

GEORG EBERS

THE BRIDE OF

THE NILE.

VOLUME 12

Georg Ebers

The Bride of the Nile. Volume 12

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The Bride of the Nile – Volume 12

CHAPTER XXI

While Rustem, to whom Mary had entrusted the jeweller's gold, was making his preparations for their journey with all the care of a practised guide, and while Mary was comforting her governess and Mandane, to whom she explained that Rustem's journey was to save Paula's life, a fresh trial was going forward in the Court of Justice.

This time Orion was the accused. He had scarcely begun to study the maps and lists he required for his undertaking when he was bidden to appear before his judges.

The members composing the Court were the same as yesterday. Among the witnesses were Paula and the new bishop, as well as Gamaliel, who had been sent for soon after Mary had left him.

The prosecutor accused the son of the Mukaukas of having made away, in defiance of the patriarch's injunction, with a costly emerald bequeathed to the Church by his father.

Orion had determined to conduct his own defence; he recapitulated everything that he had told the prelate in self-justification in his father's private room, and then added, that to put a speedy end to this odious affair he was now prepared to restore the stone, and he placed it at the disposal of his judges. He handed Paula's emerald to the Kadi who presented it to the bishop. John, however, did not seem satisfied; he referred to the written testimony of the widow Susannah, who had been present when the deceased Mukaukas had designated all the jewels in the Persian hanging as included in his gift to the Church. This was in Orion's presence so he was still under suspicion of a fraud; and it was difficult to determine whether the fine gem now lying on the table before them were indeed the same to which the Church laid claim.

All this was urged with excessive vehemence and bore the stamp of a hostile purpose.

Obedience and conviction alike prompted the zealous prelate to this demeanor, for the same carrier-pigeon which had brought from the patriarch his appointment to the bishopric required him to insist on Orion's punishment, for he was a thorn in the flesh of the Jacobite church, a tainted sheep who might infect the rest of the flock. If the young man should offer an emerald it was therefore to be closely examined, to see whether it were the original stone or a substitute.

On these grounds the bishop had expressed his doubts, and though they gave rise to an indignant murmur among the judges, the Kadi so far admitted the prelate's suspicions as to explain that last evening a letter had reached him from his uncle at Djidda, Haschim the merchant, in which mention was made of the emerald. His son happened to have weighed that stone, without his knowledge, before he started for Egypt, and Othman had here a note of its exact weight. The Jew Gamaliel had been desired to attend with his balances, and could at once use them to satisfy the bishop.

The jeweller immediately proceeded to do so, and old Horapollo, who was an expert in such matters, went close up to him, and watched him narrowly.

It was in feverish anxiety, and more eagerly than any other bystander, that Paula and Orion kept their eyes fixed on the Jew's hands and lips; after weighing it once, he did so a second time. Old Horapollo himself weighed it a third time, with a keen eye though his hands trembled a little; all three experiments gave the same result: this gem was heavier by a few grains of doura than that which the merchant's son had weighed, and yet the Jew declared that there was no purer, clearer, or finer emerald in the world than this.

Orion breathed more freely, and the question arose among the judges as to whether the young Arab might have failed in precision, or an exchange had in fact been effected. This was difficult

to imagine, since in that case the accused would have given himself the loss, and the Church the advantage.

The bishop, an honest man, now said that the patriarch's suspicions had certainly led him too far in this instance, and after this he spoke no more.

All through this enquiry the Vekeel had kept silence, but the defiant gaze, assured of triumph, which he fixed on Paula and Orion alternately, augured the worst.

When the prosecutor next accused the young man of complicity in the much discussed escape of the nuns Orion again asserted his innocence, pointing out that during the fatal contest between the Arabs and the champions of the sisters, he had been with the Arab governor, as Amru himself could testify. By an act of unparalleled despotism, he had been deprived of his estates and his freedom on mere false suspicion, and he put his trust in the first instance in a just sentence from his judges and, failing that, he threw himself on the protection and satisfaction of his sovereign lord the Khaliff.

As he spoke his eyes flashed flames at the Vekeel; but the negro still preserved his self-control, and this doubled the alarm of those who wished the youth well.

It was clear from all this that Obada felt sure that he had the noose well around his victim's neck, and why he thought so, soon became evident; for Orion had hardly finished his defence when he rose, and with a malicious grin, handed to the Kadi the little tablet given him yesterday by old Horapollo, describing it as a document addressed to Paula and desiring the Kadi to examine it. The heat had effaced much of what had been written on the wax, but most of the words could still be deciphered. The venerable Horapollo had already made them out, and was quite ready to read to the judges all that the accused—who by his own account, was a spotless dove—had written in his innocence and truthfulness for his fair one. He signed to the old man and helped him as he rose with difficulty, but the Kadi begged him to wait, made himself acquainted with the contents of the letter by the help of the interpreter, and when the man had, with much pains, fulfilled his task, he turned, not to Horapollo, but to Obada, and asked whence this document had come.

"From Paula's desk," replied the Vekeel. "My old friend found it there."

He pointed to Horapollo, who confirmed his statement by a nod of assent.

The Kadi rose, went up to the girl, whose cheeks were pale with indignation, and asked whether she recognized the tablets as her property; Paula, after convincing herself, replied with a flaming glance of scorn and aversion at Horapollo: "Yes, my lord. It is mine. That base old man has taken it with atrocious meanness from among my things." For an instant her voice failed her; then, turning to the judges, she exclaimed:

"If there is one among you to whom helplessness and innocence are sacred and malice and cunning odious, I beg him to go to Rufinus' wife, over whose threshold this man has crept like a ferret into a dovecote, for no other end but to tread hospitable kindness in the dust, to rifle her home and make use of whatever might serve his vile purpose—to go, I say, and warn the lonely woman against this treacherous spy and thief."

At this the old man, gasping and inarticulate, raised his withered arm; the Christian judges whispered together, but at cross-purposes, while the Jew fidgeted his round little person on the bench, drumming incessantly with his fingers on his breast, and trying to meet Orion's or Paula's eye and to make her understand that he was the man who would warn Joanna. But a thump from the Vekeel's fist, that came down on his shoulder unawares, reduced him to sitting still; and while he sat rubbing the place with subdued sounds of pain, not daring to reproach the all-powerful negro for his violence, the Kadi gave the tablets to Horapollo and bid him read the letter.

But the terrible accusation cast at him by the hated Patrician maiden, ascribing his removal to Rufinus house to a motive which, in truth, had been far from his, had so enraged and agitated him that his old lungs, at all times feeble, refused their office. This woman had done him a fresh wrong, for he had gone to live with the widow from the kindest impulse; only an accident had thrown this document in his way. And yet it would not fail to be reported to Joanna in the course of the day that

he had gone to her house as a spy, and there would be an end to the pleasant life of which he had dreamed—nay, even Philippus might perhaps quarrel with him.

And all, all through this woman.

He could not utter a word but, as he sank back on the seat, a glance so full of hatred, so dark with malignant fury, fell on Paula that she shuddered, and told herself that this man was ready to die himself if only he could drag her down too.

The interpreter now began to read Orion's letter and to translate it for the Arabs; and while he blundered through it, declaring that not a letter could be plainly made out, she recovered her self-control and, before the interpreter had done his task, a gleam as of sunshine lighted up her pure features. Some great, lofty, and rapturous thought must have flashed through her brain, and it was evident that she had seized it and was feeding on it.

Orion, sitting opposite to her, noticed this; still, he did not understand what her beseeching gaze had to say to him, what it asked of him as she pressed her hand on her breast, and looked into his eyes with such urgent entreaty that it went to his very heart.

The interpreter ceased; but what he had read had had a great effect on the judges. The Kadi's benevolent face expressed extreme apprehension, and the contents of the letter were indeed such as to cause it. It ran as follows:

"After waiting for you a long time in vain, I must at last make up my mind to go; and how much I still had to say to you. A written farewell."

Here a few lines were effaced, and then came the—fatal and quite legible conclusion:

"How far otherwise I had dreamed of ending this day, which has been for the most part spent in preparations for the flight of the Sisters; and I have found a pleasure in doing all that lay in my power for those kind and innocent, unjustly persecuted nuns. We must hope for the best for them; and for ourselves we must look to-morrow for an undisturbed interview and a parting which may leave us memories on which we can live for a long time. The noble governor Amru is, among the Arabs, such another as he whom we mourn was among the Egyptians . . ." Here the letter ended; not quite three lines were wanting to conclude it.

The Kadi held the tablets for a few minutes in his hand; then looking up again at the assembly, who were waiting in great suspense, he began: "Even if the accused was not one of those who raised their hands in mutiny against our armed troops, it is nevertheless indisputable, after what has just been read, that he not only knew of the escape of the nuns, but aided them to the utmost.—When did you receive this communication, noble maiden?"

At this Paula clasped her hands tightly and replied with a slightly bent head and her eyes fixed on the ground.

"When did I receive it?—Never; for I wrote it myself. The writing is mine."

"Yours?" said the Kadi in amazement. "It is from me to Orion," replied Paula.

"From you to him? How then comes it in your desk?"

"In a very simple way," she explained, still looking down. "After writing the letter to my betrothed I threw it in with the other tablets as soon as I had no need for it; for he himself came, and there was no necessity for his reading what could be better said by word of mouth."

As she spoke a peculiar smile passed over her lips and a loud murmur ran through the room. Orion looked first at the girl and then at the Kadi in growing bewilderment; but the Negro started up, struck his fist on the table, making it shake, and roared out:

"An atrocious fabrication! Which of you can allow yourself to be taken in by a woman's guile?" Horapollo, who had recovered himself by this time, laughed hoarsely and maliciously; the judges looked at each other much puzzled; but when the Vekeel went on raging the Kadi interrupted him, and desired that Orion might speak, for he had twice tried to make himself heard. Now, with scarlet cheeks and a choking utterance, he said:

"No, Othman—no, no indeed, my lords. Do not believe her. Not she, but I—I wrote the letter that. . . ."

But Paula broke in:

"He? Do you not feel that all he wants is to save me, and so he takes my guilt on himself? It is his generosity, his love for me! Do not, do not believe him! Do not allow yourselves to be deceived by him."

"I? No, it is she, it is she," Orion again asserted; but, before he could say more, Paula declared with a flashing glance that it was a poor sort of love which sacrificed itself out of false generosity. And as, at the same time, she again pressed her hand to her bosom with pathetic entreaty, he was suddenly silent, and casting his eyes up to heaven, he sank back on the prisoners' bench, deeply affected.

Paula joyfully went on:

"He has thought better of it, and given up his crazy attempt to take my guilt on himself. You see, Othman, you all see, worthy men.—Let me atone for what I did to help the poor nuns."

"Have your way!" shrieked the old man; but the Negro cried out:

"A hellish tissue of lies, an unheard-of deception! But in spite of the shield a woman holds before you, I have my foot on your neck, treacherous wretch! Is it credible—I ask you, judges—that a finished letter should be found, after weeks had elapsed, in the hands of the writer and not those of the person to whom it was addressed?"

The Kadi shrugged his shoulders and replied with calm dignity:

"Consider, Obada, that we are condemning this damsel on the evidence of a letter which was found in possession, not of the person to whom it was addressed, but of the writer. This document gave rise to no doubts in your mind. The judge should mete out equal measure to all, Obada."

The aptness of these words, spoken in a dogmatic tone, aroused the approval of the Arabs, and the Jew could not restrain himself from exclaiming: "Capital!" but no sooner had it escaped him than he shrank as quick as lightning out of the Vekeel's reach; and Obada hardly heard him, for he did not allow himself to be interrupted by the Kadi but went on to explain in wrathful words what a disgrace it was to them, as men and judges, to have dust cast in their eyes by a woman, and allow themselves to be mollified by the arts of a pair of love-stricken fools; and how desirable it must be in the eyes of every Moslem to guard the security of life and bring the severest punishment on the instigator of a sanguinary revolt against the champions of the Khaliff's power.

His eloquent and stormy address was not without effect; still, the Christians, who ascribed every form of evil to the Melchite girl, would have been satisfied with her death and have been ready to forgive the son of the Mukaukas this crime—supposing him to have committed it. And it was after the judges had agreed that it was impossible to decide by whom the letter on the tablet had been written, and there had been a great deal of argument on both sides, that the real discussion began.

It was long before the assembly could agree, and all the while Orion sat now looking as though he had already been condemned to a cruel death, and now exchanging glances with Paula, while he pressed his hand to his heart as though to keep it from bursting. He perfectly understood her, and her magnanimity upheld him. He had indeed persuaded himself to accept her self-sacrifice, but he was fully determined that if she must die he would follow her to the grave. "Non dolet,"—[It does not hurt]—Arria cried to her lover Paetus, as she thrust the knife into her heart that she might die before him; and the words rang in his ear; but he said to himself that Paula would very likely be pardoned, and that then he would be free and have a whole lifetime in which to thank her.

At last—at last. The Kadi announced the verdict: It was impossible to find Orion worthy of death, and equally so to give up all belief in his guilt; the court therefore declared itself inadequate to pronounce a sentence, and left it to be decided by the Khaliff or by his representative in Egypt, Amru. The court only went so far as to rule that the prisoner was to be kept in close confinement, so that he might be within reach of the hand of justice, if the supreme decision should be "guilty!"

When the Kadi said that the matter was to be referred to the Khaliff or his representative, the Vekeel cried out:

"I—I am Omar's vicar!" but a disapproving murmur from the judges, as with one voice, rejected his pretensions, and at a proposal of the Kadi it was resolved that the young man should be protected against any arbitrary attack on the part of the Vekeel by a double guard; for many grave accusations against Obada were already on their way to Medina. The negro quitted the court, mad with rage, and concocting fresh indictments against Paula with the old man.

When Paula returned to her cell old Betta thought that she must have been pardoned; for how glad, how proud, how full of spirit she entered it! The worst peril was diverted from her lover, and she and her love had saved him!

She gave herself up for lost; but whatever fate might have in store for her, life lay open before him; he would have time to prove his splendid powers, and that he would do so, as she would have him do it, she felt certain.

She had not ended telling her nurse of the judges' decision, when the warder announced the Kadi. In a minute or two he made his appearance; she expressed her thanks, and he warmly assured her that he regarded the disgrace of being perhaps a beguiled judge as a favor of Fortune; then he turned the conversation on the real object of his visit.

In the letter, he began, which he had received the evening before from his uncle Haschim, there was a great deal about her. She had quite won the old merchant's heart, and the enquiries for her father which he had set on foot....

Here she interrupted him saying: "Oh, my lord; is the wish, the prayer of my life to be granted?"

"Your father, the noble Thomas, before whom even the Moslem bows, has been. . . ." and then Othman went on to tell her that the hero of Damascus had in fact retired to Sinai and had been living there as a hermit. But she must not indulge in premature rejoicing, for the messengers had found him ill, consumed by disease arising from his wounded lungs, and almost at death's door. His days were numbered....

"And I, I am a prisoner," groaned the girl. "Held fast, helpless, robbed of all means of flying to his arms!"

He again bid her be calm, and went on to tell her: in his soft, composed manner, that two days since a Nabathæan had come to him and had asked him, as the chief administrator of justice in Egypt, whether an old foe of the Moslems, a general who had fought in the service of the emperor and the cross against the Khaliff and the crescent, and who was now sick, weary, and broken, might venture on Egyptian soil without fear of being seized by the Arab authorities; and when he, Othman, had learnt that this man was no other than Thomas, the hero of Damascus, he had promised him his life and freedom, promised them gladly, as he felt assured his sovereign the Khaliff would desire.

So this very day her father had reached Fostat, and the Kadi had received him as a guest into his house. Thomas, indeed, stood on the brink of the grave; but he was inspirited and sustained by the hope of seeing his daughter. It had been falsely reported to him that she had perished in the massacre at Abyla and he had already mourned her fate.

It was now his duty to fulfil the wish of a dying man, and he had ordered the prison servants to prepare the room adjoining Paula's cell with furniture which was on the way from his house. The door between the two would be opened for her.

"And I shall see him again, have him again to live with—to close his eyes, perhaps to die with him!" cried Paula; and, seizing the good man's hand, she kissed it gratefully.

The Moslem's eyes filled with tears as he bid her not to thank him, but God the All-merciful; and before the sun went down the head of the doomed daughter was resting on the breast of the weary hero who was so near his end, though his unimpaired mind and tender heart rejoiced in their reunion as fully and deeply as did his beloved and only child. A new and unutterable joy came to Paula in the gloom of her prison; and that same day the warder carried a letter from her to Orion, conveying

her father's greetings; and, as he read the fervent blessing, he felt as though an invisible hand had released him for ever from the curse his own father had laid upon him. A wonderful glad sense of peace came over him with power and pleasure in work, and he gave his brains and pen no rest till morning was growing grey.

CHAPTER XXII

Horapollo made his way home to his new quarters from the court of justice with knit and gloomy brows. As he passed Susannah's garden hedge he saw a knot of people gathered together and pointing out furtively to the handsome residence beyond.

They, like a hundred other groups he had passed, hailed him with words of welcome, thanks, and encouragement and, as he bowed to them slightly, his eyes followed the direction of their terrified gaze and he started; above the great garden gates hung the black tablet; a warning that looked like a mark of disgrace, crying out to the passer-by: "Avoid this threshold! Here rages the destroying pestilence!"

The old man had a horror of everything that might remind him of death, and a cold shiver ran through him. To live so near to a focus of the disease was most alarming and dangerous! How had it invaded this, the healthiest part of the town, which the last raging epidemic had spared?

An officer of the town-council, whom he called to him, told him that two slaves, father and son, whose duty it was to take charge of the baths in the widow's house, had been first attacked, but they had been carried quietly away in the night to the new tents for the sick; to-day, however, the widow herself had fallen ill. To prevent the spread of the infection, the plot of ground was now guarded on all sides.

"Be strict, be sharp; not a rat must creep out !" cried the old man as he rode on.

He was later than he had been yesterday; supper must be ready. After a short rest he was preparing to join the family at their meal, washing and dressing with the help of his servant, when a lame slave-girl came into his room and placed a tray covered with steaming dishes on the low table by the divan.

What was the meaning of this? Before he could ask, he was informed that for the future the women wished to eat by themselves; he would be served in his own room.

At this a bright patch of red colored his cheeks; after brief reflection he cried to his servant. "My ass!" and added to the girl: "Where is your mistress?"

"In the viridarium with Gamaliel the goldsmith; but they are going to supper immediately."

"And without their guest? I understand!" muttered the old man, taking up his hat and marching past the maid out of the room. In the hall he met Gamaliel, to whom a slave-girl was handing his stick. Horapollo could guess that the Jew had come only to warn the women against him and, without vouchsafing him a glance, he went into the dining-room. There he found Pulchena and Mary kneeling in tears by the side of Joanna, who was weeping too.

He guessed for whom were these lamentations, and prompted by the wish to prove the falsity of the accusation that charged him with having entered the house as a spy, he spoke to the widow. She shuddered as he entered, and she now pointed to the door with an outstretched finger; when he nevertheless stood still and was about to make his defence, she interrupted him loudly and urgently: "No, no, my lord! This house is henceforth closed against you! You yourself have broken every tie that bound us! Do not any longer disturb our peace! Go back to the place you came from."

At this the old man made one more attempt to speak; but the widow rose, and saying: "Come, my children," she hastily withdrew with the girls into the adjoining room, and closed the door.

Horapollo was left alone on the threshold.

Old as he was, in all his life he had never suffered such an insult; but he did not lay it to the score of those who had shown him the door, but to the already long one of the Syrian girl; as he rode back to his own home on his white ass, he stopped several times to speak to the passers- by.

During the following day or two he heeded not the heat of the weather, nor his own need of rest for his body, and quiet occupation for his mind; morning, noon and night he was riding about the streets stirring up the people, and setting forth in insinuating speeches that they must perish miserably

if they rejected the only means of deliverance which he had pointed out to them. He was present at every meeting of the Senate, and his inflammatory eloquence kept the town council on his side, and nullified the efforts of the bishop, while he pressed them to fix the day of the marriage of the Nile with his bride.

He knew the Egyptians and their passion for the intoxicating joys of a splendid ceremonial. This festival: the wedding of the Bride of the Nile to her mighty and unresting spouse, on whom the weal or woe of the land depended, was to be as a flowery oasis in the waste of dearth and desolation. He recalled every detail of the reminiscences of his childhood as to the processions in Honor of Isis, and the festivals dedicated to her and her triad; every record of his own experience and that of former generations; all he had read in books of the great pilgrimages and dramas of heathen Egypt—and he described it all in his speeches, painted it in glowing colors to the Senate and the mob, and counselled the authorities to reproduce it all with unparalleled splendor on the occasion of this marriage.

Every man in whose veins flowed Egyptian blood listened to him attentively, took pleasure in his projects, and was quite ready to do his utmost to enhance the glories of this ceremonial, in which every one was to take part either active or passive. Thousands were ruined, but there was yet enough and to spare for this marriage feast, and the Senate did not hesitate to raise a fresh loan.

"Destruction or Deliverance!" was the watch-word Horapollo had given the Memphites. If everything came to ruin their hoarded talents would be lost too; if, on the other hand, the sacrifice produced its result, if the Nile should bless its children with renewed prosperity, what need the town or country care for a few thousand drachmae more or less?

So the day was fixed!

Not quite two weeks after Paula's trial, on the day of Saint Serapis the miraculous, saving, auspicious ceremonial was to take place. And how glowing was the picture given of the Bride's beauty by the old man, and by the judges and officials who had seen her! How brightly old Horapollo's eyes would flash with hate as he described it! The eyes of love could not be more radiant.

All that this patrician hussy had done to aggrieve him—she should expiate it all, and his triumph meant woe, not only to that one woman, but to the Christian faith which he hated!

Bishop John, however, had not been idle meanwhile. Immediately after his interference with the popular vote he had despatched a letter by a carrier-pigeon to the patriarch in Upper Egypt, and Benjamin's reply would no doubt give him powers for still more vigorous measures. In church, before the Senate, and even in the highways, he and his clergy did their utmost to combat the atrocious project of the authorities and the populace, but the zeal which was stirred up by old Horapollo soon broke into brighter flames than the conservatism, orthodoxy and breadth of view which the ecclesiastics did their utmost to fan. The wind blew with equal force from both quarters, but on one side it blew on smoldering fuel, and on the other on overflowing and flaming stores. Famine and despair had undermined faith, and weakened discipline; even the mightiest weapons of the Church—Cursing and blessing—were powerless. A floating beam was held out to sinking men, and they would no longer wait for the life-boat that was approaching to rescue them, with strong hands at the oars and a trusty pilot at the helm.

Horapollo went no more to the widow's home. A few hours after she had shown him the door, his slaves came and fetched away the various things he had carried there with him. His body servant at the same time brought a large sealed phial and a letter to Dame Joanna, as follows:

"It is wrong to judge a man without hearing his defence. This you have done; but I owe you no grudge. Philippus, on his return, will perhaps pick up the ends of the tie and join again what you have this day cut. I send you a portion of the remedy he left with me at parting to use against the plague in case of need. Its good effects have been tested within the last few days. May the sickness which has fallen on your neighbors, spare you and yours."

Joanna was much pleased with this letter but, when she had read it aloud, little Mary exclaimed:

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