

ABSURDITIES OF INDIA'S CASTE SYSTEM



CALCUTTA, Dec. 7.—(Special Correspondence of The Sunday Oregonian.)—While the government of man has reached an advanced stage among most of the nations, the tribal law of India antedates that which Moses gave to the Hebrews. Although the holy lawgiver of the Israelites was undoubtedly wise in decreeing that the caste system was a safe method for ruling an ignorant and numerous population, it seems marvelous that any plan or scheme of those old days should endure through all the changing centuries. Yet we find a code here in India almost as unaltered as the one was established to meet the requirements of the early branches of the human race.

The Hindu marries in his own family, even as Abraham espoused his niece. The young Indian must seek a wife among his tribe, like Isaac, who journeyed into a far country to wed a maiden of his own family. Any young man of modern India who should disobey his caste rules of wedlock would displease his parents equally as much as Esau offended Isaac and Rebecca by marrying among strangers.

The caste system as practiced in India is a relic of the times that have ordained. Moses, means a social and economic division of the population according to profession.

Rules of Life Are Fixed.

No person is allowed to exercise more than one calling at a time, and no individual is ever permitted to change his occupation. It is a case of once a fiddler always a fiddler. Hence the son of a shoemaker must be a cobbler, and the daughter of a barber must marry a man who follows that trade. In most instances a man is not even allowed to travel about, but must work and live in the place where he was born.

There are four main castes in India, and the explanation of how they were formed is that the original members were made from the body of the god, Brahma. The Brahmins, or priests, came from the head; the rajahs, or soldiers, from the shoulders; the agriculturists from the stomach; while those devoted to servitude

came from the feet. These four main castes have been divided and subdivided into several hundred different factions, and the distinctions are so numerous that only a student can understand all the differences that exist.

The Brahmins consider themselves so superior to other castes that they observe the most ridiculous measures to preserve themselves from bodily contamination. One of them would no more think of touching the person of a member of a lower caste than he would of cutting his

own throat. In the olden times if a person without caste entered a Brahmin's house he was murdered on the spot, and even now if this should happen the offender would meet with rough treatment. In the villages the outcasts are not allowed to pass in front of a Brahmin's house, because one of their footprints is supposed to contaminate the whole neighborhood.

Fear of Defilement.

This fear of personal defilement is so

great that the most absurd precautions are employed to prevent it. The Brahmins use a plate made of banana leaves, because one made of metal which had been touched by a Brahmin is a great unit for their use, no matter how carefully it might have been cleaned. To offer a Brahmin anything to eat that has been touched by any one else would be a great offence. The Brahmins eat fruit of dry food between meals he breaks it off in bits and throws it into his mouth to keep his fingers from being defiled by saliva. The third reason he is so afraid of contamination is that he pours the water into his hand and drinks from that.

If a Brahmin is touched by a dog he must bathe at once with all his clothes on. A high-caste doctor will put his fingers upon the pulse of a patient of lower rank until a piece of this silk has been bound around the sick person's neck. A Brahmin is expected to handle a letter which he knew had been sealed with the tip of the tongue. Although they are extremely fastidious about the respects mentioned, their care seems all the more to be a proof that their customs are found to be as filthy in other ways.

Bugs vs. Widows.

The members of one sect in India will not drink water unless they have a cloth stretched across their mouths. These people also have a servant pound upon a gong while they are at their meals in order to prevent the possibility of their hearing any profane remarks from passers-by while they are eating. The safeguard against killing minute insects by destruction of any form of life being considered sinful, the women brush the floor gently with a light duster before using a broom. The rule pertaining to the consumption of life is so strictly that even eggs are abjured as food on account of the vital germs which they contain. Such considerations, however, are not without compassion were it not for the fact that a law had to be enacted to prevent the horrible cruelty of burning a husband alive on the funeral pyre of her husband.

The servants of India invariably belong to the low castes, and their fear of doing something to offend their superiors is noticeable in the hesitations they always evince in approaching a person or in entering an apartment occupied by someone whose position is higher than theirs. Even the *servants* in the hotels, who ought to be familiar with the expectations of their guests, will halt and boggle before entering a room where they have been sent for and told to enter. They bear the evidence of conscious inferiority in their cringing servility.

The Brahmin is just the reverse. He devoutly believes that he was made

from the head of God, and that no creature on earth is his equal. He carries himself with an assurance that would be splendid if it were not so ridiculous. One of the greatest offences a low caste Hindu can commit is to deceive or lie to a Brahmin. This favorite class has been so badly spoiled by its privileges that those in even the poorest circumstances carry themselves like autocrats.

Nothing Left to Chance.

The entire procedure of Hindu life is regulated by the rules of caste usage, and every action of the native is governed by it. The mode of greeting, the cut of clothing and manner of wearing it, the shape of ornaments and style of wearing them, the furniture of the house, the arrangement of the hearth and cooking pots are located, the manner of going to bed and of sleeping, the rules of politeness that must be observed, no matter how filthy the subjects of the caste may be, all are laid down by rule. Nothing is left to chance. Every action of every individual relating to himself and to others is regulated by his caste, and there can be no departure from it. This irrational phase of the ancient law is one of the shackles that binds the Hindu to the age. As the rulers of the caste customs are discarded, there is little hope of improving the lot of the miserable millions that are enchained by them. The Hindu is a naturally and commonly obedient to almost any mistreatment.

ment or dignity which does not inquire the question of his caste. If he becomes a fearless fanatic if his tribal privileges are interfered with. The gravest disturbances frequently arise over a dispute of some trifling character between members of different caste. Sometimes the sole cause of a quarrel may be the disputed right to wear slippers through the streets on the occasion of a marriage ceremony. The natives are very much amused at the noise of the trumpets and at the head of a parade, or again the right to have certain musical instruments used in observing some ceremonial.

The distinctions between some of the castes are unusual indeed. For instance, musicians are considered inferior because in the act of playing their instruments the mouthpiece is touched with saliva. Shoemakers and all leather workers are degraded because of handling skins of dead animals. Barbers are looked down upon because they have to clean the ears of their patrons. The different castes of imitators consider themselves superior to goldsmiths, blacksmiths, founders and metal workers, as well as fishermen, potters and laundrymen, and would under no circumstances sit

The Servant Problem.

The strict division of employment necessitates a large staff of servants for the European residing permanently or sojourning temporarily in India. If he owns horses he must have a groom for each animal, and these stable boys accompany him when he goes out, because the driver's work is

little stimulus to endeavor. As a consequence, the Indians are a dull, spiritless race, plodding dumbly onward without the zest that makes free men take issue with their fellows and enter into the battle of life with vigor and purpose.

the winners of war and assurance. The aristocratic English have ruled in India for more than a century, it seems that something should have been done to break down this antiquated scheme of classifying the population. That they have not done so is explained by the fact that they themselves practice the caste system. In many respects English social usage is as inconsistent as the age-worn traditions of India. Although the wealth of the English in India is enormous and maintained by her shippers and merchants, the official class holds itself aloof from the former for no other reason than that they are engaged in trade.

An instance in illustration occurred while I was in Calcutta. A young clubman of the standard type, who had come from his brother from England, and was very much embarrassed when the visitor was refused admittance to the club on the ground that his occupation was not acceptable. He was, however, a man who held an important official position, while the one refused was an expert machinist. The latter came out from England to overhaul a valuable engine that would not run. He was a man of great energy, and he did not have to sell his hands; to locate the trouble and correct it. His position was far more important and his salary much larger than his brother's, and he was a man of much more education. He educated the clubman with wages earned at the bench while he was journeyman.



HINDOO FRUIT SELLERS:

confined solely to holding the reins. If there should be a break-down, it should be necessary to hold the animals by their bits, each groom must be there to look after his particular charge. In the household one mental servant is required to take the place of the butler, and another to do what the still assistant serves the table. The cook's assistant must be his own son or a member of his caste, and a lower grade of servant is employed to wash the dishes and do the menial work.

When training a dog, one does not lift your baggage around, but merely gives orders and sees that it is done, because this kind of work is beneath his caste. He merely relieves you of the inconvenience of having to give orders, and in the training that orders are properly obeyed. Although a large number of servants are required for each household, their hire is not great. The American Consul at Calcutta estimates that the average household in Calcutta has 100 servants, and the total amount of their salaries

The principal iniquity of the caste system is that it eliminates the element of personal ambition from the lives of those subject to it. A bright boy who is the son of a water-carrier might apply himself and become a merchant or a lawyer; but it is the inevitable law that he must remain a member of the low society and profession of his father. His whole life is determined by the circumstance of his birth, rather than by any natural ability which he might possess or talent which he might develop. The perspective of the individual is so restricted that he naturally lacks enterprise. Without reward there can be

machinist qualifying himself to become
the expert for the great firm which he
represented.

Could anything be more nonsensical than the distinction which was made between these men of the same family? Yet this is an actual example of the way the British practice the caste system among themselves. A man of the drawing enough pay to buy a *dress* suit can frequent the clubs of the gentry, but the most deserving man will be unobtainable for the same reason. The British do not what English tradition recognizes as polite. Quite recently the best oarsman on the crew at Oxford College was not permitted to dine with the other rowers. It was discovered that his father kept a drugstore and was therefore "not a gentleman." It is the name and not the character or merit of the man which is the basis of the caste according to the British code.

So it is not surprising that the English have looked upon the caste evil in India with indifference. During the centuries that they have been the masters of India's destiny they have quite shrifted their responsibility in this regard. Whether there be reason for not abolishing this iniquitous institution is a matter of no consequence; the attempt might involve or mere indifference to the well-being of their wards, the indictment remains that British rule has not corrected the monstrous rule of casteism. They thrive under the Union Jack today as in older times before the idea of the equality of man had been evolved.

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THE SUNDAY OREGONIAN'S SPECIALLY
SELECTED FICTION

“THE DOWAGER DUCHESS” BY C. BRYSON TAYLER

to society at large and to the society of her friends, she was Mrs. Everett; to those who were jealous of her, she was "that frivolous old dowdy woman"; but to those who knew her best, she was the Dowager Duchess. She came into the morning room where her grandson sat waiting breakfast for her, her drapery fluttering, her step as light as a girl's. Her white hair, coiled high above her fresh-toned, aristocratic young-old face, was lustrous as burnished steel. Her eyes, once formerly unlighted, her white hands, heavily ringed with the superb old-fashioned table-cut diamonds she always wore, were as steady as the clock's constant care could keep them. Over her wrinkles had to acknowledge that Mrs. Everett was well preserved.

Her grandson rose as she entered, six feet of steel and young manhood, and seated her at the head of the table. He was a good-looking fellow, well-talored and well set up. His upper profile was blue and red, his ear-cut aristocratic, his nose of brass and his chin of them of one race, and that a good one, but his mouth was his mother's, who had not been Mrs. Everett's daughter, and his eyes looked like his mother's.

"Good morning, my dear," he said affectionately. His grandmother nodded over the old-fashioned silver coffee service.

"Yes, Marie, did we very well this morning," he said with entire frankness. "I should-be nothing but an old woman without Marie."

"Nonsense," said her grandson, "you are not old. You are much younger than most girls I know; there are always half a dozen old beaux raving over you."

"Well, why not?" said Mrs. Everett, without looking up from the letter she was opening. "I am old, and I don't deny it. But why need old age be hard and unlovely and unattractive? Anyone can grow old gracefully who will take the trouble to do so."

"Of course, I have a good time—do does every one who wants to and doesn't mope in a chimney corner. As for the matter of growing old gracefully, my grandmother and be respectful, my child. You'll be accusing me of flirting next. Why, this is rather extraordinary!"

Her flexible voice softened. "Back to the letter," said Mrs. Everett, with a nod. "At 125 Hickman street, she will learn something concerning a matter which touches her nearly. A. M. Fairfax."

She glanced swiftly and oddly at her grandson's face, but he was breaking an egg and did not look up. "Did you ever hear of any one named Fairfax? I can't think what this can be about. Can you?"

"No," said the young man, and he was conversed with his own. "Whatever it is, it

"It's probably no good. People who have a reputation for being a little more than usually choosy that method."

"But M's signed," Mrs. Everett protested. "People who want to—blackmail don't usually sign things, do they?"

"Not usually," said Jack, "but at any rate," said Jack. Mrs. Everett's glance at him was keen. She was entirely cool, and not by the quiver of an eyelash was it betrayed the fact that the letter had given her a distinct shock.

"Where is Hickman street?" she asked innocently.

"I'll search me," Jack answered.

"I think it's somewhere in the southeast section." He watched as Mrs. Everett folded the letter thoughtfully.

"Over you, grandma! You want to go and find out, don't you?" he laughed.

Mrs. Everett looked at him soberly, then with an answering gleam of mirth: "Yes, my boy, and I'm going. I haven't outgrown my love of adventure even if I am your grandmother, and I think I'll see if there's an adventure in this."

"All right," said Jack resignedly. "I'll come home early from the office and take you."

"You'll—come home—" Mrs. Everett caught herself up and took a hasty step toward the door.

"I'll be there," said Jack. "It renders you a—a true and worthy grandson of mine."

Jack looked surprised and indignant in his turn.

"Is it audacious of a man to offer to escort his own grandmother to a place she knows nothing about?" he demanded.

Again she looked at him oddly—but across his breakfast plate—sneering and he did not catch her eye.

"I can imagine that under certain circumstances it might be considered so," she said.

She rose from the table with her handful of letters, pausing on her way downward to pat her grandson's browned curls.

"You curly-headed child who clambered on her knee with his baby woes—such little woeen—called her 'Dramma.'"

"You interrupt your work," said Jack, "to interrupt your work. What could possibly happen to an old woman like me?"

"Not the same, I'm counting," said Jack, smiling back into her sunny eyes. "If I were not your grandson, I'd rather run off with you than any girl I know, and there are plenty of men who are not your grandson."

She laughed irrepressibly at his nonsense.

"Goose! What girl you know is teaching me to make a man?"

"I want to make, I mean. I must get back early. I have my manicure at 4 and my massenauze at 4 and 5, and dine with the Tysons at 7:30."

"What General is there?" Jack asked with a twinkle.

"Naturally, if I am," said Mrs. Ever-

ell secretly. "I told him that if he was going to see me from now on, I shall wear black velvet and diamonds—"

"You giddy old soul!" her grandson laughed at her as she left the room.

Once the door was closed, Mrs. Everett old face sobering into sudden keen perplexity.

"I'm afraid there's something I don't understand," she murmured. "If wonder if I should have to read the boy the re of that letter? No! If he doesn't choose to confide in me—"

She left her.

It was Jacob, the artist, who, meeting Mrs. Everett at dinner in her black velvet, point lace and diamonds, had vowed that he would paint her thus, and call her "the Duchess." But Mrs. Everett's cobi died before the first sitting took place; but the name stuck and was remembered. Yet, even in her plainest gray dress, Mrs. Everett's face, with its fur and simple black hat, she had never in her life looked more the Duchess as she stood on the steps of the narrow house and watched her grandson and his wife.

The door opened in time to reveal a woman in a torn diamond wrapper, with a faded and soiled white apron. She stared, dumbly, until Mrs. Everett took control of the situation by asking:

"Does any one by the name of A. M. Fairfax live here? Yes? Then I wish to see him. He is a friend of mine."

"I want you to wait in the carriage for me. No, I don't want you to come in."

But the woman showed her into a study from room to room, through a room of cabbage and damp walls, and left her. Mrs. Everett stood in the middle of the room, her skirts gathered closely about her, and she looked at the door with her were the coolly soiled look with which the Dowager Duchess was wont to ward off obsequious advances.

She was then, a little grinning woman, woeased faced, hard eyed, in shabby and deadlly respectable black. Her manner held a desperate assumption of the air of a woman who had been a ruler, and made her appear more pretentious and ill at ease than she had been before. The expert eyes of the Duchess classified her as a woman who had been on—on, so unsure of her position that she mortgaged her own sure of it. She stopped, facing Mrs. Everett. Glass confronted and recognized glass. "You have triumphed," Mrs. Everett, wise in the tactics of her strategy, kept the reins of the situation.

"I am Mrs. Everett," she said, courteously if distinctly. "Perhaps you are the one from whom I have received a letter signed A. M. Fairfax?"

The small woman's jaw dropped.

"What—My Lord!" she muttered.

"What has Lord Fairfax done?" she asked instantly and visibly, she had the effect of adjusting herself mentally to con-

tions wholly new and unexpected. Her eyes ferreted out every detail of Mrs. Everett's dress and face and figure; a gleam of covetous eagerness crossed her face.

"I'm Mrs. Fairfax, and I wrote that letter," said sedately, an onslaughting daisy who knew John was swell, but I didn't look to see you like this. Will you take a chair?"

"Thank you!" Mrs. Everett sat herself upon the slippery baronet's chair indicated by her hostess's nod, with no sign of the quick nervous apprehension the woman's words evoked. Again before the latter could speak she took her heel and said, "I don't understand your reference to my grandson and your grand-daughter. I should like an explanation."

"That's all right," said Fairfax. "But maybe I'll be wanting an explanation too, since your grandson has married my grand-daughter. I want to know what you are going to do about it. Are you going to recognize her as his wife?"

"His-wife?" Mrs. Everett's shock of horror and amazement all but brought her to her feet. Under the stimulus of her amazement half insolent, her cringing regard, she recovered with an effort that left her fairly weak. She raised her forenoon—which she never in her life had allowed to be soiled by a woman's soot-soiled face and the shabby genteel form with slow and merciless criticism.

"What a very curious mistake you make," said Mrs. Fairfax, "and very liberally. My grandson to marry your grand-daughter?"

Mrs. Fairfax's leathery cheeks turned red. She was quite keen enough to appreciate the insult, but she was too proud to know how to return it in kind. Her weapons were the blunter ones of mere words; the rapier points of tone, infection and wit were wanting.

"A mistake, is it?" she said angrily. "All right—Lena!"

She turned to the door to call stridently down the hall. "Lena! Mrs. Everett's paid her handkerchief rapidly across her lips.

"Comin'!" said a full-throated, care-free young voice down the hall. Mrs. Everett's red lips and her eyes had hardened. What horrible thing had Jackson done—and never betrayed himself by word or sign? Was it actually possible that she had done it? The very notion of her by a low mesalliance! Many pitfalls she had dreamed for him and had done her womanly best to help him over—the many snare life lays for the unwary—she had never dreamed that. How could he have helped betraying himself when he knew the very house to which she was to come. In the midst of her agitation she had time to remember that she was in her own home—that she recognized as her own coolness—an admiration very short lived and most

useful. Her high pride of blood flushed to full tide. Let these common people see how her blood runs! She had caught her fairly between the eyes!—never! She was an Everett—she never forgot that.

Mrs. Fairfax, returning from the door, found a footman standing cap-a-pie in the vulnerable self-possessor, studiously courteous, glacially calm. In Mrs. Fairfax's footsteps followed a girl, a willowily slim of a thing, pretty, frowzy, and with a look of being a little out of the doorway staring shyly under her eyebrows. Mrs. Everett trained her long nose upon her. The effect was fully what she had intended, the girl winced at her glare of crimson embarrassment at her mother's.

"This is Lena," said Mrs. Fairfax. "Lena, this is Mrs. Everett. Tell her what you are."

"I'm J—John's wife, ma'am," said Lena with a stammer.

"Don't say ma'am," prompted her mother irritably. "She's your mother-in-law."

Lena winced at abject panic.

Mrs. Everett turned on her, ignoring her mother completely.

"What are you and my son's wife. How long have you been married?"

Under her eyes the girl's face became transfused. Love flushed it with rose light, killed twin sparks of unuttered happiness. For the first time her glance met Mrs. Everett's squarely.

"About a week, ma'am," she said with a thrill of her velvet voice. "We were goin' to keep it secret until John had fixed it up with you, but mother spoiled it."

"Spoiled it!" snapped Mrs. Fairfax acidly. "Well, if you won't stand up for your rights, somebody's got to—and that's all the thanks they get. A nice mess you'd be in—secret, my dear!—a thrall of her velvet voice—I've got my good name to keep up, I tell you and I won't have it!" She turned to what John was saying.

With a spit of the armor—"and Lena wouldn't listen to anybody but him, I took it into my hands. I'm a stranger here—came on from home—when I was a child. I had a letter what was going on—but I looked you up in the directory and wrote to you right over John's head, you might say. I've got to know all about it. Now I want to know what she's saying you're going to do about it."

Mrs. Everett moistened her lips. She knew that she was deadly white and that John was deadly red. She turned back toward the dingy window.

"Don't you think," she said quietly, "that you are taking a rather un-

fortunate way to serve your daughter's interests? Do you realize that your manner can hardly do other than make a bad matter worse—for her?"

Beneath her cool exterior her mind was traveling at racing speed. What was she getting into, she wondered. With a shock, she realized that the girl was watching her, was reading the struggle which tore her. That there were signs of sympathy in the young fright, she could not deny. But she was not. Instantly she became once more the Duchess, poised, self-controlled, dominating the situation.

"What shall do depends very much on myself," she said, with a nod at the Duchess's own inimitable manner, addressing the girl directly. "If—I—my son loves you, and you love him, and I am a mother, and a loving wife to him, doing your best to fit yourself for the place he has chosen for you to fill, I think—"

"Love him—ah, ma'am! the girl broke in. It was the work of the Duchess to speak that she had heard.

"That much may be forgiven you," said the Duchess stolidly.

"My dear child, I am glad to hear of relief; the girl's eyes widened.

"You don't hate me?" she whispered incredulously, magnifying, after the manner of her kind, the courtesy of Mrs. Everett's admission of the personal to herself. But the Duchess did not even smile.

"It will depend on yourself whether I do," she said. "I am not an adoring gratitude in Lena's brown eyes should have rewarded her, but the Duchess was not thinking of Lena's eyes just then. "I don't think my son has any right to sit in the driver's seat in this matter," she was saying, in her soft, well-modulated voice, when another voice from the hall, shrill and assertive, came to her ears. "I am making the objection of their excitement. It is almost as well have been a bomb for the effect it created."

"Mr. M. Everett, and I want particularly to see you," Mrs. Everett came to her to meet his wife, and if she's here I'm not coming all this way for nothing!"

Mr. Fairfax's breath of relief changed to a gasp of apprehension. Mrs. Everett looked startled; Lena stood poised as though for instant flight. A woman came to the door and opened it for them; a woman of very red cheeks, very blue eyes, snuggly nipped-in figure, which overflowed into very pronounced curves. Her voice was so many dots; her hat too many feathers.

"My word!" said the newcomer. "It is a family party? Hope I don't intrude. Her black eyes glanced swiftly from Len-

to face, and roared unerringly on Mrs. Fairfax's bewildered countenance.

"You must be Mrs. Fairfax. You're Everett-John's grandmother. You look surprised—I do look young to be a man's grandmother, don't I? I just found out today that the reason he'd been acting so queer all this week was that he was married, and he was afraid I would ruin his life. I'm not! I've always said the best girl in this world was none too good for John. Are you John's wife?"

Lena jumped.

"Yes," she faltered unhappily.

"Humph!" said John's grandmother frankly. "I've always told John he must marry a rich girl or he'd hear from me. I'm an Everett."

John's grandmother gave an almost hysterical giggle, and John's grandmother turned at obviously inquiring eye upon her. But for once the Duchess's courage deserted her. With a little cry she turned back, she walked to the door, stumbled blindly into the hall, and felt a nervous touch upon her arm. She stopped, simply because she was too dazed to resist whatever else Fate might choose to do with her, and looked into Lena's imploring eyes.

"You're glad it isn't you," sobbed Lena incoherently. "And I'm glad it isn't you. You're glad because you're not married. I wish it was. But I wish—oh, ma'am, I wish it was you, because you would have been square with me, even if you didn't like me—you couldn't help being square with me. But she's different—she's mean, and no matter how hard she'll never be anything else."

The Duchess found her voice.

"Trust John, my dear: always true. If I tell him I'll come out right for you," she said cheerfully. With one of her quick impulses, which wild as they were, she never regretted, she stooped and kissed the girl's cheek. Then, holding her fifth cigarette on the other side, she looked at her in a sideward, mood paralyzed into immobility, match in hand, at sight of his grandmother as she appeared suddenly from the front door, clinging to the pillars and laughing until the tears ran down her cheeks. He went to her three steps at a time.

"Good Lord, grandma, what's the matter? What have you been doing?"

"I'm being told! Nothing at all!" gasped the Duchess indignantly. "Oh, my! I'll tell you some day." She suppressed a giggle, which again she attempted to suppress, and said to the girl, "I'm your nearest darling—heavens, child, don't get frightened. I only came near having an adventure!"

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