

CHAPTER IV.

NUSSOOH TALKS WITH HIS YOUNGEST SON,
SULLEEM.

NEXT day the youngest boy, Sulleem, was awakened by Bedará with a message that his father wanted to speak to him. He was only ten years old, and, alarmed at the unusual summons, he washed his hands and face, and ran to ask his mother why his father had sent for him, and if he was angry.

"How can I tell," she said, "he hasn't been down stairs yet."

"Bedará, do you know anything?"

"All that I know is that master was sitting reading, and when I passed his door, he told me to call you."

"I wonder if he is angry," said the boy. "Mother, you'll come with me, won't you?"

"No, I can't leave baby. What are you afraid of? If your father questions you, mind you answer him properly."

At last Sulleem ventured up-stairs, and timidly entering his father's room made his obeisance, and stood at a respectful distance. His father called him to come and sit beside him, and said pleasantly :

"So you haven't gone to school yet, my boy."

"No, Sir, it wants an hour to the time yet."

"Do you go to school with your second brother, or alone?" inquired his father.

"Generally I go alone, Sir. The examination comes off next month, and my brother is working for it. He rises very early and goes to a schoolfellow's, and I meet him at school afterwards."

"Why does he do that? is there no room for him to study here?"

"He says that chess and cards are always going on in our part of the house, and he can't work in peace," replied Sulleem.

"Ah! I daresay you play chess, don't you?" remarked his father with a smile.

"I know the moves, Sir, but I don't care about playing."

"Perhaps it is too difficult for you. You prefer cards?"

"No, Sir, I like cards still less."

"Well, but how is this? Not so long ago you were always playing at some game or other. There must be some special reason," said his father, rather astonished at the boy's words and manner.

"I will tell you, Sir," replied Sulleem, who was fast losing his dread of his father. "Have you noticed the four boys who pass our house every day together, with books under their arms?"

"What? those quiet-looking boys with pale faces, hair close cut, trousers up to the ankle, and low coats? * Well, what then?"

"You may well call them quiet, Sir. They have lived in our quarter ever so long, and scarcely anyone knows them. They are four brothers, and go to our school; and they never quarrel or fight, or call names or swear, or use bad language, or tease. And during the recess they always go to the mosque near the school."

"Good! and what then?"

"The third brother is in my class; and one day the Maulvi Sahib was very angry with me for not knowing my lesson, and said, pointing to him, 'Why don't you go and study with that boy? He lives close by your father's.' I asked the boy to let me come, and he gladly agreed. So next day I went; and the first thing I saw was an old lady, called Huzrut Bee, the boys' grandmother, who has charge of them; but I took no notice of her, and went and sat down by my class-fellow. When she had finished what she was doing, she said,

* These are prescribed tokens of sobriety; and may be taken as an unfailling indication of character, except in cases where imposture is intended.

'How is it, my boy, that you forgot to salaam to me when you came in? Gentlemen's sons are respectful to their seniors; and if you are to associate with my grandsons, I expect you to behave as they do.' I was very much ashamed, and fell at her feet to beg pardon. And then she gave me some sweeties in token of forgiveness, and has ever since loved me and treated me like her own grandsons, and given me good advice. This is the reason why I don't care any more for cards and chess."

Nussooh was much pleased, and said he had told a capital story, and asked him to go on with it. The boy's tongue was loosed by this time, and he went on:—

"One day I had a quarrel with a boy in the bazar close to her house; hard words and abuse first, and then blows. I gave him a sound drubbing, and the bystanders cried 'Bravo!' and tried to drag me off him, for I was very angry. At last my school-fellow came out, and pulled me into the house; and I don't know what nonsense I talked in the heat of the moment; but Huzrut Bee said presently, 'Sulleem, I am sorry you have been such a bad boy, and used such bad language too. My advice has been thrown away. I must give up living here if this is to go on at my very doors.' 'I swear it wasn't my fault,' I cried; 'the grocer's boy provoked me.' And then she said, 'You need not swear; people who swear will say anything. I am very

much displeased with you, and you have disgraced yourself by brawling in the bazar. It takes two to make a quarrel, and I don't see that there is anything to choose between you and the other boy, though you are a gentleman's son and he is not. Men are honoured for their own worth, and not for their ancestors.' I had cooled down by this time, and was so ashamed of myself that I began to cry. Huzrut Bee made me sit down by her, and kissed me, and said, 'I speak, dear, for your good. You know, after a time bad habits like these are very hard to get rid of'; and she ended by making me promise never to swear, or use bad language again, or fight in the bazar. Some time after this, Huzrut Bee asked me how I spent my time, and I reckoned up the hours I spent in eating and drinking and sleeping, and at school, and in playing and amusements. She sighed and said, 'Sulleem, do you do nothing at all for God in the twenty-four hours? He has made you a member of a respectable family, the son of well-to-do parents. You might have been the child of a labourer or woodman, and have had to work all day with nothing but parched grain to eat, and no clothes. Instead of being loveable and comely, you might have been blind and deformed. Do you never thank Him, or bow your head to Him in worship?' And then she taught me a prayer, and explained its meaning, and I promised not to neglect saying it."

At this point Sulleem was silent, and his eyes filled

with tears as he added, after a pause, "But I have now left off going to her house for a long time."

"Why?" asked his father, noticing his emotion. "You haven't quarrelled with your friends, have you?"

"Oh no! not that. I love them better than my own brothers."

"Then, perhaps, Huzrut Bee is angry with you for something?"

"Oh no, Father. Huzrut Bee is too good to be angry with anyone."

"Has anyone forbidden you to go?" said his father, somewhat sternly, for he suspected the reason.

"No, Sir!" sobbed Sulleem.

"Boy, what is the reason? I wish to know."

"Please don't ask me, Sir. I must not tell tales, for Huzrut Bee said it was wrong."

"Sulleem, you must tell me. I command you, as a father."

The boy no longer hesitated. Drying his tears, he said:

"Huzrut Bee once expressed a wish that I should have my long hair * cut off, and said that I wasted my time over it, and that it was no good. I knew she would say nothing that it was not right for me to do; and the next time the barber came to shave my eldest brother I asked him to cut away my hair. I can't tell

* Long hair is a mark of being "fast" and gay. See note on page 30.

you how angry my eldest brother was. I didn't mind his abusing me, but he said cruel things of Huzrut Bee and her boys."

"What has he got to do with Huzrut Bee, or with you either, for that matter?" indignantly exclaimed his father.

"He had found out I went to her house, and had abused her on other occasions. He told me to have my hair cut if I dared; and asked me if I wanted to turn fukeer or saint."

"And what answer did you give to him?"

"Of course I could not answer back my eldest brother; and if I had, he would have half killed me. The result was that, as I could not have my hair cut, I was ashamed for some time to go near my friends. It was afterwards that I left off going altogether."

The boy again hesitated; but his father encouraged him, and he continued:

"I told you Huzrut Bee taught me to pray. It happened one day my eldest brother and his companions saw me. They jeered at me, and pushed me off the prayer-carpet, and sat upon me, and I haven't dared to say my prayers since; and what with shame at breaking my promise and not having my hair cut short, it is now three months since I have been to Huzrut Bee's; and my class-fellow, too, has been ill all the time, and I haven't gone to see him."

"But why didn't you speak to me?" asked his father.

"Because I thought it would be telling tales behind my brother's back."

"But you might have spoken to me before his face."

"I daren't do that, father. He would have beaten me afterwards when you went away."

"Has he ever beaten you, then?"

"Oh yes, often and often," said the boy.

"Why didn't you tell your mother?"

"For the same reason." And then, after a pause, he added, "Besides, as no one cared for religion in the house, I thought perhaps you would all be angry with me like my eldest brother."

"Poor boy!" said his father, gently; "you have passed the last few months very unhappily."

"Oh, father! I can't tell you how unhappily. People say, '*Room for a dog, but not for a younger brother,*' and I know now how true it is."

"Well, now, wouldn't you like to go to Huzrut Bee's again?"

"Indeed I should; but I am ashamed to go till my hair is cut, and I can say that I have kept my word about saying my prayers."

"And supposing you can do this, what then?"

"Oh, then our house would be like Huzrut Bee's; and I should be quite happy."

Nussooh was deeply touched by the boy's artless words, and exclaimed, in remorseful tones: "A wretched sinful house is ours, indeed! The fault is mine. No

punishment would be too bad for me. I cared nothing for my children's welfare, and have utterly neglected my duties! My dear Sulleem, you shall do all you wish. I will go with you myself to Huzrut Bee, and thank her for all her goodness, and for doing what I should have done myself. Henceforward you shall be dearer to me than all my children."

CHAPTER V.

FAHMEEDAH'S QUARREL WITH HER ELDEST
DAUGHTER NAEEMAH.

WHILE father and son were thus conversing, a very different scene was being enacted in the zenana, and this was nothing less than a quarrel between Fahmeedah and her favourite daughter Naeemah.

At this time Naeemah had been two years married, and had a baby a few months old. She was naturally ill-tempered, and the petting she had received from her earliest years had completely spoiled her: as the proverb says, "*It was the Kurela on the Neem.*"* It was unlikely such a girl could get on with her husband's family. Her first unveiling there was, so to speak, her last, for she soon returned to her mother's house. "*A burnt rope retains its twist,*" and she came back worse

* The proverb means bitterer and bitterer. The *Kurela* is a bitter parasite, and the *Neem* a bitter tree.