

CHAPTER XII

A NAUGHTY STORY

A remedy for loneliness—Mohamed's Story—Buralli's "unfinished" story.

THE first day of the Mahomedan New Year is nearing its close without anything unusual having occurred, for which let us touch wood and be duly thankful. At four o'clock this morning the people were astir, and afterwards, from my veranda, I watched the town beauties bathing in the sea. Perhaps I ought not to have looked, but I *did* notice that some of them had extraordinary fine figures, of which they were not ashamed. By half-past five all the bathers had gone to don their "glad rags," and the men and boys marched onto the sports ground behind my house, where a service was held in the open. Afterwards, the day long, there was dancing, singing, and feasting, in all of which the women were very much in evidence. At sunset another burst of prayer, more feasting, followed by general dancing and rejoicing, marked by only one fight. Fatuma Fareh, a divorced lady, invited to dance in a friend's compound, had patiently watched all the other women guests dance in their turn. When hers came

the dance broke up, and poor Fatuma, who loves dancing, was given no opportunity of showing what she could do on her feet. What she had to say about it must have been to the point for one of the women came back and smacked her face. Then the fight started.

I thought it better to keep away from the town, and Buralli and Mahomed, pitying my loneliness, came after dinner and sat with me in front of the bungalow.

"Please tell me one of your stories, Mahomed," I asked.

"Once upon a time," said Mahomed, "a man came to a Somal encampment, and at the entrance met a woman to whom he said: 'I do not talk with women, and am in a conversational mood. Is there ever a man here with whom I can have a chat?'

"'In this encampment,' said the woman, 'is only one man, and he lies asleep inside the tent.'

"'Well, wake him up,' said the man.

"'I am ashamed to wake him,' said the woman.

"'For what reason?' says he.

"'Because his mother is my mother's child and I am his father's wife,' she replied.

"That is my story," said Mahomed, "and sometimes a Somal will sit for two days trying to find out what relation that woman was to the sleeping man."

"I'll tell you a real story, Sahib," said the disgusted Buralli, "but it is naughty. Do you mind?"

Now what does it matter what I answered for Buralli told the story.

"Once upon a time," said he (it wouldn't be a real story if it did not start like that), "there was a very rich Somal who had a lovely daughter, and he swore on the Koran a hundred 'By Gods' that he would kill the first man who asked for her hand in marriage. He was a powerful Sheiba,¹ very handy with his spear or dagger, so, though many a youth loved the girl, not one dared approach her father with an offer of marriage. Now, the old man had large flocks and employed many herds to shepherd them, but it was his custom every morning to drive the animals himself forth from the kraal, allowing the herds, who had to be out all day in the sun, to sit until eight o'clock preparing their food and water for the day. On such occasions he went quite unarmed, and left his spear, shield, and dagger in his gurgi;² when his herds relieved him he walked back alone to his camp.

"A certain young man noticed the old man's habit and thought to himself, if I go armed in the morning to intercept and ask him for his daughter he cannot kill me because he carries no arms, therefore I will do this thing.

¹ Old man.

² Somal tent or wigwam.

people, who live far from here, for three things. Firstly, I am shameless; no matter what I do I shall never be ashamed of it. Secondly, I am fearless; the man who can frighten me is not yet born. Thirdly, if a man ask me for anything I can give, even for my life, I cannot refuse him, and I always give with both hands and a glad heart.

“So the old man was interested, and said to himself, ‘I wonder if this fellow is speaking the truth. I shall try to find out, and, if he is not telling lies, I shall break my oath and spare his life.’

“And thus it came to pass that the couple returned to the gurgi together, and after the arrangements were completed the young man married the girl and prepared to settle down with her people.

“But his father-in-law said to him, ‘You must take your wife and return to your own tribe!’

“‘Very good, I am ready,’ said he.

“The old man had three camels laden with mats and rich presents, and giving his son-in-law three days’ food he said to him, ‘I know you are poor, take these camels and set forth on your journey, but bear in mind this is all the property, you see packed on these camels’ backs, that you can expect to receive from me.’

“When the man and his wife had gone his father-in-law sent for fifty of his boldest warriors and said to them, ‘My son-in-law and his wife have taken the

road towards his own people. You must wait until he has been gone three days, and on the morning of the fourth day, when the food I have given him will be finished, you are to make an attack on his camp. Should he run away, you are to kill him and tell my daughter to come home, but should he fight he must on no account be hurt, and you are then to bring him back to me, watching carefully on the road how he acts.'

"The warriors departed, and on the morning of the fourth day, when the young man was sitting under a tree feeling very weak and hungry, he saw them approaching in fighting array. He promptly saddled up his horse, and taking his shield and spear from his wife's hand, galloped amongst them and made a splendid fight.

"Seeing this the warriors held up their hands and called out: 'Hoi, hoi! Aman! Peace! We are your father-in-law's people and bear a message from him.'

"He listened to them, and agreed to return to his wife's people.

"That night there was no food, and the young man gave orders that one of his three camels should be killed.

"'You are foolish,' said his wife; 'for if you do this thing we must throw away the load the beast carries; don't forget we are very poor and may not expect any further presents from my father.'

“ ‘I cannot see fifty men go hungry to save the load,’ said her husband. ‘I shall have the camel killed.’

“ On the following night another camel was killed and its load thrown away, and again on the third night the last camel was killed, and the last of the old man’s rich presents was thrown away into the bush.

“ On the morning of the fourth day the party came to the old man’s camp, to whom a true account of all that had happened was given by the warriors. He was delighted, and made much of his son-in-law, feasting him and paying him great honour.

“ One day, after the evening prayer, the old man said: ‘My son, it is time you explained to me why you are shameless, fearless, and generous beyond all men.’

“ ‘That is easily done,’ said the youth. ‘Once I went with my section into battle; we were heavily outnumbered, and I was in the front rank. I noticed that of the men who were afraid and stayed a little behind many were killed by the spears that went over the heads of us who were doing the fighting. Thus I learned the lesson that man’s life is not in his own keeping but in God’s hands. When our time comes to die we cannot escape by running away or refusing to fight. So I know that God will call me

at His own good time, and I leave it to Him, never worrying about my life. For this reason I am fearless.

“As for being generous, I am not really so as everything I give away I believe belongs to God, even as I told you my life is His. Once when my brothers and I were rich two poor men came to our camp and asked for food. We refused, and drove them forth into the bush. Near us lived a poor man and his wife, and to this couple the poor men went for shelter and a bite of food. They had but a few goats, of which they killed one, and gave the strangers to eat and made them welcome. We laughed and said it was meet the poor should help the poor. Soon after that the cattle plague came and swept off all our stock; we were left beggars, without a bite to eat. The stock of the poor man who had killed his goat for the poor men, sent to his gate by God, escaped the plague and multiplied so that he became rich. Thus I learned that we but hold the world's riches on trust, and God to Whom they belong can take them away from us in a single night. The good things that come my way I share with my less fortunate brethren whilst I have the opportunity, lest it should pass from my hands for ever.”

“And that is the end of the story,” said Buralli.

“But you said it was a naughty story, Buralli, and

you have not explained why the young man was shameless."

Buralli's eye twinkled.

"That is the naughty part, Sahib."

Like Mark Twain's "indelicate story," but for a different reason, as Buralli did tell me why the young man was shameless, this story must remain incomplete.