

The Storyteller.

THE WARD BOY.

'REQUIRED, a ward boy for a newly-erected hospital. Apply for particulars to—'

The advertisement was read out of one of the local papers by a friend, Vishnu Bulwunt listening attentively. He was a thin, lanky, loose-limbed boy about 18 years of age, and in the usual native costume of the 'dhoti,' or waistcoat, and a close cut jacket; his head was destitute of hair save for a little tuft at the top, surmounted by a small red cap.

'Wah ji! I wonder if they would take me if I applied?' he said, eagerly.

'You!'—his companion looked at him with amazement—'a Brahmin, demean yourself by such employment. What are you thinking of? You will lose caste forever.'

Vishnu spread out his palms with deprecatory gesture.

'What matter,' he said; 'who can it affect but myself, and to one without sons what can anything matter in this world? If I die who will perform the sacred ceremonies necessary to rescue my soul from hell? Besides, I am a poor man and cannot live without bread; "hat," if they pay me well I will take the place.'

'A Brahmin is a mighty god,' said his companion.

'I tell you,' answered Vishnu, impatiently, 'I am poor, poor, and if I cannot earn something my family and I will die of hunger in these bad times.'

'What must be, must,' assented the other, at last persuaded of the futility of argument and with the usual Oriental indifference.

'I am applying for an appointment myself,' he continued presently, producing a sheet of paper. 'Listen to this—what do you think of my letter? It was written for me by the writer in the Suddha Bazaar. Listen.' He read slowly, translating word by word; the original, in English, ran as follows:—

'Please will you let me know if you have any vacancies? Allow me to inform you that I am offering my services in spite of the bubonic plague. I am plain, honest, and simple hearted, and will take the greatest pleasure in obliging you, and, being no new hand in any position, you will shortly find you have no chance of dismissing me.'

'Shabash!' said Vishnu, admiringly. 'That is indeed a clever letter, and will assuredly obtain a reward; for myself, I am not frightened either, and I shall apply for the place to-night.'

When a few hours later Vishnu Bulwunt, redolent of oil and brushed from head to foot, stood before the doctor of the plague hospital, he was met with exactly the same queries as those his friend had put to him in the morning. For a Brahmin to apply for such menial employment was extremely unusual, but he accounted for this, as before, as more or less obligatory by reason of poverty. The question of danger from nursing plague patients he waved aside with the same reply: 'I am poor, and the poor man cannot choose his lot,' he said epigrammatically. 'Though I have never done such work before, yet I have several times been ill in hospital, and have seen how other ward boys do,' he added anxiously, fearing lest the qualification should not be deemed sufficient. The wages offered were high, and diverted his thoughts from all else. After a few more inquiries the doctor satisfied himself that the boy would suit (it was not easy to get any volunteers for such service), and it was accordingly arranged for him to commence his duties.

The hospital had been opened a short time previously by a large public body for the use of any employees who might be attacked with the bubonic plague, then raging in their midst. It was a long, low, mud-and-thatch building, erected on a piece of reclamation ground some two miles up the harbor, the waters of which lay spread before it. Far across on the further side could be seen the hills of the Kolaba coast, blue green in the distance by the day, where the fierce glare of the sun was on them; soft pink and gray in the misty evening light. Immediately behind the hospital, to which it formed a background, rose a plateau fringed with cocoanut palms, showing in clear, dark outline against the sky. Their roots in places overhanging the semicircular hollow caused by recent excavation, the crimson soil of which, especially with the glow of sunset resting on it, presented the appearance of a still gaping, bleeding wound inflicted on Nature by the wanton hand of man. Great boulders of purple rock lay scattered around, adding to the wild picturesque-ness of the spot,—it was very silent and sequestered, hidden more or less from sights and sounds of the outside world, and approached by a beaten track which wound round the foot of the ridge. Inside the hospital was arranged a row of low iron bedsteads; those formed the sole furniture of the ward, but all was clean and fresh, ready for occupation. In the small hut close by lived the native apothecary in charge, while the ward boy sat crouched on his haunches, his chin resting on the palms of his hands, the sole living being in the hospital itself.

It was midday, and the air was still and hot. Vishnu sat looking across the harbor, thinking over the events of the previous evening, when, after having signed an agreement with the doctor, he had returned to relate the joyful news of his appointment to the few remaining relatives he possessed. His child wife had said very little, but her eyes gleamed happily at the idea of the small fortune they would possess when Vishnu should receive the munificent income of twenty rupees a month. 'And all my clothes,' he had added as a crowning surprise. The naked brown baby in his wife's arms was very thin, and Vishnu looked at it compassionately, though of course, being only a girl, it could never expect either affection or consideration in the world. Perhaps if he could propitiate the gods by sacrifice some day a son might be granted him to perform those rites necessary after death to rescue his soul from hell. Though a Brahmin, and duly invested with a sacred thread, Vishnu was absolutely ignorant of most things pertaining to his

religion. His uncle, who had formerly denounced him as idle and good for nothing, now rated him soundly for undertaking employment which would bring disgrace not only on himself, but on all connected with him. Vishnu had sorrowfully acquiesced in the sentence of degradation, comforting himself merely by repeating now and again: 'Twenty rupees a month and all my clothes given me.' It was a marvellously solacing reflection, and the only one that appealed to the poor, half-starved little wife, who watched him with reverent eyes. Next morning Vishnu had left the house in the cool silence of dawn, and midday found him at his post at the plague hospital.

In his hut the apothecary was reading a letter received by the morning's post from a friend, an accountant by profession; the contents were as follows:—

'I have been ill and am now recovering; there is some wonderful native medicine given me principally for pain in my side, the drug to be taken once a week in boiled flesh of tortoise; this has reduced pain in my side by about one-seventh. It was at first thought that I had the evil sickness of the plague, but it was not so, and I hoped to be cured soon by His Grace.' Then followed more to the same effect.

'Bah!' ejaculated the apothecary scornfully—he was a small, sleek, very fat Goanese—'nowadays men are so frightened they think every pain is going to turn to plague. They have no courage, none at all, now if I was nervous about such things how should I have taken this appointment?' He patted himself complacently and looked across at the empty hospital. At the door sat Vishnu looking out over the sea. 'I don't believe that boy will stay if we get a case,' he thought, and shook his head sorrowfully in anticipation of the lad's defection. 'Ah! there are not many such brave men in the world as I,' and again he stroked his pompous little person in a congratulatory way.

Inside the hospital it was cool, dark, and still; outside the glare and heat were intense, but the only sounds were those of the crows cawing and the copper bird with its one monotonous note, 'Too-hoo,' 'Too-hoo,' 'Too-hoo.' Presently Vishnu's head dropped forward on his knees and he fell asleep.

For 10 whole days the hospital remained absolutely empty. Every morning Vishnu swept and dusted the wards, after having first performed his own ablutions, above all the teeth cleaning, which is an essential part of a Brahmin's observances. The apothecary in his little hut grew visibly fatter and oilier, and was almost jocular on the subject of the plague, from which they seemed indeed to have a wonderful immunity. There was very little to be done all day but to eat and sleep and ask questions of the few people from the outer world who visited the hospital. Now and again an English Sahib would come, accompanied by the doctor, and, after seeing round the place, express satisfaction at all the arrangements therein. Vishnu was a part of the arrangements, and therefore included in the general satisfactoriness. The natives who came occasionally to sell sweetmeats, or the barber who squatted beside Vishnu under a tree at the back of the apothecary's house to shave him—for no Brahmin will shave himself—brought accounts of what was happening in the city, the latest news of the plague, the price of grain, and the possibility of a rise or fall in the rates, and the number of bodies burned at the principal burning ghat of the city, such information was imparted in brief oracular sentences. On the eleventh day a patient was brought to the hospital, almost the first indications of his arrival being the sudden departure of the apothecary, who had prayed daily and fervently that his services might not be required. The sick man was laid on one of the narrow iron bedsteads. His wife had come to tend him, and held a baby at the breast—it was the great attractions of the hospital that patients might bring their own relations to feed and nurse them and so run no risk of pollution by the touch of any one belonging to a different caste.

Vishnu set about his work cheerfully and did it well. The case was a serious one, but, having been taken in time, not hopeless. In a few days the patient was pronounced out of danger, but in the meantime two other cases had been admitted. Another apothecary, a far better type of man, had been appointed, and the doctor paid his visits regularly three times a day and once at night. He was also a Goanese, a clever and not unkind man. The time passed more quickly with so much to be done, and Vishnu counted triumphantly that he now had worked 16 days towards the attainment of his month's wages. True, one rupee and a few odd annas had been advanced him for food; these must be deducted; the balance owing to him had to be carefully reckoned on his fingers. He had worked faithfully and well for this, and had earned the praise of both doctor and apothecary. Not that Vishnu cared much for words, but still if thrown in together with other good and substantial things they might be taken as not altogether worthless. An instinct of common humanity had led him to be attentive and patient with the sick men, who generally lay rolled up like so many motionless mummies, unless the delirium was on them, during which it would require sometimes absolute force to hold them in their beds. There was one poor fellow to whom Vishnu was particularly drawn by the fact of his being the only patient whose relatives had not attended him to the hospital. Moreover the man was weak and suffered during his convalescence from fainting fits, which had once or twice sent Vishnu running wildly across for help, thinking him to be dead. The doctor duly recorded the fact in the official report as follows:—

'Suffers from fainting fits; it is a common occurrence during recovery among those affected with weak hearts.'

In spite of the 'fits' the man was recovering, and bade fair to be discharged cured. Vishnu had confided to him the great salary he was to draw, and had been pleased at seeing his companion duly impressed.

One evening Vishnu sat outside waiting for his dinner, which was being prepared by one of the women belonging to a patient, a