earth—demented, deluded, diseased, and devout—all struggling after their gods, I clambered aboard a boat and floated slowly down the Ganges before all this pagan panorama, wonder-

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### THE UPSIDE-DOWN MAN

The Urdhamukhi Sadhu who hangs head downward for three hours at a time.

## BELIEVE IT OR NOT

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ing all the while whether leprosy were contagious, and whether that one-eyed beggar with spots and both hands and feet eaten away had tainted me with that unmerciful malady with the red stump of his hand when he nudged me as I passed.

Each ghat and each temple is different. Each is built and dedicated to a different deity and each spot is peculiarly holy, to a Hindoo—from the Assi Ghat, built at the junction of a river not visible to anybody but the Hindoo, down past several hundred ghats to the Prahlad Ghat, the last of all.

Five of these ghats are particularly holy, and the millions of pilgrims must immerse in each successively on the same day—the Assi, Dasashwamedh, Barna-sangam, Panchganga, and the Manikarnika. Some are built in honor of monkeys, others, to “Ganesh,” a red idol with three eyes, a silver cap, and an elephant’s trunk, riding on a rat. Another was built for the “Dandas,” ascetics who always carry long sticks upright, never putting them down. The Sitla Ghat was built in honor of “Mother Smallpox,” and the Dasashwamedh Ghat means the “ghat of the ten-horse sacrifice.”

All the ghats are thronged with multitudes who swarm down in multi-colored waves to the filthy—but purifying—water.

Strange, but it seems that the dirtier a thing is the holier it becomes in India!

Sanitation and sanctity never come together here. The holy water of the Ganges is muddy and sluggish. Into it empty the city sewers and into it are thrown the dead who are too poor to afford the wood with which to burn their bodies after death. Those who die of loathsome diseases such as small-pox and leprosy are regarded as unworthy of cremation and so are consigned also to the great river.

According to their creed, the holy Ganges water purifies everything, utterly and instantly. Nothing can defile it, no matter how foul.

So the sight of these throngs of people drinking and bathing in this filthy water in which dead bodies are floating and sewage is seeping is not to be wondered at—but you will shudder at it just the same.

I was rowed up and down this panorama of never-ceasing interest all morning and I wish space permitted me to tell all I saw. I had the boat stop near the tall, stately minarets of the Aurangzeb Mosque near where thin columns of smoke were slowly ascending. Climbing over several native boats I reached the shore where several gauze-draped corpses were resting with their feet in the water.

Just above me were several bodies burning.



## THE BURNING GHAT

I HAD seen burning ghats before and was not particularly anxious to see this one at the Jalsain Ghat. However, when I learned that more than a million human beings offered up a daily prayer that they be burned on this very spot I decided to watch the entire ceremony.

I have seen many dead people in India—it is a common thing to die here—and frequently I have seen the bodies being wrapped in winding sheets of thin gauze as they lay on the ground in front of a hut. When a death occurs the body is immediately taken out of the house. If it is that of a woman it is wrapped in red; if it is that of a man it is covered over with white. Children are not wrapped at all, and neither are those who die of leprosy or smallpox. They are simply taken down to the Ganges and thrown in.

This morning on my way to the Burning Ghat I saw two funerals on the way. The procession is simple. There is no hearse—the body is merely tied to a bamboo pole by the neck and ankles and hoisted on the shoulders of two chanting relatives, who carry it down to the river bank.

I arrived at the Burning Ghat before them, passing the Nepalese Temple with its eighty-one indecent carvings, and the Dharm Kup, the sacred well in which the lepers bathe and where the water is changed but once a year. I stood for a few minutes watching the ghastly fires of several corpses leaping viciously to the sky, when behind me came the chanting of the procession I had passed near the Chowk.

Down the crumbling steps they went to the edge of the sacred water and advancing gave the body its last bath in the holy Ganges, for without that bath any shadow which might fall upon it would convey impurity. Then, resting the feet of the white-robed figures in the water, the two bearers set about building the funeral pyre.

An ordinary pile of logs and boughs, about four feet high, costs five dollars. This was just an ordinary one. The body was placed on top and several cakes of cow dung laid on its chest, while the nearest relative, the dead man's wife, ascended a few steps to a sacred spot where the holy fire was brought to burn the body.

As I waited a sacred cow came wandering down the steps and calmly proceeded to eat the grass strands that bound the winding sheet to the corpse. The widow returned with shaven head and snow-white garments, waited for the cow to finish, then placed a handful of meal on her dead husband's mouth, walked five times around the pyre and without the slightest sign of emotion set fire to the pile at her husband's throat.

The flames spread rapidly. From time to time the woman, assisted by a near relative, used long poles to make the fire burn faster. Not a pleasant sight.

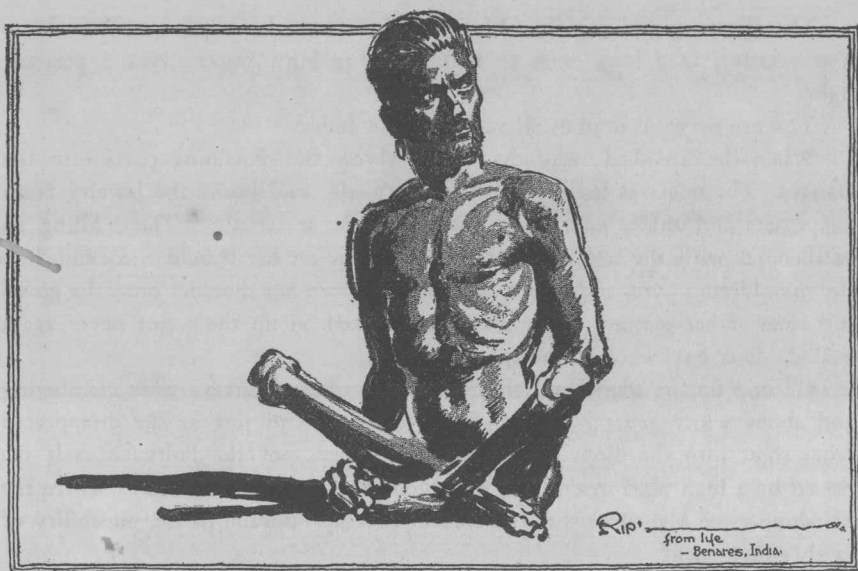
You are never so dead as when you die in India.

When the fire died away the widow threw the remaining parts into the Ganges. The relatives led her to the water's edge and broke the jewelry from her wrists and ankles and threw them into the water also. Then, filling an earthen jar with the sacred water, she placed it on her shoulder, ascended to the smouldering pyre, and tipped it backward from her shoulder onto the glowing ashes of her master. Straightway she walked on up the steps; never again will she look backward at the spot.

On and up she went through an archway where monkeys were clambering and above which several vultures were soaring. And just as she disappeared from sight into the dingy crevices—called streets—of the Pukka Mahals she passed by a high platform on top of which is an image of Mahadeva where the worshippers of Mahadeva dwell, a sect supposedly immune to the possibility of earthly defilement.

So they say.





## THE SUN GAZER

“STRANGE is man when he seeks after his gods.” Sometimes he thinks too much and seeks too long, yet learns nothing and loses everything . . . like the naked faquir who sits all day glaring at the blazing sun. He has looked too long and now sees nothing. The fiery rays of the sun have burned out his eyes long years ago.

Each morning as I floated down the sacred stream I saw this sun gazer being carried down the steps to his accustomed place on the Dasashwamedh Ghat. His brothers placed him down gently—he could not walk as his legs had withered away from years of inactivity—and turned his face toward the east. Slowly he opened his eyes to greet the morning sun as it raised its burning head over the temple tops of the Holy City; here he remained the whole day long with his wide staring eyes fastened on the blazing sun without once turning them away or closing them for an instant until the dying disc had sunk once more below the horizon. He had been doing this for fifteen years.

