

GEORG EBERS

THE BRIDE OF

THE NILE.

VOLUME 01

Georg Ebers

The Bride of the Nile. Volume 01

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PREFACE

The "Bride of the Nile" needs no preface. For the professional student I may observe that I have relied on the authority of de Goeje in adhering to my own original opinion that the word Mukaukas is not to be regarded as a name but as a title, since the Arab writers to which I have made reference apply it to the responsible representatives of the Byzantine Emperor in antagonism to the Moslem power. I was unfortunately unable to make further use of Karabacek's researches as to the Mukaukas.

I shall not be held justified in placing the ancient Horus Apollo (Horapollo) in the seventh century after Christ by any one who regards the author of the Hieroglyphica as identical with the Egyptian philosopher of the same name who, according to Suidas, lived under Theodosius, and to whom Stephanus of Byzantium refers, writing so early as at the end of the fifth century. But the lexicographer Suidas enumerates the works of Horapollo, the philologer and commentator on Greek poetry, without naming the Hieroglyphica, which is the only treatise alluded to by Stephanus. Besides, all the other ancient writers who mention Horapollo at all leave us quite free to suppose that there may have been two sages of the same name—as does C. Leemans, who is most intimately versed in the Hieroglyphica—and the second certainly cannot have lived earlier than the VIIth century, since an accurate knowledge of hieroglyphic writing must have been lost far more completely in his time than we can suppose possible in the IVth century. It must be remembered that we still possess well-executed hieroglyphic inscriptions dating from the time of Decius, 250 years after Christ. Thus the Egyptian commentator on Greek poetry could hardly have needed a translator, whereas the Hieroglyphica seems to have been first rendered into Greek by Philippus. The combination by which the author called in Egyptian Horus (the son of Isis) is supposed to have been born in Philae, where the cultus of the Egyptian heathen was longest practised, and where some familiarity with hieroglyphics must have been preserved to a late date, takes into due account the real state of affairs at the period I have selected for my story.

GEORG EBERS

October 1st, 1886.

CHAPTER I

Half a lustrum had elapsed since Egypt had become subject to the youthful power of the Arabs, which had risen with such unexampled vigor and rapidity. It had fallen an easy prey, cheaply bought, into the hands of a small, well-captained troop of Moslem warriors; and the fair province, which so lately had been a jewel of the Byzantine Empire and the most faithful foster-mother to Christianity, now owned the sway of the Khalif Omar and saw the Crescent raised by the side of the Cross.

It was long since a hotter season had afflicted the land; and the Nile, whose rising had been watched for on the Night of Dropping—the 17th of June—with the usual festive preparations, had cheated the hopes of the Egyptians, and instead of rising had shrunk narrower and still narrower in its bed.—It was in this time of sore anxiety, on the 10th of July, A.D. 643, that a caravan from the North reached Memphis.

It was but a small one; but its appearance in the decayed and deserted city of the Pyramids—which had grown only lengthwise, like a huge reed-leaf, since its breadth was confined between the Nile and the Libyan Hills—attracted the gaze of the passers-by, though in former years a Memphite would scarcely have thought it worth while to turn his head to gaze at an interminable pile of wagons loaded with merchandise, an imposing train of vehicles drawn by oxen, the flashing maniples of the imperial cavalry, or an endless procession wending its way down the five miles of high street.

The merchant who, riding a dromedary of the choicest breed, conducted this caravan, was a lean Moslem of mature age, robed in soft silk. A vast turban covered his small head and cast a shadow over his delicate and venerable features.

The Egyptian guide who rode on a brisk little ass by his side, looked up frequently and with evident pleasure at the merchant's face—not in itself a handsome one with its hollow cheeks, meagre beard and large aquiline nose—for it was lighted up by a pair of bright eyes, full of attractive thoughtfulness and genuine kindness. But that this fragile-looking man, in whose benevolent countenance grief and infirmities had graven many a furrow, could not only command but compel submission was legible alike in his thin, firmly-closed lips and in the zeal with which his following of truculent and bearded fighting men, armed to the teeth, obeyed his slightest sign.

His Egyptian attendant, the head of the Hermeneutai—the guild of the Dragomans of that period—was a swarthy and surly native of Memphis; whenever he accidentally came too close to the fierce-looking riders of the dromedaries he shrunk his shoulders as if he expected a blow or a push, while he poured out question and answer to the Merchant Haschim, the owner of the caravan, without timidity and with the voluble garrulity of his tribe.

"You seem very much at home here in Memphis," he observed, when the old man had expressed his surprise at the decadence and melancholy change in the city.

"Thirty years ago," replied the merchant, "my business often brought me hither. How many houses are now empty and in ruins where formerly only heavy coin could secure admittance! Ruins on all sides!—Who has so cruelly mutilated that fine church? My fellow-believers left every Christian fane untouched—that I know from our chief Amru himself."

"It was the principal church of the Melchites, the Emperor's minions," cried the guide, as if that were ample explanation of the fact. The merchant, however, did not take it so.

"Well," he said, "and what is there so dreadful in their creed?"

"What?" said the Egyptian, and his eye flashed wrathfully. "What?— They dismember the divine person of the Saviour and attribute to it two distinct natures. And then!—All the Greeks settled here, and encouraged by the protection of the emperor, treated us, the owners of the land, like slaves, till your nation came to put an end to their oppression. They drove us by force into their churches, and every true-born Egyptian was punished as a rebel and a leper. They mocked at us and persecuted us for our faith in the one divine nature of our Lord."

"And so," interrupted the merchant, "as soon as we drove out the Greeks you behaved more unmercifully to them and their sanctuaries than we—whom you scorn as infidels—did to you!"

"Mercy?—for them!" cried the Egyptian indignantly, as he cast an evil eye on the demolished edifice. "They have reaped what they sowed; and now every one in Egypt who does not believe in your One God—blessed be the Saviour!—confesses the one sole nature of our Lord Jesus Christ. You drove out the Melchite rabble, and then it was our part to demolish the temples of their wretched Saviour, who lost His divine Unity at the synod of Chalcedon—damnation wait upon it!"

"But still the Melchites are fellow-believers with you—they are Christians," said the merchant.

"Christians?" echoed the guide with a contemptuous shrug. "They may regard themselves as Christians; but I, with every one else great and small in this land, am of opinion that they have no right whatever to call themselves our fellow-believers and Christians. They all are and shall be for ever accursed with their hundreds—nay thousands of devilish heresies, by which they degrade our God and Redeemer to the level of that idol on the stone pillar. Half a cow and half a man! Why, what rational being, I ask you, could pray to such a mongrel thing? We Jacobites or Monophysites or whatever they choose to call us will not yield a jot or tittle of the divine nature of our Lord and Saviour; and if the old faith must die out, I will turn Moslem and be converted to your One Omnipotent God; for before I confess the heresies of the Melchites I will be hewn in pieces, and my wife and children with me. Who knows what may be coming to pass? And there are many advantages in going over to your side: for the power is in your hands, and long may you keep it! We have got to be ruled by strangers; and who would not rather pay small tribute to the wise and healthy Khalif at Medina than a heavy one to the sickly imperial brood of Melchites at Constantinople. The Mukaukas George, to be sure, is not a bad sort of man, and as he so soon gave up all idea of resisting you he was no doubt of my opinion. Regarding you as just and pious folks, as our next neighbors, and perhaps even of our own race and blood, he preferred you—my brother told me so—to those Byzantine heretics, flayers of men and thirsting for blood, but yet, the Mukaukas is as good a Christian as breathes."

The Arab had listened attentively and with a subtle smile to the Memphite, whose duties as guide now compelled him to break off. The Egyptian made the whole caravan turn down an alley that led into a street running parallel to the river, where a few fine houses still stood in the midst of their gardens. When men and beasts were making their way along a better pavement the merchant observed: "I knew the father of the man you were speaking of, very well. He was wealthy and virtuous; of his son too I hear nothing but good. But is he still allowed to bear the title of governor, or, what did you call him?—Mukaukas?"

"Certainly, Master," said the guide. "There is no older family than his in all Egypt, and if old Menas was rich the Mukaukas is richer, both by inheritance and by his wife's dower. Nor could we wish for a more sensible or a juster governor! He keeps his eye on his underlings too; still, business is not done now as briskly as formerly, for though he is not much older than I am—and I am not yet sixty—he is always ailing and has not been seen out of the house for months. Even when your chief wants to see him he comes over to this side of the river. It is a pity with such a man as he; and who was it that broke down his stalwart strength? Why, those Melchite dogs; you may ask all along the Nile, long as it is, who was at the bottom of any misfortune, and you will always get the same answer: Wherever the Melchite or the Greek sets foot the grass refuses to grow."

"But the Mukaukas, the emperor's representative.... the Arab began. The Egyptian broke in however:

"He, you think, must be safe from them? They did not certainly injure his person; but they did worse, for when the Melchites rose up against our party—it was at Alexandria, and the late Greek patriarch Cyrus had a finger in that pie—they killed his two sons, two fine, splendid men—killed them like dogs; and it crushed him completely."

"Poor man!" sighed the Arab. "And has he no child left?"

"Oh, yes. One son, and the widow of his eldest. She went into a convent after her husband's death, but she left her child, her little Mary—she must be ten years old now—to live with her grandparents."

"That is well," said the old man, "that will bring some sunshine into the house."

"No doubt, Master. And just lately they have had some cause for rejoicing. The only surviving son—Orion is his name—came home only the day before yesterday from Constantinople where he has been for a long time. There was a to-do! Half the city went crazy. Thousands went out to meet him, as though he were the Saviour; they erected triumphal arches, even folks of my creed—no one thought of hanging back. One and all wanted to see the son of the great Mukaukas, and the women of course were first and foremost!"

"You speak, however," said the Arab, "as though the returning hero were not worthy of so much honor."

"That is as folks think," replied the Egyptian shrugging his shoulders.

"At any rate he is the only son of the greatest man in the land."

"But he does not promise to be like the old man?"

"Oh, yes, indeed," said the guide. "My brother, a priest, and the head of one of our great schools, was his tutor, and he never met such a clever head as Orion's, he tells me. He learnt everything without any trouble and at the same time worked as hard as a poor man's son. We may expect him to win fame and honor—so Marcus says—for his parents and for the city of Memphis: but for my part, I can see the shady side, and I tell you the women will turn his head and bring him to a bad end. He is handsome, taller even than the old man in his best days, and he knows how to make the most of himself when he meets a pretty face—and pretty faces are always to be met in his path . . ."

"And the young rascal takes what he finds!" said the Moslem laughing. "If that is all you are alarmed at I am glad for the youth. He is young and such things are allowable."

"Nay, Sir, even my brother—he lives now in Alexandria, and is blind and foolish enough still in all that concerns his former pupil—and even he thinks this is a dangerous rock ahead. If he does not change in this respect he will wander further and further from the law of the Lord, and imperil his soul, for dangers surround him on all sides like roaring lions. The noble gifts of a handsome and engaging person will lead him to his ruin; and though I do not desire it, I suspect. . . ."

"You look on the dark side and judge hardly," replied the old man. "The young. . . ."

"Even the young, or at least the Christian young, ought to control themselves, though I, if any one, am inclined to make the utmost allowance for the handsome lad—nay, and I may confess: when he smiles at me I feel at once as if I had met with some good-luck; and there are a thousand other men in Memphis who feel the same, and still more the women you may be sure—but many a one has shed bitter tears on his account for all that.—But, by all the saints!—Talk of the wolf and you see his tail! Look, there he is!—Halt! Stop a minute, you men; it is worth while, Sir, to tarry a moment."

"Is that his fine quadriga in front of the high garden gate yonder?"

"Those are the Pannonian horses he brought with him, as swift as lightning and as . . . But look! Ah, now they have disappeared behind the hedge; but you, high up on your dromedary, must be able to see them. The little maid by his side is the widow Susannah's daughter. This garden and the beautiful mansion behind the trees belong to her."

"A very handsome property!" said the Arab.

"I should think so indeed!" replied the Memphite. "The garden goes down to the Nile, and then, what care is taken of it!"

"Was it not here that Philommon the corn-merchant lived formerly?" asked the old man, as though some memories were coming back to him.

"To be sure. He was Susannah's husband and must have been a man of fifty when he first wooed her. The little girl is their only child and the richest heiress in the whole province; but she is not altogether grown up though she is sixteen years old—an old man's child, you understand, but a

pretty, merry creature, a laughing dove in human form, and so quick and lively. Her own people call her the little water-wagtail."

"Good!—Good and very appropriate," said the merchant well pleased. "She is small too, a child rather than a maiden; but the graceful, gladsome creature takes my fancy. And the governor's son—what is his name?"

"Orion, Sir," replied the guide.

"And by my beard," said the old man smiling. "You have not over-praised him, man! Such a youth as this Orion is not to be seen every day. What a tall fellow, and how becoming are those brown curls. Such as he are spoilt to begin with by their mothers, and then all the other women follow suit. And he has a frank, shrewd face with something behind it. If only he had left his purple coat and gold frippery in Constantinople! Such finery is out of place in this dismal ruinous city."

While he was yet speaking the Memphite urged his ass forward, but the Arab held him back, for his attention was riveted by what was taking place within the enclosure. He saw handsome Orion place a small white dog, a silky creature of great beauty that evidently belonged to him—in the little maiden's arms saw her kiss it and then put a blade of grass round its neck as if to measure its size. The old man watched them as, both laughing gaily, they looked into each other's eyes and presently bid each other farewell. The girl stood on tiptoe in front of some rare shrub to reach two exquisite purple flowers that blossomed at the top, hastily plucked them and offered them to him with a deep blush; she pushed away the hand he had put out to support her as she stretched up for the flowers with a saucy slap; and a bright glance of happiness lighted up her sweet face as the young man kissed the place her fingers had hit, and then pressed the flowers to his lips. The old man looked on with sympathetic pleasure, as though it roused the sweetest memories in his mind; and his kind eyes shone as Orion, no less mischievously happy than the young girl, whispered something in her ear; she drew the long stem of grass out of her waist-belt to administer immediate and condign punishment withal, struck it across his face, and then fled over grass-plot and flower-bed, as swift as a roe, without heeding his repeated shouts of "Katharina! bewitching, big damsel, Katharina!" till she reached the house.

It was a charming little interlude. Old Haschim was still pondering it in his memory with much satisfaction when he and his caravan had gone some distance further. He felt obliged to Orion for this pretty scene, and when he heard the young man's quadriga approaching at an easy trot behind him, he turned round to gaze. But the Arab's face had lost its contentment by the time the four Pannonians and the chariot, overlaid with silver ornamentation and forming, with its driver, a picture of rare beauty and in perfect taste, had slowly driven past, to fly on like the wind as soon as the road was clear, and to vanish presently in clouds of dust. There was something of melancholy in his voice as he desired his young camel-driver to pick up the flowers, which now lay in the dust of the road, and to bring them to him. He himself had observed the handsome youth as, with a glance and a gesture of annoyance with himself, he flung the innocent gift on the hot, sandy highway.

"Your brother is right," cried the old man to the Memphite. "Women are indeed the rock ahead in this young fellow's life—and he in theirs, I fear! Poor little girl!"

"The little water-wagtail do you mean? Oh! with her it may perhaps turn to real earnest. The two mothers have settled the matter already. They are both rolling in gold, and where doves nest doves resort.—Thank God, the sun is low down over the Pyramids! Let your people rest at the large inn yonder; the host is an honest man and lacks nothing, not even shade!"

"So far as the beasts and drivers are concerned," said the merchant, "they may stop here. But I, and the leader of the caravan, and some of my men will only take some refreshment, and then you must guide us to the governor; I have to speak with him. It is growing late. . ."

"That does not matter," said the Egyptian. "The Mukaukas prefers to see strangers after sundown on such a scorching day. If you have any dealings with him I am the very man for you. You have only to make play with a gold piece and I can obtain you an audience at once through Sebek,

the house-steward he is my cousin. While you are resting here I will ride on to the governor's palace and bring you word as to how matters stand."

CHAPTER II

The caravansary into which Haschim and his following now turned off stood on a plot of rising ground surrounded by palm-trees. Before the destruction of the heathen sanctuaries it had been a temple of Imhotep, the Egyptian Esculapius, the beneficent god of healing, who had had his places of special worship even in the city of the dead. It was half relined, half buried in desert sand when an enterprising inn-keeper had bought the elegant structure with the adjacent grove for a very moderate sum. Since then it had passed to various owners, a large wooden building for the accommodation of travellers had been added to the massive edifice, and among the palm-trees, which extended as far as the ill-repaired quay, stables were erected and plots of ground fenced in for beasts of all kinds. The whole place looked like a cattle-fair, and indeed it was a great resort of the butchers and horse-dealers of the town, who came there to purchase. The palm-grove, being one of the few remaining close to the city, also served the Memphites as a pleasure-ground where they could "sniff fresh air" and treat themselves in a pleasant shade. Tables and seats had been set out close to the river, and there were boats on hire in mine host's little creek; and those who took their pleasure in coming thither by water were glad to put in and refresh themselves under the palms of Nesptah.

Two rows of houses had formerly divided this rendezvous for the sober and the reckless from the highroad, but they had long since been pulled down and laid level with the ground by successive landlords. Even now some hundreds of laborers might be seen, in spite of the scorching heat, toiling under Arab overseers to demolish a vast ruin of the date of the Ptolemies, and transporting the huge blocks of limestone and marble, and the numberless columns which once had supported the roof of the temple of Zeus, to the eastern shore of the Nile—loading them on to trucks drawn by oxen which hauled them down to the quay to cross the river in flat-bottomed boats.

Amru, the Khaliff's general and representative, was there building his new capital. For this the temples of the old gods were used as quarries, and they supplied not only finely-squared blocks of the most durable stone, but also myriads of Greek columns of every order, which had only to be ferried over and set up again on the other shore; for the Arabs disdained nothing in the way of materials, and made indiscriminate use of blocks and pillars in their own sanctuaries, whether they took them from heathen temples or Christian churches.

The walls of the temple of Imhotep had originally been completely covered with pictures of the gods, and hieroglyphic inscriptions; but the smoke of reeking hearths had long since blackened them, fanatical hands had never been wanting to deface them, and in many places they had been lime-washed and scrawled with Christian symbols or very unchristian mottoes, in Greek and the spoken dialect of the Egyptians. The Arab and his men took their meal in what had been the great hall of the temple—none of them drinking wine excepting the captain of the caravan, who was no Moslem but belonged to the Parsee sect of the Masdakites.

When the old merchant, sitting at a table by himself, had satisfied his hunger, he called this chief and desired him to load the bale containing the hanging on a litter between the two largest baggage camels, and to fasten it securely but so that it could easily be removed.

"It is done," replied the Persian, as he wiped his thick moustache—he was a magnificent man as tall and stalwart as an oak, with light flowing hair like a lion's mane.

"So much the better," said Haschim. "Then come out with me." And he led the way to the palmgrove.

The sun had sunk to rest behind the pyramids, the Necropolis, and the Libyan hills; the eastern sky, and the bare limestone rock of Babylon on the opposite shore were shining with hues of indescribable diversity and beauty. It seemed as though every variety of rose reared by the skilled gardeners of Arsinoe or Naukratis had yielded its hues, from golden buff to crimson and the deepest

wine-tinted violet, to shed their magic glow on the plains, the peaks and gorges of the hills, with the swiftness of thought.

The old man's heart beat high as he gazed at the scene; he drew a deep breath, and laying his slender hand on the Persian's mighty arm he said: "Your prophet, Masdak, taught that it was God's will that no one should think himself more or less chosen than another, and that there should be neither rich nor poor on earth, but that every possession should belong to all in common. Well, look around you here as I do. The man who has not seen this has seen nothing. There is no fairer scene here below and to whom does it belong? To poor simple Salech yonder, whom we allowed to tramp half naked at our camels' heels out of pity.—It is his as much as it is yours or mine or the Khaliff's. God has given us all an equal share in the glory of his works, as your prophet would have it. How much beauty is the common possession of our race! Let us be thankful for it, Rustem, for indeed it is no small matter.—But as to property, such as man may win or lose, that is quite a different matter. We all start on the same race-course, and what you Masdakites ask is that lead should be tied to the feet of the swift so that no one should outstrip another; but that would be.... Well, well! Let us feast our eyes now on the marvellous beauty before us. Look: What just now was the purple of this flower is now deep ruby red; what before was a violet gleam now is the richest amethyst. Do you see the golden fringe to those clouds? It is like a setting.—And all this is ours—is yours and mine—so long as we have eyes and heart to enjoy and be uplifted by it!"

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