

GEORG EBERS

THE BRIDE OF

THE NILE.

VOLUME 02

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CHAPTER VI

Pangs of soul and doubtings of conscience had, in fact, prompted the governor to purchase the hanging and he therefore might have been glad if it had cost him still dearer. The greater the gift the better founded his hope of grace and favor from the recipient! And he had grounds for being uneasy and for asking himself whether he had acted rightly. Revenge was no Christian virtue, but to let the evil done to him by the Melchites go unpunished when the opportunity offered for crushing them was more than he could bring himself to. Nay, what father whose two bright young sons had been murdered, but would have done as he did? That fearful blow had struck him in a vital spot. Since that day he had felt himself slowly dying; and that sense of weakness, those desperate tremors, the discomforts and suffering which blighted every hour of his life, were also to be set down to the account of the Melchite tyrants.

His waning powers had indeed only been kept up by his original vigor and his burning thirst for revenge, and fate had

allowed him to quench it in a way which, as time went on, seemed too absolute to his peace-loving nature. Though not indeed by his act, still with his complicity he saw the Byzantine Empire bereft of the rich province which Caesar had entrusted to his rule, saw the Greeks and everything that bore the name of Melchite driven out of Egypt with ignominy—though he would gladly have prevented it—in many places slain like dogs by the furious populace who hailed the Moslems as their deliverers.

Thus all the evil he had invoked on the murderers of his children and the oppressors and torturers of his people had come upon them; his revenge was complete. But, in the midst of his satisfaction at this strange fulfilment of the fervent wish of years, his conscience had lifted up its voice; new, and hitherto unknown terrors had come upon him. He lacked the strength of mind to be a hero or a reformer. Too great an event had been wrought through his agency, too fearful a doom visited on thousands of men! The Christian Faith—to him the highest consideration—had been too greatly imperilled by his act, for the thought that he had caused all this to be calmly endurable. The responsibility proved too heavy for his shoulders; and whenever he repeated to himself that it was not he who had invited the Arabs into the land, and that he must have been crushed in the attempt to repel them, he could hear voices all round him denouncing him as the man who had surrendered his native land to them, and he fancied himself environed by dangers—believing those who spoke to him of assassins sent forth by the Byzantines to kill him.

—But even more appalling, was his dread of the wrath of Heaven against the man who had betrayed a Christian country to the Infidels. Even his consciousness of having been, all his life long, a right-minded, just man could not fortify him against this terror; there was but one thing which could raise his quelled spirit: the white pillules which had long been as indispensable to him as air and water. The kind-hearted old bishop of Memphis, Plotinus, and his clergy had forgiveness for all; the Patriarch Benjamin, on the contrary, had treated him as a reprobate sentenced to eternal damnation, though at the time of this prelate's exile in the desert he had hailed the Arabs as their deliverers from the tyranny of the Melchites, and though George had principally contributed to his recall and reinstatement, and had therefore counted on his support. And, although the Mukaukas could clearly see through the secondary motives which influenced the Patriarch, he nevertheless believed that Benjamin's office as Shepherd of souls gave him power to close the Gates of Heaven against any sheep in his flock.

The more firmly the Arabs took root in his land, the wiser their rule, and the, more numerous the Egyptian converts from the Cross to the Crescent, the greater he deemed his guilt; and when, after the accomplishment of his work of vengeance—his double treason as the Greeks called it—instead of the wrath of God, everything fell to his lot which men call happiness and the favors of fortune, the superstitious man feared lest this was the wages of the Devil, into whose clutches his hasty compact with

the Moslems had driven so many Christian souls.

He had unexpectedly fallen heir to two vast estates, and his excavators in the Necropolis had found more gold in the old heathen tombs than all the others put together. The Moslem Khaliff and his viceroy had left him in office and shown him friendship and respect; the bulaites—[Town councillors]—of the town had given him the cognomen of "the Just" by acclamation of the whole municipality; his lands had never yielded greater revenues; he received letters from his son's widow in her convent full of happiness over the new and higher aims in life that she had found; his grandchild, her daughter, was a creature whose bright and lovely blossoming was a joy even to strangers; his son's frequent epistles from Constantinople assured him that he was making progress in all respects; and he did not forget his parents; for he was never weary of reporting to them, of his own free impulse, every pleasure he enjoyed and every success he won.

Thus even in a foreign land he had lived with the father and mother who to him were all that was noblest and dearest.

And Paula! Though his wife could not feel warmly towards her the old man regarded her presence in the house as a happy dispensation to which he owed many a pleasant hour, not only over the draughts-board.

All these things might indeed be the wages of Satan; but if indeed it were so, he—George the Mukaukas—would show the Evil One that he was no servant of his, but devoted to the Saviour in whose mercy he trusted. With what fervent gratitude to the

Almighty was his soul filled for the return of such a son! Every impulse of his being urged him to give expression to this feeling; his terrors and gratitude alike prompted him to spend so vast a sum in order to dedicate a matchless gift to the Church of Christ. He viewed himself as a prisoner of war whose ransom has just been paid, as he handed to the merchant the tablet with the order for the money; and when he was carried to bed, and his wife was not yet weary of thanking him for his pious intention, he felt happier and more light-hearted than he had done for many years. Generally he could hear Paula walking up and down her room which was over his; for she went late to rest, and in the silence of the night would indulge in sweet and painful memories. How many loved ones a cruel fate had snatched from her! Father, brother, her nearest relations and friends; all at once, by the hand of the Moslems to whom he had abandoned her native land almost without resistance.

"I do not hear Paula to-night," he remarked, glancing up as though he missed something. "The poor child has no doubt gone to bed early after what passed."

"Leave her alone!" said Neforis who did not like to be interrupted in her jubilant effusiveness, and she shrugged her shoulders angrily. "How she behaved herself again! We have heard a great deal too much about charity, and though I do not want to boast of my own I am very ready to exercise it—indeed, it is no more than my duty to show every kindness to a destitute relation of yours. But this girl! She tries me too far, and after

all I am no more than human. I can have no pleasure in her presence; if she comes into the room I feel as though misfortune had crossed the threshold. Besides!—You never see such things; but Orion thinks of her a great deal more than is good. I only wish she had been safe out of the house!"

"Neforis!" her husband said in mild reproach; and he would have reproved her more sharply but that since he had become a slave to opium he had lost all power of asserting himself vigorously whether in small matters or great.

Ere long the Mukaukas had fallen into an uneasy sleep; but he opened his eyes more frequently than usual. He missed the light footfall overhead to which he had been accustomed for these two years past; but she who was wont to pace the floor above half the night through had not gone to rest as he supposed. After the events of the evening she had indeed retired to her room with tingling cheeks and burning eyes; but the slave-girls, who paid little attention to a guest who was no more than endured and looked on askance by their mistress, had neglected to open her window-shutters after sundown, as she had requested, and the room was oppressively sultry and airless. The wooden shutters felt hot to the touch, so did the linen sheets over the wool mattresses. The water in her jug, and even the handkerchief she took up were warm. To an Egyptian all this would have been a matter of course; but the native of Damascus had always passed the summer in her father's country house on the heights of Lebanon, in cool and lucent shade, and the all-pervading heat

of the past day had been to her intolerable.

Outside it was pleasant now; so without much reflection she pushed open the shutter, wrapped a long, dark-hued kerchief about her head and stole down the steep steps and out through a little side door into the court-yard.

There she drew a deep breath and spread out her arms longingly, as though she would fain fly far, far from thence; but then she dropped them again and looked about her. It was not the want of fresh air alone that had brought her out; no, what she most craved for was to open her oppressed and rebellious heart to another; and here, in the servants' quarters, there were two souls, one of which knew, understood and loved her, while the other was as devoted to her as a faithful dog, and did errands for her which were to be kept hidden from the governor's house and its inhabitants.

The first was her nurse who had accompanied her to Egypt; the other was a freed slave, her father's head groom, who had escorted the women with his son, a lad, giving them shelter when, after the massacre of Abyla, they had ventured out of their hiding-place, and after lurking for some time in the valley of Lebanon, had found no better issue than to fly to Egypt and put themselves under the protection of the Mukaukas, whose sister had been Paula's father's first wife. She herself was the child of his second marriage with a Syrian of high rank, a relation of the Emperor Heraclius, who had died, quite young, shortly after Paula's birth.

Both these servants had been parted from her. Perpetua, the nurse, had been found useful by the governor's wife, who soon discovered that she was particularly skilled in weaving and who had made her superintendent of the slave-girls employed at the loom; the old woman had willingly undertaken the duties though she herself was free-born, for her first point in life was to remain near her beloved foster-child. Hiram too, the groom, and his son had found their place among the Mukaukas' household; in the first instance to take charge of the five horses from her father's stable which had brought the fugitives to Egypt, but afterwards—for the governor was not slow to discern his skill in such matters—as a leech for all sorts of beasts, and as an adviser in purchasing horses.

Paula wanted to speak with them both, and she knew exactly where to find them; but she could not get to them without exposing herself to much that was unpleasant, for the governor's free retainers and their friends, not to mention the guard of soldiers who, now that the gates were closed, were still sitting in parties to gossip; they would certainly not break up for some time yet, since the slaves were only now bringing out the soldiers' supper.

The clatter in the court-yard was unceasing, for every one who was free to come out was enjoying the coolness of the night. Among them there were no slaves; these had been sent to their quarters when the gates were shut; but even in their dwellings voices were still audible.

With a beating heart Paula tried to see and hear all that came within the ken of her keen eyes and ears. The growing moon lighted up half the enclosure, the rest, so far as the shadow fell, lay in darkness. But in the middle of a large semi-circle of free servants a fire was blazing, throwing a fitful light on their brown faces; and now and again, as fresh pine-cones were thrown in, it flared up and illuminated even the darker half of the space before her. This added to her trepidation; she had to cross the court-yard, as she hoped, unseen; for innocent and natural as her proceedings were, she knew that her uncle's wife would put a wrong construction on her nocturnal expedition.

At first Neforis had begged her husband to assist Paula in her search for her father, of whose death no one had any positive assurance. But his wife's urgency had not been needed: the Mukaukas, of his own free will, had for a whole year done everything in his power to learn the truth as to the lost man's end, from Christian or Moslem, till, many months since, Neforis had declared that any further exertions in the matter were mere folly, and her weak-willed husband had soon been brought to share her views and give up the search for the missing hero. He had secured for Paula, not without some personal sacrifice, much of her father's property, had sold the landed estates to advantage, collected outstanding debts wherever it was still possible, and was anxious to lay before her a statement of what he had recovered for her. But she knew that her interests were safe in his hands and was satisfied to learn that, though she was not rich in the eyes

of this Egyptian Croesus, she was possessed of a considerable fortune. When once and again she had asked for a portion of it to prosecute her search, the Mukaukas at once caused it to be paid to her; but the third time he refused, with the best intentions but quite firmly, to yield to her wishes. He said he was her Kyrios and natural guardian, and explained that it was his duty to hinder her from dissipating a fortune which she might some day find a boon or indeed indispensable, in pursuit of a phantom—for that was what this search had long since become.

[Kyrios: The woman's legal proxy, who represented her in courts of justice. His presence gave her equal rights with a man in the eyes of the Law.]

The money she had already spent he had replaced out of his own coffers.

This, she felt, was a noble action; still she urged him again and again to grant her wish, but always in vain. He laid his hand with firm determination on the wealth in his charge and would not allow her another solidus for the sole and dearest aim of her life.

She seemed to submit; but her purpose of spending her all to recover any trace of her lost parent never wavered in her determined soul. She had sold a string of pearls, and for the price, her faithful Hiram had been able first to make a long journey himself and then to send out a number of messengers into various lands. By this time one at least might very well have reached home with some news, and she must see the freed-man.

But how could she get to him undetected? For some minutes

she stood watching and listening for a favorable moment for crossing the court-yard. Suddenly a blaze lighted up a face—it was Hiram's.

At this moment the merry semi-circle laughed loudly as with one voice; she hastily made up her mind—drew her kerchief closer over her face, ran quickly along the darker half of the quadrangle and, stooping low, hurried across the moonlight towards the slaves' quarters.

At the entrance she paused; her heart throbbed violently. Had she been observed? No.—There was not a cry, not a following footstep—every dog knew her; the soldiers who were commonly on guard here had quitted their posts and were sitting with their comrades round the fire.

The long building to the left was the weaving shop and her nurse Perpetua lived there, in the upper story. But even here she must be cautious, for the governor's wife often came out to give her orders to the workwomen, and to see and criticise the produce of the hundred looms which were always in motion, early and late. If she should be seen, one of the weavers might only too probably betray the fact of her nocturnal visit. They had not yet gone to rest, for loud laughter fell upon her ear from the large sheds, open on all sides, which stood over the dyers' vats. This class of the governor's people were also enjoying the cool night after the fierce heat of the day, and the girls too had lighted a fire.

Paula must pass them in full moonshine—but not just yet; and

she crouched close to the straw thatch which stretched over the huge clay water-jars placed here for the slave-girls to get drink from. It cast a dark triangular shadow on the dusty ground that gleamed in the moonlight, and thus screened her from the gaze of the girls, while she could hear and see what was going on in the sheds.

The dreadful day of torture ending in a harsh discord was at end; and behind it she looked back on a few blissful hours full of the promise of new happiness;—beyond these lay a long period of humiliation, the sequel of a terrible disaster. How bright and sunny had her childhood been, how delightful her early youth! For long years of her life she had waked every morning to new joys, and gone to rest every evening with sincere and fervent thanksgivings, that had welled from her soul as freely and naturally as perfume from a rose. How often had she shaken her head in perplexed unbelief when she heard life spoken of as a vale of sorrows, and the lot of man bewailed as lamentable. Now she knew better; and in many a lonely hour, in many a sleepless night, she had asked herself whether He could, indeed, be a kind and fatherly-loving God who could let a child be born and grow up, and fill its soul with every hope, and then bereave it of everything that was dear and desirable—even of hope.

But the hapless girl had been piously brought up; she could still believe and pray; and lately it had seemed as though Heaven would grant that for which her tender heart most longed: the love of a beloved and love-worthy man. And now—now?

There she stood with an inconsolable sense of bereavement—empty-hearted; and if she had been miserable before Orion's return, now she was far more so; for whereas she had then been lonely she was now defrauded—she, the daughter of Thomas, the relation and inmate of the wealthiest house in the country, and close to her, from the rough hewn, dirty dyers' sheds such clear and happy laughter rang out from a troop of wretched slave wenches, always liable to the blows of the overseer's rod, that she could not help listening and turning to look at the girls on whom such an overflow of high spirits and light-heartedness was bestowed.

A large party had collected under the wide palm-thatched roof of the dyeing shed—pretty and ugly, brown and fair, tall and short; some upright and some bent by toil at the loom from early youth, but all young; not one more than eighteen years old. Slaves were capital, bearing interest in the form of work and of children. Every slave girl was married to a slave as soon as she was old enough. Girls and married women alike were employed in the weaving shop, but the married ones slept in separate quarters with their husbands and children, while the maids passed the night in large sleeping-barracks adjoining the worksheds. They were now enjoying the evening respite and had gathered in two groups. One party were watching an Egyptian girl who was scribbling sketches on a tablet; the others were amusing themselves with a simple game. This consisted in each one in turn flinging her shoe over her head. If it flew beyond a

chalk-line to which she turned her back she was destined soon to marry the man she loved; if it fell between her and the mark she must yet have patience, or would be united to a companion she did not care for.

The girl who was drawing, and round whom at least twenty others were crowded, was a designer of patterns for weaving; she had too the gift which had characterized her heathen ancestors, of representing faces in profile, with a few simple lines, in such a way that, though often comically distorted, they were easily recognizable. She was executing these works of art on a wax tablet with a copper stylus, and the others were to guess for whom they were meant.

One girl only sat by herself by the furthest post of the shed, and gazed silently into her lap.

Paula looked on and could understand everything that was going forward, though no coherent sentence was uttered and there was nothing to be heard but laughter—loud, hearty, irresistible mirth. When a girl threw the shoe far enough the youthful crowd laughed with all their might, each one shouting the name of some one who was to marry her successful companion; if the shoe fell within the line they laughed even louder than before, and called out the names of all the oldest and dirtiest slaves. A dusky Syrian had failed to hit the mark, but she boldly seized the chalk and drew a fresh line between herself and the shoe so that it lay beyond, at any rate; and their merriment reached a climax when a number of them rushed up to wipe out

the new line, a saucy, crisp-haired Nubian tossed the shoe in the air and caught it again, while the rest could not cease for delight in such a good joke and cried every name they could think of as that of the lover for whom their companion had so boldly seized a spoke in Fortune's wheel.

Some spirit of mirth seemed to have taken up his quarters in the draughty shed; the group round the sketcher was not less noisy than the other. If a likeness was recognized they were all triumphant, if not they cried the names of this or that one for whom it might be intended. A storm of applause greeted a successful caricature of the severest of the overseers. All who saw it held their sides for laughing, and great was the uproar when one of the girls snatched away the tablet and the rest fell upon her to scuffle for it.

Paula had watched all this at first with distant amazement, shaking her head. How could they find so much pleasure in such folly, in such senseless amusements? When she was but a little child even she, of course, could laugh at nothing, and these grown-up girls, in their ignorance and the narrow limitations of their minds, were they not one and all children still? The walls of the governor's house enclosed their world, they never looked beyond the present moment—just like children; and so, like children, they could laugh.

"Fate," thought she, "at this moment indemnifies them for the misfortune of their birth and for a thousand days of misery, and presently they will go tired and happy to bed. I could envy these

poor creatures! If it were permissible I would join them and be a child again."

The comic portrait of the overseer was by this time finished, and a short, stout wench burst into a fit of uproarious and unquenchable laughter before any of the rest. It came so naturally, too, from the very depths of her plump little body that Paula, who had certainly not come hither to be gay, suddenly caught the infection and had to laugh whether she would or no. Sorrow and anxiety were suddenly forgotten, thought and calculation were far from her; for some minutes she felt nothing but that she, too, was laughing heartily, irrepressibly, like the young healthful human creature that she was. Ah, how good it was thus to forget herself for once! She did not put this into words, but she felt it, and she laughed afresh when the girl who had been sitting apart joined the others, and exclaimed something which was unintelligible to Paula, but which gave a new impetus to their mirth.

The tall slight form of this maiden was now standing by the fire. Paula had never seen her before and yet she was by far the handsomest of them all; but she did not look happy and perhaps was in some pain, for she had a handkerchief over her head which was tied at the top over the thick fair hair as though she had the toothache. As she looked at her Paula recovered herself, and as soon as she began to think merriment was at an end. The slave-girls were not of this mind; but their laughter was less innocent and frank than it had been; for it had found an object which they

would have done better to pass by.

The girl with the handkerchief over her head was a slave too, but she had only lately come into the weaving-sheds after being employed for a long time at needle work under two old women, widows of slaves. She had been brought as an infant from Persia to Alexandria with her mother, by the troops of Heraclius, after the conquest of Chosroes II.; and they had been bought together for the Mukaukas. When her little one was but thirteen the mother died under the yoke to which she was not born; the child was a sweet little girl with a skin as white as the swan and thick golden hair, which now shone with strange splendor in the firelight. Orion had remarked her before his journey, and fascinated by the beauty of the Persian girl, had wished to have her for his own. Servants and officials, in unscrupulous collusion, had managed to transport her to a country-house belonging to the Mukaukas on the other side of the Nile, and there Orion had been able to visit her undisturbed as often as fancy prompted him. The slave-girl, scarcely yet sixteen, ignorant and unprotected, had not dared nor desired to resist her master's handsome son, and when Orion had set out for Constantinople—heedless and weary already of the girl who had nothing to give him but her beauty—Dame Neforis found out her connection with her son and ordered the head overseer to take care that the unhappy girl should not "ply her seductive arts" any more. The man had carried out her instructions by condemning the fair Persian, according to an ancient custom, to have her ears

cut off. After this cruel punishment the mutilated beauty sank into a state of melancholy madness, and although the exorcists of the Church and other thaumaturgists had vainly endeavored to expel the demon of madness, she remained as before: a gentle, good-humored creature, quiet and diligent at her work, under the women who had charge of her, and now in the common workshop. It was only when she was idle that her craziness became evident, and of this the other girls took advantage for their own amusement.

They now led Mandane to the fire, and with farcical reverence requested her to be seated on her throne—an empty color cask, for she suffered under the strange permanent delusion that she was the wife of the Mukaukas George. They laughingly did her homage, craved some favor or made enquiries as to her husband's health and the state of her affairs. Hitherto a decent instinct of reserve had kept these poor ignorant creatures from mentioning Orion's name in her presence, but now a woolly-headed negress, a lean, spiteful hussy, went up to her, and said with a horrible grimace:

"Oh, mistress, and where is your little son Orion?" The crazy girl did not seem startled by the question; she replied very gravely: "I have married him to the emperor's daughter at Constantinople."

"Hey day! A splendid match!" exclaimed the black girl. "Did you know that the young lord was here again? He has brought home his grand wife to you no doubt, and we shall see purple

and crowns in these parts!"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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