

THE PUNDIT

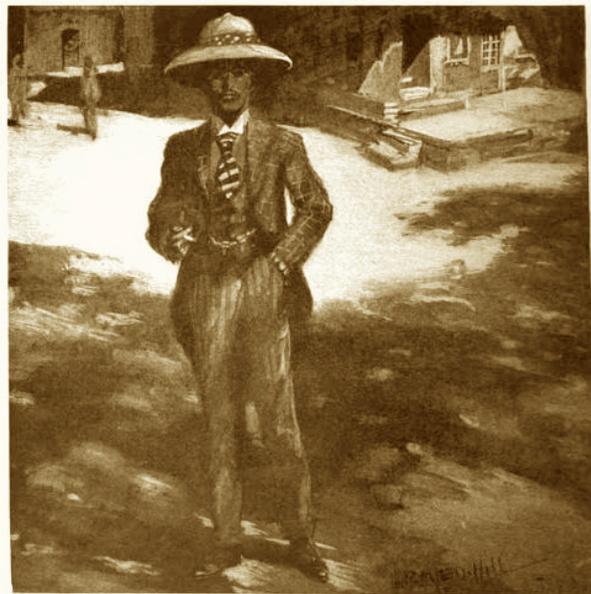
Tom Stoker

ILLUSTRATIONS BY LEONARD RAVEN - HILL

They called him "The Pundit" because he was a Brahman and was reputed to know Sanscrit. Whether he knew it or not, none of us could say, for reasons which I need not particularise. Anyway, he said he did, and this ought to have been true if it wasn't. Most Pundits in India are priests of the Hindu faith. But there was nothing of the clergyman about our Pundit as we saw him. Indeed if he believed in any religion we certainly had no reason to suppose it was the Hindu creed. He wore English clothes, and ate beefsteaks, and kept a Mohammedan cook and a Portuguese waiter, and did other most unorthodox things that would have made his worthy father turn in his grave if the custom of cremation had not rendered any concerted action of the sort quite out of the question.

In fact, I am sorry to say that our Pundit in his hours of ease took rather a pleasure in demonstrating his emancipation from the beliefs or superstitions of his ancestors by making them and their professors objects of his humour or his sarcasm. When offered, for example, a third helping of calfs-head *a la tortue*, he would cheerfully justify his acceptance of it by observing that the first duty of a good Brahman was always to be ready to eat and to go on eating as long as he got nice food for nothing. "Grub," to be quite accurate, was the word he used, to which he prefixed the adjective "rippin' "—those being the terms in which he had once heard the Judge's dinner described at the club by a slangy subaltern. He read the works of Comte and Mr. Frederic Harrison, and drew comparisons between them and Manu or the Rig Vedas which were distinctly disrespectful to the earlier authorities. Towards Hindu religion in the concrete, as presented in its daily observances, with its tawdry shrines and idols, its hungry priests and mendicant Fakirs, his attitude was one of lofty and undisguised contempt. He had left these things behind along with his loin-cloth and his puggaree and his vegetarian diet. He breathed the clear air of civilised rationalism, and he dressed the part he had chosen to play. No more prayers to gods riding on tigers—no more sacrifices to elephant-headed, many-armed deities—no more waving of lights or ringing of bells at the time when educated people were drinking tea or getting ready to eat with knives and forks.

His costume was aggressively European. Large striped trousers concealed his nether extremities, and a very large check coat of morning cut revealed a brilliant waistcoat which would have been most useful to a member of parliament who wanted to catch the Speaker's eye. A grass-green or a lustrous sky-blue necktie of ample proportions shone luridly from the background of a drab flannel shirt. When he attired himself in evening dress, the conventional claw-hammer coat and black trousers replaced the striped and checked garments, but the dazzling necktie and the flannel shirt remained unchanged. The most strikingly exotic part of the attire, however, was decidedly the head-dress. He persistently wore the very largest sun-hat of the class known as "solah topi" that money could purchase. It not only protected his head, but cast a wondrous shadow which at noontide extended to his feet, and later in the day presented the profile of a gigantic mushroom. He wore it early and late—hot weather and cold; there was even a rumour that he had been seen to seek its protection on a bright moonlight night. It was his trade-mark - it proclaimed to all observers that he was to be ranked among the Franks, even as the kilt will at times proclaim the true Gaelic affinity of the young man from Upper Tooting.



"He had been seen to seek its protection on a bright moonlight night."

As in this latter case also it must be admitted that the language of his adopted character presented occasional difficulties to the Pundit. With the English of Milton and Addison and Dr. Johnson he was quite familiar. But they did not count for much at the Station Club, and the colloquial English which prevailed at that resort presented new and puzzling complications, untempered by footnotes and glossaries. It was perhaps fortunate for the Pundit that he did not recognise a solecism when he heard it or when he committed it. He treated these embarrassments in the way the Scotch Minister recommended his congregation to treat a peculiarly difficult theological argument when they met it—to look it straight in the face and pass on. To the purist in style his remarks might occasionally seem grotesque or even equivocal; his innocent and quiet mind took them for idioms. It seemed to him, for example, quite unreasonable that he could use the good old scriptural word "belly" without rebuke when he spoke of his horse, but that

comment and even remonstrance were excited when he employed it to describe the place where the Judge's wife wore a large silver buckle which formed part of her tennis costume. It is undeniable that he once described the Collector's bungalow as a "harem" of rest, and it took a good deal of explanation to make the Collector's wife believe that he really meant a "haven." He always received our comments on his mistakes with extreme good nature, and repeated them in another form. When he once retorted on his tormentors that at any rate he knew more of their language than they knew of his, the remark was obviously made to express his placid satisfaction with his own acquirements and not to twit them with their ignorance. Anything of the latter sort would have been entirely foreign to his character. His anxiety to avoid giving offence amounted to timidity. A young and inconsiderate police officer was known to have essayed to make fun for himself by confiding to the Pundit certain imaginary atrocities committed by the Collector and the Padre, and ingenuously asking his candid opinion of their characters as so disclosed. But the distress and dismay of the poor victim were so poignant that the youth had not the heart to proceed with the joke.

The terrible possibility that the Pundit had ever before his eyes was that he might lose the good opinion of his European friends and be denied the unique privilege of free admission to their society—without this life to him would have been a blank. How he had secured his footing in that society no one knew. In our little station the English staff changed about every three years. As soon as any one was posted to it he began at once to lay his plans for getting out of it. Each successive generation as it came found the Pundit in possession and left him there as it passed away. Consequently, no one ever remembered the time when he did not figure as a Sahib among Sahibs.

His official position was a sufficiently humble one, and its salary was also *modest*. He never sought promotion, and gave it as his reason that promotion would involve transfer, and he could nowhere else count on the good fortune of securing that European society which had become a necessity to his existence. He lived comfortably in a nice little bungalow in the Civil Lines, furnished in English fashion, and he explained to the curious or inquisitive that he possessed private means and had not to limit his expenditure by his pay. He was always ready to join in the Station subscriptions for charity or amusement, and had been known even to lend money to impecunious youths who had anticipated payday. But it was not considered good form to borrow money from the Pundit, so we spared him and backed one another's bills after the evil custom of Anglo-India.

It is scarcely necessary at this stage to remark that the Pundit was a Bengalee. Yet in spite of the characteristics so mercilessly stated by Macaulay which go to prejudice that nationality, we all agreed that the Pundit was, in many ways, about the best specimen of a native we could name. His freedom from prejudice, his kindly nature and his unflinching cheerfulness, his anxiety to assist every one, and his almost pathetic gratitude for the smallest kindness, quite won our hearts. We forgot his race and colour and talked before him as freely as if he were one of ourselves. We felt we could do this with safety, as he never mixed in native society and had cut himself apart from all their habits and ideas. In his up-country surroundings he was as much a foreigner as ourselves. When he had to revisit his home in Bengal for some business or social duty he hurried back as soon as he could, and told us the relief he felt at getting free again from the associations

of his village life at home. Whenever we talked about the Pundit two points were recognised as beyond the reach of controversy. First - that he had assimilated European ideas and habits to an extent which left no room for the superstitions or prejudices or social restrictions which race and education imposed on ordinary natives. Second—that in honesty and truthfulness he was the equal of any English gentleman, and as incapable of deception or self-seeking.

It must be admitted that in one respect the Pundit found it very difficult to live up to the European character. Field sports and manly exercises occupied a large part of the lives we had to live. While professing the utmost enthusiasm about them and talking their jargon most fluently, it was observed that he displayed some ingenuity in losing opportunities for sharing them. He had an excellent gun, beautifully kept, and was immensely particular about the loading of his cartridges: but in the field his reluctance to shoot at moving game was that of the traditional French sportsman. In the matter of horses his little weakness was even less obscured by his other virtues. Polo he frankly eschewed, and in our annual races he confined his exertions to the grand stand and the bit of dusty waste behind it, which from sheer force of habit we called the "paddock." There it must be admitted that he shone. He knew all about the weights and colours and distances— the merits of each jockey and the condition of every pony. He put into all the sweeps and lotteries, generally with some success. He invariably entered a pony or two of his own; and more than that he usually managed to have a winner in his stable. But the annals of our Turf Club from the dawn of its history failed to disclose any instance in which the Pundit, to use an idiom he favoured exceedingly, had ever "sporting the silk" himself.



"His was ever the longest and the brightest spear in the field."

Curiously enough, he was regular in his attendance at our pig-sticking meets— where he made himself really useful in getting "Khabbar" of pigs, collecting beaters, borrowing elephants, and in the various other arrangements which are requisite for that king of all sports. His was ever the longest and the brightest spear in the field. When the beat started the great hat of the Pundit could be seen moving energetically, if not rapidly,

in the tall grass. But when the boar broke that hat was seen no more till the pig had become pork. Then indeed would the Pundit turn up full of the incidents of the run, and always with a satisfactory explanation of the absence of blood or grease from his spear. In the evening round the camp table none could kill the slain and fight the day's battles over again with the keenness, I might almost say the fierceness, of the Pundit. An unwritten but well-understood rule forbade that any of us should on these occasions remind the Pundit that he had failed to score, though in all our records of slaughter no spear, first or last, ever stood in the Pundit's name. Once, indeed, a sporting Mohammedan gentleman who often led the field and stood many a charge of the grey boar, did, in some dispute between them, tell the Pundit with some abruptness that he was more ready with his tongue than with his spear. But he at once divined from our serious silence that, freely as we chaffed one another on our little failures, we respected the Pundit's susceptibilities; and, like the true gentleman he was, the Nawab conformed to the wishes of his hosts and comrades. We observed, however, that he stood aloof from the Pundit, and he was known once to have confided to the Opium Assistant that he could not understand why the Sahibs made so much of that—(blank)—Bengali—using an adjective commonly applied to persons wanting in personal dignity and moral worth. We set that down to the antagonism of rival race, and hostile religion, and we continued, as our predecessors had done, to let the Pundit run tame among us as the most upright and most Anglicised of natives.

I shall always be glad to think that I left the station before the painful episodes occurred which preceded the Pundit's final return to Bengal and his severance from the Public Service. I heard them only the other day from Fitzbrooke in the smoking-room of our club in London, and state them as given by that temperate chronicler, with his usual salting of Hindustani.

"It all began," he said, "over a horse. The Pundit was planted with a dashed three-cornered brute by a condemned Cabuli thief. It had every fault a horse could have and be a horse; but it was as quiet as a superannuated cow in famine time, and that was why the Pundit bought it. Of course the robber who sold it had drugged it and fed it soft. We had a day at the pig in the Ramgurh *jhil*. The Pundit came as usual, and ran the show until the business began. We had three spears out that day besides him, and we all posted ourselves at the crossing near the big seemul tree where the pig always break. We saw the Pundit's *topi* in front of the line and his new Cabuli horse underneath it. Some one on the elephant fired a blank cartridge to start the swine, and the next thing we saw was the *topi* up in the air and the Pundit on the horse's neck and the brute bolting with him at an eighteen-anna gallop. It wasn't ground for an amateur Bengali horseman, and they naturally stayed in the first blind nullah. The horse remained there—took a contract for feeding jackals—and we picked out the Pundit, not fit for much more. He hadn't any external injuries to speak of, but the shock and the fright had changed him into somebody else. He could do nothing but groan and jabber like a mendicant leper. You never saw such a transformation. We took him home and put him to bed. We had a new doctor who didn't know the Pundit, and thought he must be like any other native. However, we got him in, and he vetted the Pundit all over, but couldn't find anything broken, and prescribed a whiskey peg and a game of billiards. Nothing could rouse the beggar—he just lay like a log and whined when he was told to turn over —put his hand on his head and asked for some *pine ka pani*. You know what a chap he was for everything English,

and how he pretended to have almost forgotten his own *bat*. Well, if you'd believe me, his English was clean gone - he could neither understand it nor speak it, and all he talked was Hindustani like a drunken syce. As Bateman remarked, he had suddenly changed into a dashed coolie.

"We made him snug for the night and left him there, and told him to go to sleep. Next morning I strolled over and met the doctor coming out. 'I'm not wanted there, I find,' says he with a grin; 'you had better go in and take a hand with your dear Pundit.' I went. You might have knocked me down with a crowbar. He had sent down to the bazaar and got up a Brahman to hold service over him. There they were burning incense and ringing a brass bell and doing *jhar phunk* and the rest of it, with the Pundit lying on his bed and a big idol of Debi or some other deity on the *teapoy* in front of him, and he chucking rice at it and praying to it. They had also got in a Hakeem to treat him, and had plastered his head with turmeric and were doctoring him with pomegranate pips and pigeons' dung. He had discarded his sleeping suit and put on a native '*chudder*.' It was the rummest thing you ever saw. It gave me rather a turn, for here was the man we all thought more European than ourselves. Of course I concluded the poor devil was off his chump, and I spoke to him. He stared at me like an owl till I tried Hindustani, and then he answered in a mumbling sort of way, and said he was very bad and had a devil riding on him, and that it must be dismounted. He went on just like my bearer did when he thought he had cholera once in the Terai. I asked him if there wasn't any relation or friend of his own family he would like to send for to look after him—for you know how friendless he was before. After a bit he said he would like to see Kanta Babu, and when I asked the address he said the Bazaar. I thought he meant his own village in Bengal, and went away, for I was getting rather sick of the perfumery. I met the police inspector outside—the sharp little Kayeth, you remember—and asked him if he knew where Kanta Babu, a *thai* of the Pundit's, lived. He looked at me a bit queerly, and said, 'Oh, your Honour has heard of him, then ?—he lives here in Ram Lal's garden in the big *gunj*! I didn't understand what it meant—at least just then—but I sent a peon to hunt him out and take him to the Pundit's bungalow.



"The whole place had turned native."

"In the afternoon Bateman and I looked in. My God! it was like a blessed pantomime. The whole place had turned native. There were charpoys in the front verandah, and in what used to be the Pundit's Belattee drawing-room there were two or three brick cooking-places on the floor—regular *chulhas* with earthen pots and chupattis and a smell like the bazaar confectioner's shop, rancid oil and bad butter and worse sugar, and the place a cloud of cowdung smoke. The carpet and the furniture were all cleared out. In possession we found Kanta Babu—an ordinary sneaking Babu, the very living image of the Pundit. No doubt the beggar was his brother, as he claimed to be. He cringed and whined in the usual way, and said his poor brother had been brought to book by the gods at last: he always feared the Pundit had gone too far, he said, especially in the matter of beefsteaks. A course of pilgrimages to Budrinath and Juggernath and a few other Naths was his only hope. As for the Pundit himself, he was a worse wreck than ever: not a word still but a mumble of bazaar Hindustani. He was sitting on his hunkers eating boiled rice with his fingers under the *pipal* tree behind the house, with nothing on him but a loin-cloth and his body covered with caste marks. He whined out to us not to come near him, or we would defile his food, and looked funky about our shadows. He had propped his idol up against a tree and given it the first of his dinner. He called little Bateman 'Your Majesty,' and the police inspector 'My Lord.' Great Scott! it made me quite sick to look at the creature, and think that he had been living among us as one of ourselves, and turning over the music for the Memsahibs. We were so knocked out of time that we could say nothing, but just took ourselves off to the Club and treated one another to a stiff peg before we could settle down to a game of tennis. When the other fellows turned up, and we told them the story, they took it for a sell and went over to see for themselves. They found the Pundit doing *pooja* inside to his idols, and feeding a crowd of Brahmans, and they couldn't get a word out of him.

"The next day he was gone clean and clever—not a trace of him left. The whole place was cleared out—lock, stock, and barrel. Another Bengali had turned up from God knows where; they had sold everything in the place to Framjee the Parsee for money down, and gone off by the 5.37 a.m. train with tickets for Calcutta. The only P.P.C. he left was an official resignation of his appointment.

"Then it all came out. Do you know, that chap had been kidding the whole lot of us all the time! Our dear, simple, honest friend had been carrying on a regular and flourishing business in blackmail and corruption, and was hauling in money all over the place. He gave it out that nothing was to be got out of the Sahibs without money, and that we had all made him our agent to collect it. And, by the Lord, he did collect! Not a big case tried in the Judge's Court but he got a dollop out of both sides and refunded to the loser; not a dashed appointment made in the whole district that he didn't take six months' pay of the man who got it; not a man Khan Bahadur-ed or Rai Bahadur-ed that he didn't get hundreds from for his good offices. He and his cursed *bhais* kept a regular shop in Ram Lal's garden, and sold the whole show, as if it was a rotten native state with an idiot for Rajah and a Bunnia for prime minister. 'You see the terms I'm on with the Sahibs,' he'd say; 'if you want your business fixed, just put it in my hands. I'm dining with the Collector to-night, and will settle it after dinner when he is *khush*, or I'll speak to the Memsahib at the Club this evening.' By Jove! the diamond rings and pearl necklaces and sapphire bangles he got to bribe all our wives, would stock a jeweller's shop. And the devil did it all so cunningly that no one ever split on him. If a man didn't win his suit, or

didn't get his title, the Pundit refunded his coin, and invented some lie to explain why he couldn't bring it off, and they were all quite content, and regarded him as a very honest broker. The most extraordinary thing is that our native officials and friends knew all about it, and not one of them ever said a word to any of us. He used to bribe some of them and frighten others, and he kept the whole crowd quiet—showed what they thought of us, doesn't it? I asked Kashi Pershad the banker, who was by way of being a candid friend of mine, and letting me know what was going on in the district, why he never gave me a hint; and all he could say was, 'When we saw how intimate your Honours were with the Pundit, we didn't think you would believe anything we said against him.' The little Kayeth Inspector said he thought we must know the raw truth, and were using the Pundit as a sort of informer for picking up secret intelligence. My belief is, the two of them were afraid the Pundit would turn round and let out some of their own misdeeds. God knows; perhaps they went snacks with him. Anyhow, he scored all round. We have been trying ever since to catch him, but he disappeared absolutely, and there is not a trace of his hoof anywhere. We sent to Bengal to hunt him up at his home, and it is not that we can't find him there, but hanged if we could even find the village where he said he lived, or unearth any one who had ever heard of him or it. He was prepared all the time for a bolt. Bateman, the D.S.P., swears he will catch him washing off his sins in the Ganges, and has men on the look-out at all the holy places; but it's my belief that we'll never see him again. The fellow knows too much for any of Bateman's lot to bring him back.

"They talk of nothing else at the Club now, and every one of them tries to make out that he suspected the Pundit all along. What rot!

"Some of them think he had got to the end of his tether, and that his sudden collapse was part of the plant. The devil was capable of that or any other villainy, to be sure; but if he was acting, then the finest artist alive is lost to the world. No; take my word for it, the spill did for him. That's where the blood shows. When he was knocked out of time, he forgot all his lessons and went back to his original sin out of sheer, beastly funk. The old priest in the garden temple says it was the vengeance of the gods for the way he used to laugh at them. Whatever it was, it's jolly well they have some weak spot, or we couldn't make a living in the blessed country!"

My latest information shows that they are still looking for the Pundit.

T. STOKER.