

**A Scene in the Life of  
Nourmahal**

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*Nourmahal*

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## A SCENE IN THE LIFE OF NOURMAHAL.

BY L. E. L.

It was a large lonely looking hall, with nothing in it that marked the usual splendour of the East. There were no carpets, and the mats were formed of the scented grass, — one of those common luxuries which summer bestows on all. The frescos on the walls were dimmed by time, and the golden letters of the sentences from the Koran were rough and dull. Still, there was much of cheerfulness, nay, of grace, in that desolate apartment. The silvery fall of the fountain mingled with youthful voices, and its spray fell like pearls on the lilies below. The slaves seated around were gorgeously apparelled; and the scarfs that they were working were scarcely less fresh than those that they wore. Seated a little apart from the rest, but equally busy with themselves, was a lady, employed in tracing some rich arabesques upon delicate white china. She was very young; but there was that in the compressed lip and curved brow which spoke experience,—experience which can teach so much, and in so little time. She worked like one whose mind compels itself to the

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task, but whose heart is not in it. A deeper darkness filled the large and dreaming eyes; and more than once a slight start, and then a yet more rapid progress of the pencil, told that there were thoughts which had mastered for a moment, only to be put resolutely aside. But, as the colours became shadows, and the rapid twilight merged in sudden night, and the slaves eagerly sought the garden for their hour's accustomed relaxation, the proud and lonely beauty gave way to her reverie. A softness for an instant unbent the set and stately brow, and her small fingers woke, low and indistinct, a few chords from the chitar beside, and words almost as low and indistinct came from her lip.

Mournfully, how mournfully,  
 Think I of my lover!  
 Round a weary pillow  
 Does one image hover.  
 O'er the sunny waters gliding  
 Are many shadows thrown;  
 But the flower by it drooping  
 Sees one sweet shade alone.

“Folly; folly of the young and loving heart!” exclaimed the singer, ceasing abruptly in her song; and, drawing up her stately figure to its full height, she began to pace the solitary hall. “Folly, indeed!” muttered she, in a lower tone; “and yet, how I loved him! How well I remember the first day that the young and graceful prince came to my

father's palace. My soul at once knew its predestined idol. With what delicious fear did I bind the yellow champac in my hair, when I met him secretly in the cedar grove! Oh, my father, was it not cruel to wed me with another? But even that hated link is broken! and how—" her face grew deadly pale, and the white brow glistened with the damps that rose upon it. The darkness seemed fearful; and, rubbing two pieces of sandal wood together, she hastily lighted a small lamp on a table near.

The startled terror of remorse that dares not think of what it fears, is as inconsistent as all other human feelings. The attention of Shire Afkun's lovely widow was caught by a mirror on the table. She took it up and gazed on the face it reflected, earnestly, coldly,—rather as woman gazes on the features of her rival than her own.

"I am beautiful," said she, slowly; "and yet that beauty, which is triumph to another, is to me mortification. He saw me, I know, when I was first brought here, prisoner, slave, in that harem where he once asked me to be queen. Can loveliness lose its power? Ah, yes! when love can lose its truth. Weak and impetuous, yielding to temptation, but trembling to enjoy the reward of the committed crime; such is the man of whom my heart made its divinity,—for whose sake I would have toiled as a slave; ay, and do; but with far other aim now. Let us but once meet again, Jehanghire, and thou

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art mine ! but I—I can never be thine again. Life, throne, fortunes, we will yet share together ; but my heart, never, never more !”

For a few listless minutes she gazed from the window, rather for distraction than amusement. The Jumna was flowing like a dark and glittering beryl amid its melon trees. Perched on the topmost boughs, the herons rested their long and snowy necks beneath their wings, breaking with their white presence the long lines of shade. Some three or four little flames, like meteors, seemed dancing down the river, now flinging their tremulous lustre on the waters, now all but shipwrecked by the broad leaves and crimson flowers of the lotus. They were the tiny barks launched by her young slaves, formed of a cocoa-nut shell, and filled with fragrant oil, whose burning was to be an augury for the gentle hopes that trusted themselves to such frail freightage.

Nourmahal smiled bitterly, and turned aside. Such graceful fantasies belong to the childhood of Love: to Love, the credulous and the dreaming ; and such Love had long since passed away from Nourmahal. She asked of Fate for a sterner sign, and a darker omen. The river seemed to mock her feverish unrest with its tranquil beauty. She looked out from another window, which commanded one of those vast plains—dry ; bare, like the human heart, which so often exhausts its own fertility ; yet there was something striking in the very desolation. The

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clear moonshine turned the sand to silver; and there it lay like a vast unbroken lake, without ripple or shadow, one bright and glittering expanse. Suddenly the quick eye of Nourmahal detected a slight speck on the shining surface; it approached rapidly; and she saw a vast snake making its swift circles: one of its rings like dark jewellery, winding into another, till the vast expanse was passed, and its speckled length became again a shadow, a speck, and nothing.

“That reptile,” muttered Nourmahal, “was the saviour of my childish life. I laugh at such vain belief, and yet it haunts me. I feel as if its presence here were an omen. Is my destiny about to fulfil itself?”

While she was speaking, a step at the extremity of the chamber drew her attention. She knew well the low dwarfish figure of the fakir that entered to ask that charity of which she was so lavish. “I am rich to-day,” said she, giving the dwarf a little bag filled with coins. The creature took them in silence, and stood gazing upon her. The contrast was strange between them; the one looking the very poetry, the other the caricature, of humanity.

“They were talking of you in the divan to-day; the omrah Mohareb is forbidden to appear at Agra.”

“The shadow of the mighty emperor rests on the meanest of his slaves,” replied Nourmahal; “and it must have been a keen observer that marked

the small teeth that pressed the lip till it wore a hue like coral, ere the waters have dried upon it."

"The shadow was deepest on his own brow," returned the fakir; "the emperor was thinking of you, lady."

"And I," continued Nourmahal, "must resume my nightly task, or it may chance that, on your next visit, the poor will watch your going forth in vain."

The fakir took the hint, and departed, both understanding each other; and Nourmahal held her breath for a moment. It was as if to inhale a new existence; the light darkened in her eyes, and the delicate lines of her brow knit to almost sternness. The gilded balls of the ghurree dropping into the water, warned her of the hour, and clapping her hands, the sound assembled her slaves. All were soon seated at their accustomed task; and no one who had seen the lovely painter bending o'er the cup on which she was tracing, in a fanciful arabesque, the name of Jehanghire, would have dreamed of the agitation, that even her self-control could scarcely master. She felt that her destiny was on a cast. None but an ear, quickened as the mind can quicken the faculties of the body, could have heard a step that hesitated on the threshold. Nourmahal felt it on her heart, — not with the sweet, quick beating which it used to excite, but as the warrior hears the first trumpet of the coming battle on which he has staked his all. She moved not from her

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graceful attitude ; and nothing could be better calculated to display her perfect form. The head, small as an Arab steed's, but with hair whose long black plaits reached to the ground, bent so as to shew the curved neck, and the finely cut profile, while the curled eyelashes told how dark were the eyes that they concealed. The whole position bespoke despondency ; and so, too, did the dress. Her slaves were richly garbed, but Nourmahal had on only white muslin, without an ornament of any kind. In her belt, sole mark of her birth, was a small poniard ; it had no sheath ; but there was crusted blood upon it. It was that of the omrah who had intruded upon her solitude but the evening before. Yet how little did the fierce or the scornful seem to suit the sweet, sad face which Jehanghire saw drooping over his name. Jehanghire was the stranger on the threshold. He entered—all at once knew their master, and fell prostrate.

“ Leave us,” said the sultan, approaching Nourmahal. She rose on her knee, and remained gazing upon him, her large eyes radiant with delight.

“ Nay,” exclaimed she, as he took her hand to raise her ; “ let me be happy for a little. Let the sunshine of that beloved face enter my heart. It seems but yesterday that we parted, Jehanghire. Ay, still the same stately and glorious form that taught me to know how the gods look on earth.”

“ You have not forgotten me, then ?” said the king.

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A look was her only answer.

“This is but a gloomy place,” continued he, glancing round. “You must be wretched here?”

“Wretched! I can sometimes see you ride past in the distance.”

The emperor gazed on the soft dark eyes, which filled with large bright tears as they gazed upon his own.

“Why should we not be happy?” said he; “it is of no use dwelling on what has been. Why should we part?”

“We have never parted, my lord,” replied Nourmahal. “Do you think your image could pass from the heart where it had once been shrined?”

The next day saw Nourmahal on a throne; Jehanghire at her side; the court at her feet. But there was a troubled shadow in the depths of those midnight eyes; and scorn curved the small red lip, if for a moment its settled smile passed away. There was but one thought in her heart, half triumph, half bitterness.

“I have won him, and shall keep him; for to his weak temper habit will be as fetters of iron. I have won him—but how? He remembered not the earnest and devoted love of the young heart, which was his, and his only. Even my beauty failed to influence his selfish carelessness: but he is mine by a more potent spell. Love may be given in vain,

— beauty may be powerless ; but I have mastered by the deeper magic of flattery.”

## NOTE.

Those who only know Nourmahal by Moore's delicious description in “ The Light of the Harem,” the most exquisite painting to which words ever gave music, are little acquainted with the resolution and talents of this extraordinary woman. Jehanghire, after one or two fruitless attempts, had her first husband murdered, and herself placed in his harem. Yet, by some caprice of remorse, or of despotism, he never made an attempt to even see the object of his early passion. The weak only are discouraged by difficulties ; and Nourmahal's ambition looking steadily onwards, she supported herself and slaves by the exercise of her abilities, whose display became the talk of the court. Every lover was steadily rejected ; and her own hand and poniard avenged her, when one of the omrahs intruded on her solitude. Jehanghire's curiosity was awakened ; he saw her again ; and from that moment began an influence which endured to the last. One of the many recorded triumphs of the strong over the weak mind.