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THE REPENTANCE OF NUSSOOH.

CHAPTER I.

NUSSOOH'S DREAM.

NOT very long ago the cholera was so bad in Dehli that thirty or forty deaths a day were counted in a single street. The public thoroughfares, once crowded with men till midnight, were empty. The hammer of the artizan had ceased, and the street-criers were dumb. There was no visiting, no hospitality, no friendly intercourse, for all had lost heart and hope. A man might be walking about in the best of health, when of a sudden he felt ill. There was no chance of escape, no time even to make a will. In one short quarter of an hour all was over—vomiting, medicine, prayer, and the death-

rattle. The city lost half its population. Thousands of orphans bemoaned their parents' loss.

Nussooh, whose story I am about to tell, had foreseen at the first outbreak the necessity of precaution. He had his cooking-vessels re-tinned, and impressed the duty of cleanliness on his household. Frankincense was burned, and camphor and charcoal placed about the rooms. The usual native remedies—cocoanut, aniseed, tamarind, lime-juice, &c.—were provided in readiness for emergency. A stock of English medicines was laid in—cholera-pills from the Dispensary, tincture from Allahabad, chlorodyne from Agra,* and a specific, said to have been recently discovered by a Bengali, was procured from Benares. There was some comfort too in the fact that a physician lived close by. But the Angel of Death was at the door. Nussooh's father was the first seized, and the old man died before a single potion could be administered. The aunt came next; but she, poor soul, was too tired of life to care for physic. And then the family nurse was taken ill; and though she tried all the medicines, her course, too, was run. Despair fell upon the survivors, and Nussooh sat down to await his destiny.

Six miserable weeks passed by. Rich and poor alike suffered from the visitation, and at last the rumour went

* These medicines are constantly advertised in the local press, as purchasable at the "Medical Halls" of the European traders in the cantonments of Allahabad and Agra.

round that the Nawab Umdatul-mulk, the head of native society, beloved for his charities, and respected for his virtues, was dead, and that his bier was even now in the Great Mosque. It was the popular idea that the plague would not be stayed until some great man was taken; and, strange to say, so it happened, for from this time things began to mend; the shops were re-opened,* and the business of life recommenced.

Nussooh shared the general sense of relief; and one day he suggested to his wife that, as they had not tasted rice for two months, they might venture on a *pulao* for the evening meal. They all enjoyed the treat; but Nussooh awoke in the night with a burning pain, feeling desperately ill. He hurried outside into the courtyard, and began to pace up and down the verandah, determined not to succumb; but the terrible vomiting came on. The household was soon alarmed, and the hearts of all sank within them at the sight of their master's seizure. One brought one thing and one another, and all babbled in confusion and dismay. What could it be? The *pulao*? the cooking-vessels? Oh! there was no cause for anxiety—a little aniseed and rose-water, and he would soon be well!

For his own part the sufferer felt his hours were numbered. The symptoms gradually became worse. Chilliness, cramp, and thirst told their tale. It was

* The closing of the shops in the bazar is a sign of public distress.

hardly light when the native physician was called in. He dreaded the very name of cholera, but could hardly refuse to come at his neighbour's summons. He came, and that was all. What was the use of such a prescription as iced water and pounded cocoanut? A man was despatched in haste to the Dispensary. Back came the English doctor like an echo. He gave four pills there and then, and a sedative, and had the patient laid in a private room, with orders that he should be kept perfectly quiet, and, with the comforting assurance that if he slept he would recover, promised that he would call again.

And what were Nussooh's feelings? His friends thought he was insensible; but he heard all that passed, and was absorbed in the expectation of coming death. How was he to enter upon that endless journey whence none returned? How part from his belongings with no hope of restoration or recovery? How leave the world before he had done with its delights and cares? His wife would be a lonely widow, and there were two unmarried daughters. He remembered the miserable trouble of his eldest daughter's marriage, and sighed to think how the others could be settled. There was no guardian, no one to take the lead, for his eldest son was not to be depended upon. The second boy was at college reading for the Entrance Examination.* How could he be expected to continue his

* The matriculation examination of the Calcutta University

studies when his father's eye was closed and there was no one to look after him? Then, again, he had just bought a village, and the parties had not yet given him full possession. His venture in indigo had yielded no returns. He was about to enlarge his house, for they had no guest-chamber. The timber had been bought in the Doon,* and the bricks bargained for; but nothing had yet been delivered. These and other matters who was to arrange? Could he but have lived a few years longer, all would have been well. The marriage of his daughters, the education of his sons, and the settlement of his affairs could have been provided for. It was not that he feared to die; for he told himself that, once born into the world, a man must die: but to die thus unseasonably was like dying twice. It was a wrong to himself and his dependents.

Hitherto Nussooh had lived a self-contained kind of life. He was not a domestic man, fond of his children, or devoted to his family duties, and would rarely interfere in the affairs of the household except at his wife's instance. He had made the mistake of supposing that he was independent of others, and that his own life was all he had to care for, and he had selfishly neglected everything but his own convenience. He was indifferent to the sorrows of humanity, and sometimes wondered that, if men were wretched, they should be loath to die;

* Dehra Doon, at the foot of the Himalayas, about 100 miles north of Dehli, noted for its timber-forest.

but now that it was his own turn to face the end, he suddenly found he had a wife and children to love, and possessions to cling to. A vast journey was before him, which he was not prepared to undertake. The railway whistle had sounded, and he was yet outside the station tying up his bundles.

His thoughts had run on thus far when the doctor's sleeping-draught began to take effect; and he had no sooner closed his eyes than the reflections of his wearied brain passed off into the fantastic realism of the land of dreams.

A building of imposing dimensions and weird grandeur stood before him, and, rightly taking it to be some great Court of Justice, he entered among the throng within; but, to his astonishment, instead of the busy clamour of the tribunals he had been accustomed to, an anxious silence oppressed the senses. The majesty of the President was such that of the thousands present none dared speak. There were no pleaders or attorneys—no by-play of bribery and subornation. All were convinced of the justice and discernment of the great Chief of the assembly. So vast were his powers that there was no appeal, no possibility of revision of judgment. The day's proceedings were never left unfinished. No matter how many cases were on the file, all were heard; and it was no cursory hearing, for the evidence was fully weighed, every objection considered, every argument followed out, and judgment given at the appointed time;

and more than this, every criminal was convinced of his guilt and acknowledged the justice of his sentence. Each prisoner had a copy of his indictment, and all had leisure to prepare their defence and consider how they might rebut the charges brought against them.

Passing thence he reached the House of Detention, where persons whose cases were not yet called were confined in separate cells, or otherwise awaited orders; and hard by was the Gaol, a scene of hideous penalty and correction. Here and there, to his amazement, he recognized former friends and fellow-citizens, and by and by the well-known figure of his venerable father met his astonished gaze. He ran to embrace him, and exclaimed, "Dear father, so lately lost, why are you here? and what place is this?"

"I am here," was the reply, "to give an account of my sins. This great tribunal is the Court of Divine Justice, of which the Most High is the sole and supreme Judge."

"But, Sir, yours was a life of piety and self-restraint; of what sin can you be guilty?"

"Not of one sin, my son, but of hundreds and thousands. Look at this long list! I am utterly at a loss what plea for pardon I can urge."

Nussooh examined the list, and saw with unspeakable surprise the mention of such charges as infidelity, blasphemy, rebellion, pride, falsehood, &c., to each of which, instead of marginal references to the Indian Penal Code, were attached texts from the Koran.

"And are you really guilty of these offences?" he presently asked his father.

"Of all of them," was the answer.

"Have you pleaded guilty before the Judge?"

"To plead not guilty would have been of no avail," returned the old man.

"But who are the witnesses against you?" said his son.

"In the first place there are the Recording Angels, who have kept a diary of my life, every line of which is true. In the second place, all my members bear testimony against me. I thought them part of myself—my associates and friends; but I now find they were spies and informers."

"Has, then, your case been heard?" inquired the son.

"God grant it never may!" replied his father; "would that I might remain in the tomb for ever! I see no hope of salvation now."

"And can no one help you in this strait?" anxiously asked Nussooh.

"Yes, indeed," said his father: "only lately, one of my fellow-criminals received his pardon. He was summoned before the Tribunal and thus addressed: 'Thou hast now learned the enormity of thy deeds. But several of my servants—to wit, thy wife and children—have prayed earnestly in thy behalf; and it is a point in thy favour that thou hast sown in their hearts the

seeds of virtue and religion. Go: I have pardoned thee.' Ah! my son, have you and others of the family thus prayed for me?"

"Alas, father, no," sorrowfully replied Nussooh. "We mourn your loss, and shall never forget you. We paid the last honours with exemplary piety and zeal; but we have not prayed for you, and have been engaged in quarrelling over the inheritance instead. But say, father, do not your own good deeds on earth serve you now? Is your diligence in fasting and alms-giving of no avail?"

"Why not?" replied his father. "Otherwise you had not found me here under comparatively mild restraint. But sincerity of motive is the test of merit; and I now recognise the fact that my prayers were not really from the heart, and might have been left unsaid; and that my fasts were starvation to no good purpose."

"And is there no one to intercede on your behalf?"

"No one, my son. Each has his own affairs to look to, and must answer for himself without a mediator."

Lost in dismay, Nussooh presently exclaimed: "But my dear and honoured father, what is the meaning of this charge of infidelity? All the world testified to your piety and devotion! Did you not believe in God, when every act of your life attested the integrity of your faith?"

"Ah! my son, listen to what was said to me when I was first arraigned. 'Who is thy God?' was the

first question; and fresh from the religious services at my death-bed, I replied glibly, '*There is no God but God, and Mohammed is the Prophet of God.*' 'What?' (was the reply) 'when long ago thou wast in despair of obtaining service, and on the point of starvation, didst thou not pray to me for assistance, ignorant that I was testing thy patience and resignation; and when, unknown to thee, I put it into the heart of a District officer, my servant as well as thou, to promise thee an appointment, didst thou not think this was the result of thy own sagacity? Didst thou not place more reliance on the spoken word of the Englishman than on my written bond—'*Not a creature on earth but God provides for it*'?

"If thou sincerely believedst that I was omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent, how daredst thou commit iniquity? I created thee out of nothing, and clothed thee with the robe of humanity, and supplied all thy wants, and reared thee from childhood, and gave thee reason for thy guide, that thou mightest provide thyself with the means of lawful enjoyment: yet, proud of thy frail existence, thou thoughtest thyself independent of my authority, and rebelledst against obedience. If air and food had been withheld for a brief space, thou wouldst have died. I created for thy benefit the sun, the moon, and the stars of heaven,—earth's varied landscapes, its trees and fruits and flowers. Was it for this that thou shouldst thanklessly spurn my favours?

A little insect might have sufficed for thy destruction. The materials of disease were so abundant in thy constitution, that the simplest disorder might have ended thy existence, without my protecting care. How hast thou requited my forbearance and friendliness?

"When I sent thee into the world, I gave thee a precious jewel, thy immortal soul, with charge to keep it unsullied and uninjured. How hast thou this day restored it? Dim and lustreless as a broken potsherd. I desired thee not to fix thy affections on the world, but lodge therein as a traveller in an inn. Thou hast made it thy home, and slept in forgetfulness to wake in the tomb.

"Thou hast neglected my ordinances from the first, or made them part of the round of fashion. I ordained a month's fast,* for thy bodily health, and to remind thee of the wants of the poor and hungry, and to teach thee the virtue of humility: but with thy belly full the whole year round, how grudgingly didst thou comply! The sun had no sooner set than thou devouredst enough for two days, and then wentest to thy rest grumbling at the loss of to-morrow's breakfast. Thou lookedst for the Eed, as a prisoner for the day of his release.

"I bade thee be charitable and remember the poor and unfortunate of thy fellows. So far from this, thou hast

* The ninth month of the lunar year, called *Ramazan*, during which pious Moslems fast from dawn to sunset. It is extremely trying when the month falls in the hot season. The *Eed*, or "feast," at its close, is the *Eedu-l-Fitr*, which is observed on the first day of the tenth month as a time of joy and merriment.

enslaved them in the pursuit of thy own selfish lusts. Men pined in cold and starvation around thee, while thou wast physicking for surfeit, or reposing beneath costly quilts. Thou hast wasted the wealth I gave thee in luxury and ostentation.

“My commands were not harsh or unreasonable, for cruelty is not my attribute. Thy disobedience is without excuse. Would that during life thou hadst felt even a passing concern for the salvation thou now so passionately desirest! Would that, in place of the world’s paltry interests, thou hadst thought of the neglect of thy religion and its consequences!

“I am aware that thy repentance is bitter now, but it comes too late. Thou art speechless. I grant thee time to prepare thy defence, and to try to find a plea for thine acquittal.”

CHAPTER II.

NUSSOOH’S AWAKENING.

HIS father’s recital was no sooner ended than Nussooh awoke from his dream. He was lying as before, and his wife was fanning him. He had slept from eight till two; but when she asked him how he felt and told him how anxious they had all been, he made no response. She supposed his weakness and prostration made him disinclined to speak. Nevertheless, the general uneasiness was relieved, and the family began to talk of the festivities they would have to celebrate his recovery.

Nussooh was wrapt in the recollection of his dream, which he believed was a special message sent by God in his behalf. Every syllable of what he had heard was impressed upon his memory; and the more he reflected the more he was driven to admit that he himself was guilty of all the sins laid to his father’s charge—nay, more, that there was no comparison between them; for his father had been regular in his