

His mother entreated him to read his father's letter carefully once more; but she had hardly finished speaking when Salihah's *dooli* was announced, and she hurried to the zenana to receive her niece.

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## CHAPTER VIII.

## NAEEMAH AND SALIHAH.

"AND what is it all about?" said Salihah when her aunt came to her in the zenana. "Ulleem tells me there has been a quarrel, and says I must learn the rest from you."

Her aunt replied by telling her the whole story.

Salihah saw that she had a difficult task before her, and said cheerfully that she thought she could persuade her cousin to be reasonable, but that everyone must be kept out of the way during the interview, lest Naeemah's pride should again take fire. Her aunt knew as well as she did that wrong-doers are apt to detest the witnesses of their misconduct, and at once followed out the suggestion by ordering everybody out of that part of the house.

Salihah then passed quickly into the passages, calling "Naeemah! Naeemah!" as if she had just arrived, and wanted to see her cousin as usual. First she went

towards the kitchen and searched the apartments on that side, and finally approached the room where she knew her cousin was. Naeemah had been lying on the floor all day; but directly she heard Salihah's voice, never imagining that she had been sent for, she hurried on to the bed, and, covering herself up, pretended to be asleep.

Salihah still feigned ignorance, and, coming up to the bed, exclaimed:

"Why, who is this?—I declare it's Naeemah! How do you do, dear? you have been asleep."

Naeemah burst into tears at her cousin's kindly greeting.

"Does your head ache, dear? What is the matter? Is baby not well? Has a message come from your husband's family?" embracing and comforting her as she talked on.

At last Naeemah managed to sob out: "Don't you know what has happened?"

Salihah replied: "I have only just come in. All I heard was that Kulleem had quarrelled with my uncle, and threatens to leave the house."

"Kulleem going to leave the house!" ejaculated Naeemah, now thoroughly aroused.

"They say," continued Salihah, "that my uncle insisted on his saying his prayers, and that if he refuses he will have nothing more to do with him."

"Confound these prayers!" burst out Naeemah.

"Nobody will be able to stay in the house except Humeedah. Remain here a day or two, and you will see for yourself what we have come to! All sociability and friendliness are at an end. The zenana used to be alive with our acquaintances. Ajubah used to amuse us with gossip and stories every day. Not a soul comes near us now."

"I wonder what is the reason of this?" innocently asked Salihah.

"When my father recovered from his illness," continued her cousin, "instead of inviting his friends and neighbours to a festival, he resorted to the mosque, and now spends all his time on the prayer-carpet. And Humeedah abets him; I should like to thrash the little wretch!"

"Poor little Humeedah!" exclaimed Salihah. "She loves you far more than most sisters love each other. I have seen her refuse her breakfast because you had no appetite. She nurses baby for you all day, and he is quiet with no one else. She is a darling child, and I love her dearly."

"Yes, everybody sings Humeedah's praises; I can only say I detest her. Till to-day my mother never used a cross word to me, and this morning she struck me, and all on account of Humeedah."

"So my aunt struck you, did she?"

"I gave Humeedah my baby to hold, and she flopped him down on the ground to catch his death of cold. I

gave her a push, and bang she fell upon a nail or something and got scratched a little."

"I don't believe Humeedah would put down the baby any more than my aunt strike you, without cause. I must go and ask her about it," returned Salihah.

But this was not to Naeemah's mind, and she cried: "Stay here: I'll tell you how it was. She put baby down because she had forgotten her prayers, and mother struck me because I spoke ill of praying."

"No one who believes in God," gravely said Salihah, "would speak ill of praying. Your mother was right to be angry."

"I did not say it intentionally; it slipped out."

"If a disrespectful expression had slipped out, as you say, about your father or brother, would they not have been angry? Are you not afraid of God's anger?" said her cousin.

Naeemah said she was sorry, and presently asked: "But what is the use of women praying? They have their family duties and their children to attend to."

Salihah replied: "In my opinion there is more reason for women to worship God than for men. In the first place they have more time, and, in the second place, they have a larger share of the good things of life. We have ten times as much clothing and jewellery, for instance. *You might bury a woman in a gold mine, and she would never have enough gold.*"

"It is a pity you were not my mother's daughter,"

laughed Naeemah; "you would then have had plenty of the good things you speak of."

"If the result of having good things is to forget God, I desire none of them," rejoined Salihah. "I am content to be as I am; and do not care for a few hours of pleasure at the expense of eternal misery."

"*The grapes are sour!*" observed her cousin.

"That is as you take it. You think I am unhappy; but where is your own happiness? Happiness consists in affection and love. You have quarrelled with your mother, you hate Humeedah, you are separated from your husband. Do you call it happiness to lie weeping here all day by yourself?"

"Good God!" exclaimed Naeemah, "from the way you talk, one would think you were not a human being! Did you ever hear of a family without quarrels? *If you put dishes together, they will rattle.*"

"Well, then, why do you make such a fuss about a quarrel now?" was the adroit reply.

"What fuss do I make?" blustered Naeemah. "What should you say, if your mother was to beat you?"

"She is welcome to beat me; but then I take care to say nothing to displease her."

"I didn't think my mother would be displeased," said Naeemah; "she never thought about prayer before. However, I shouldn't have minded so much if she had corrected me in private."

Salihah saw her advantage, and said with a smile: "What! *the fault in the bazar, and the punishment behind the wall!*"

Naeemah was softened, and said presently: "What do you wish me to do?"

"Go, and join your hands before your mother and ask her pardon. Eat some food yourself, and feed your baby. Kiss Humeedah and console Bedara," promptly replied her cousin.

The "join hands" was a mistake. Naeemah's pride flared up at once with:

"Join hands, indeed! I never did such a thing to anyone before, and I won't now. Kiss Humeedah, indeed! I should like to cut her head off! And as to food, I won't touch a morsel in this house again!" And then, seeing the pained expression on her cousin's countenance, she added: "Well, Salihah, to please you I will feed baby. Go and fetch him."

The battle was not yet won, and Salihah refused to stir. All she said was: "Where do you mean to go?"

"Go!" said Naeemah, rather taken aback. "I should have gone long ago if you hadn't come."

"To your mother-in-law's, I suppose?"

"What! *out of a pit into a well?*" cried Naeemah.

"Where, then?" persisted Salihah.

"Wherever I can find a place," was the reply.

"Are you mad, sister? What would my uncle say?"

To step outside the zenana is a serious matter, let alone leaving the house."

"I am going to Ajubah's, where I often go."

"But under these circumstances Ajubah would not have you. Try, if you like. How could she afford to keep you? And there is no room. There are herself and her husband, three married sons and their families, and two daughters."

"I have some money in my box, and I can pay her," suggested Naeemah.

"*Eat molasses and avoid sweets,*" said the ready Salihah. "Use your parents' money, but avoid their food! You had better go at once to your mother-in-law's."

"I won't go there, and I won't eat here," cried the angry girl.

Salihah tried another tack.

"I can't understand why you are so angry with your mother. She doats on you; and is more sorry for this quarrel than you are yourself. Is a life's kindness to be effaced by a single blow? You have everything you want; not even your father or your brothers fare as you do. You have lace on your dresses, and a servant to yourself. In fact you are better treated now than you were as a girl. What more can you expect?"

"Ah!" sighed Naeemah as her thoughts flew back to years passed by. "I know my mother loves me. But how can I forget that cruel slap?"

"You forgot your duties to your mother, dear sister," said her cousin gently.

"Salihah," said she, after an interval, "did my mother send you to talk me over?"

"No," said her cousin; "the fault is yours, not hers."

Naeemah, relenting: "I want to go to her, but I am ashamed. Won't to-morrow do?"

"To-morrow!" said Salihah. "Have you no fear of God, that you would keep everyone starving till to-morrow!"

"Let me off joining my hands and I will do everything. You may get some food for me, and bring baby."

"What do I care, whether you eat or not?" said Salihah. "You must beg your mother's pardon."

"Please don't tease me any more. I have given in to oblige you. I will take food, if you will bring it; and when I have to join hands I will do it, and not till then."

Salihah said no more. She had gained her point, and went straight to her aunt, and asked her to send some food at once to Naeemah's room for her cousin and herself.

Fahmeedah could hardly believe her ears. She had been listening at the door part of the time, and had gone away in sorrow and despair at the things she heard her daughter say, and now in astonishment she asked her niece how she had exorcised the demon.

Before midnight all the family had taken food, and had gone to rest, except Naeemah and Salihah, who sat up talking.

Naeemah said: "Well, my dear, are you happy now? I have done all you wished."

Said Salihah: "I shall be happy when you are reconciled to your mother."

"What remains now? In ten days or so we shall speak to each other again."

"Ten days! why, you said to-morrow yourself just now! I had hoped you would have cleared up the balance in the morning."

"The truth is," said Naeemah, "I don't see how I can go on living in this house. I told you the fashion of our life is changed. My eldest brother's time has come, and it is my turn next. But he is a man, and won't want friends; his poetry will secure him a place anywhere. I have no accomplishments, and could not earn a pice. I am *like a street cur who eats what is thrown to him*. Our father never speaks to us; and if my mother turns against me, what can I do?"

"Why are you so disheartened?" asked her cousin. "Is religion such a burden, that all these troubles should come of it?"

"I am a laughter-loving person. I can't stand this gloom and austerity. The quarrel has come to-day, but I have long foreseen it."

"What, then, do you think of doing?" asked Salihah

"I thought of coming to live with you," replied her cousin.

Salihah was silent.

"Oh!" sighed Naeemah, "the very idea takes away your breath. Never mind, I only said it to test your affection. I don't want to be under an obligation."

"What obligation? You are as much my mother's child as I am. Your aunt will be your host, not I. If you quarrel with your own mother, it does not follow that all the family will be your enemies."

"But aunt is not well off," said Naeemah. "If I go, how can she keep me?"

"She is not so poor but that she can afford to have you for a time," replied her cousin.

"My idea was to remain with you some little time, till these troubles have blown over, and then, if my mother sends for me, I can return home," suggested Naeemah.

Salihah assented, but said that she must ask her mother's leave before she left home, and made her promise not to go away without seeing her. Naeemah, full of the idea of getting away, was only too glad to promise anything, and even begged that the *doolies* might be ordered at once so as to be ready the first thing in the morning. She said she wanted to get away before it was light, as the baby was frightened in a *dooli*.

After this had been done, they went to sleep.

The stars were still shining when Salihah rose, according to custom, to perform her morning devotions. Her aunt was up for the same purpose, and she joined her. Later on Salihah told her aunt what had passed, and said that Naeemah wished to accompany her home. Fahmeedah, finding that it was Naeemah's own suggestion, raised no difficulty about her going for a week or so, and took it for granted, as did her niece, that she would see Naeemah to say good-bye. The *doolies* had come, and Salihah went to awake her cousin: but what was her astonishment to find that Naeemah, taking her baby with her, had already started? Unwilling to face her mother, or too proud to ask her forgiveness, she had slipped out unseen, while her cousin was engaged.

Fahmeedah was bitterly disappointed, but the *dooli* could not be recalled; and Salihah, bidding her aunt take heart, for all would eventually be right, started after her cousin.