

CHAPTER XVIII

SCANDAL

Mrs Kar Krishna and Saleha—Mrs Ibrahim and a few reasons
—Whisperings and consequences—Saleha's statement.

MRS KAR KRISHNA is the wife of a Hindu gentleman, and Mrs Krishna, who is a very nice woman, may be seen by common or garden Christians. She is very ill, and at times is in such pain that her screams may be heard all over the town. Saleha, an Arab purdah woman, the wife of a shop-keeper, lives near to Mrs Krishna, and, in the absence of her husband, has been known to run from her house, climb the stairs to Mrs Krishna's room and rub the poor woman's legs. That's what I have been told. As I happen to know the seat of Mrs. Krishna's pain is situated higher up I can't conceive why Saleha should rub her legs instead of higher up. I'm not trying to be vulgar. I've heard exactly what is the matter with Mrs Krishna from Mr Kar Krishna. It's what you used to get when you were younger and ate of the apples that were green. It's a mysterious thing that she should suffer from a long protracted bout of "what you used to get," for there are no

natural than that she should resent the other woman entering his house. She knows Mr Krishna better than you or I do. Saleha is reported to be a very beautiful woman—I have not seen her unveiled, so speak from hearsay—and her husband is of a jealous, violent disposition. Once upon a time in Arabia, during the course of an argument with another Arab, he lost his temper so badly that he drew a knife, and *snick!* That was the end of the other fellow. It is also why Saleha's husband lives in Zeila; for the other man's relatives are waiting for him over there in Arabia. A bad man to upset.

However, Mrs Ibrahim did upset him by whispering in his ear that, during his absence in the day-time at the shop, his wife left the house to visit at the Krishnas'. Foolish Saleha had not asked his permission to do so, and when, one day on returning unexpectedly from the shop, her husband found her away he awaited her return, and, not liking her explanations, in a fit of mad fury tore the clothes from her back and drove her from the house. Saleha told me so herself. She said he had kept all her clothing, silken and other kinds, two amber armlets, two silver anklets, the property of her small daughter, a gold nose ring, forty rupees in cash, ten rupees' worth of rope she had plaited with her own hands, and her brass-bound chest. That is how she came to see me,

to ask me to get her things back, and accompanied by her daughter, aged seven, a pretty little child, who would have passed anywhere in Europe as a European.

Saleha talked sensibly, and told me she had been married three times. Her first husband, the girl's father, was dead. The second divorced her, and now the third had turned her out. Marriage she considered a failure. I sent for the husband, and, after seeing the pair together, realised it was a hopeless case. The man had conformed to Mahomedan law, since he had thrust his wife from his house, by sending her six annas daily, as musroof or maintenance. He did not want to take her back. She did not want to go; but they both professed otherwise. There was a reason.

Under Mahomedan law a woman, becoming openly disobedient, and forcing her husband to divorce her, may forfeit all right to her mehr or dowry. Therefore, in the court, and particularly in the Kathi's court where all matrimonial cases are sent, she must be careful what she says, and how she acts. Also, outside the courts she must walk circumspectly. Foolish conduct may be misunderstood, or seized upon as a pretext to deny her her rights.

If a man is tired of a woman he may, in sundry ways, lead her a dog's life, keeping well within the

sharia¹ himself. When she is tired of it all, and asks for a divorce, he can keep her dangling on until at last the woman, in desperation, will offer to give up her mehr for her liberty. That is, very often, the man's price; he will then divorce her three times before witnesses. In such a case, if she can prove his little game, she has still a remedy in the courts. This is the weakest point in the Mahomedan marriage laws, for the man may marry four wives, and, whilst the poor woman is kept hanging on as a grass widow, he may enjoy all the comforts of married life. She may not marry again until he has agreed to divorce her, or she has proved such outrageous conduct on his part that the Kathi will take the matter into his own hands. What is called "outrageous treatment" of a woman under European law is not always so defined under Mahomedan jurisdiction.

When I sent Saleha and her husband to the Kathi the man proved his wife was disobedient. Had she not left her house to go visiting without his permission? Did she not now refuse to return to him, prepared as he was to forgive her? The woman said she was willing to go back on the condition that he first returned her property. The man swore on the Koran she possessed nothing of that which she claimed, excepting the rope, the box,

¹ Mahomedan law.

the nose ring and her clothes. That settled it. She got these articles, but firmly refused to return to him until all were forthcoming. They were both playing a game.

We are now awaiting the return, from Perim, of her brother with whose wife she lives, in the hope that he will be able to patch up the trouble. Such is the history of this year's biggest divorce case in the high society in Zeila.

Meanwhile, I am informed that Mrs Ibrahim, Mrs Krishna, Saleha, and all the other great ladies, meet on fairly friendly terms; whilst Mrs Ibrahim declares hotly that it is quite untrue she ever dropped a hint in the ear of Saleha's husband that if he returned unexpectedly from the shop he might find his wife absent from the house.