

GEORG EBERS

THE BRIDE OF

THE NILE.

VOLUME 05

Georg Ebers

The Bride of the Nile. Volume 05

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CHAPTER XVII

During all these hours Orion had been in the solitude of his own rooms. Next to them was little Mary's sleeping-room; he had not seen the child again since leaving his father's death-bed. He knew that she was lying there in a very feverish state, but he could not so far command himself as to enquire for her. When, now and again, he could not help thinking of her, he involuntarily clenched his fists. His soul was shaken to the foundations; desperate, beside himself, incapable of any thought but that he was the most miserable man on earth—that his father's curse had blighted him—that nothing could undo what had happened—that some cruel and inexorable power had turned his truest friend into a foe and had sundered them so completely that there was no possibility of atonement or of moving him to a word of pardon or a kindly glance—he paced the long room from end to end, flinging himself on his knees at intervals before the divan, and burying his burning face in the soft pillows. From time to time he could pray, but each time he broke off; for what Power in Heaven or on earth could unseal those closed eyes and stir that heart to beat again, that tongue to speak—could vouchsafe to him, the outcast, the one thing for which his soul thirsted and without which he thought he must die: Pardon, pardon, his father's pardon! Now and then he struck his forehead and heart like a man demented, with cries of anguish, curses and lamentations.

About midnight—it was but just twelve hours since that fearful scene, and to him it seemed like as many days—he threw himself on the couch, dressed as he was in the dark mourning garments, which he had half torn off in his rage and despair, and broke out into such loud groans that he himself was almost frightened in the silence of the night. Full of self-pity and horror at his own deep grief, he turned his face to the wall to screen his eyes from the clear, full moon, which only showed him things he did not want to see, while it hurt him.

His torture was beginning to be quite unbearable; he fancied his soul was actually wounded, riven, and torn; it had even occurred to him to seize his sharpest sword and throw himself upon it like Ajax in his fury—and like Cato—and so put a sudden end to this intolerable and overwhelming misery.

He started up for—surely it was no illusion, no mistake—the door of his room was softly opened and a white figure came in with noiseless, ghostly steps. He was a brave man, but his blood ran cold; however, in a moment he recognized his nocturnal visitor as little Mary. She came across the moonlight without speaking, but he exclaimed in a sharp tone:

"What is the meaning of this? What do you want?"

The child started and stood still in alarm, stretching out imploring hands and whispering timidly:

"I heard you lamenting. Poor, poor Orion! And it was I who brought it all on you, and so I could not stay in bed any longer—I must—I could not help..." But she could say no more for sobs. Orion exclaimed:

"Very well, very well: go back to your own room and sleep. I will try not to groan so loud."

He ended his speech in a less rough tone, for he observed that the child had come to see him, though she was ill, with bare feet and only in her night-shift, and was trembling with cold, excitement, and grief. Mary, however, stood still, shook her head, and replied, still weeping though less violently:

"No, no. I shall stop here and not go away till you tell me that you—"

Oh, God, you never can forgive me, but still I must say it, I must."

With a sudden impulse she ran straight up to him, threw her arms round his neck, laid her head against his, and then, as he did not immediately push her away, kissed his cheeks and brow.

At this a strange feeling came over him; he himself did not know what it was, but it was as though something within him yielded and gave way, and the moisture which felt warm in his eyes and on his cheeks was not from the child's tears but his own. This lasted through many minutes of silence; but at last he took the little one's arms from about his neck, saying:

"How hot your hands and your cheeks are, poor thing! You are feverish, and the night air blows in chill—you will catch fresh cold by this mad behavior."

He had controlled his tears with difficulty, and as he spoke, in broken accents, he carefully wrapped her in the black robe he had thrown off and said kindly:

"Now, be calm, and I will try to compose myself. You did not mean any harm, and I owe you no grudge. Now go; you will not feel the draught in the anteroom with that wrap on. Go; be quick."

"No, no," she eagerly replied. "You must let me say what I have to say or I cannot sleep. You see I never thought of hurting you so dreadfully, so horribly—never, never! I was angry with you, to be sure, because— but when I spoke I really and truly did not think of you, but only of poor Paula. You do not know how good she is, and grandfather was so fond of her before you came home; and he was lying there and going to die so soon, and I knew that he believed Paula to be a thief and a liar, and it seemed to me so horrible, so unbearable to see him close his eyes with such a mistake in his mind, such an injustice!—Not for his sake, oh no! but for Paula's; so then I—Oh Orion! the Merciful Saviour is my witness, I could not help it; if I had had to die for it I could not have helped it! I should have died, if I had not spoken!"

"And perhaps it was well that you spoke," interrupted the young man, with a deep sigh. "You see, child, your lost father's miserable brother is a ruined man and it matters little about him; but Paula, who is a thousand times better than I am, has at least had justice done her; and as I love her far more dearly than your little heart can conceive of, I will gladly be friends with you again: nay, I shall be more fond of you than ever. That is nothing great or noble, for I need love—much love to make life tolerable. The best love a man may have I have forfeited, fool that I am! and now dear, good little soul, I could not bear to lose yours! So there is my hand upon it; now, give me another kiss and then go to bed and sleep."

But still Mary would not do his bidding, but only thanked him vehemently and then asked with sparkling eyes:

"Really, truly? Do you love Paula so dearly?" At this point however she suddenly checked herself. "And little Katharina. . ."

"Never mind about that," he replied with a sigh. "And learn a lesson from all this. I, you see, in an hour of recklessness did a wrong thing; to hide it I had to do further wrong, till it grew to a mountain which fell on me and crushed me. Now, I am the most miserable of men and I might perhaps have been the happiest. I have spoilt my own life by my own folly, weakness, and guilt; and I have lost Paula, who is dearer to me than all the other creatures on earth put together. Yes, Mary, if she had been mine, your poor uncle would have been the most enviable fellow in the world, and he might have been a fine fellow, too, a man of great achievements. But as it is!—Well, what is done cannot be undone! Now go to bed child; you cannot understand it all till you are older."

"Oh I understand it already and much better perhaps than you suppose," cried the ten years' old child. "And if you love Paula so much why should not she love you? You are so handsome, you can do so many things, every one likes you, and Paula would have loved you, too, if only . . . Will you promise not to be angry with me, and may I say it?"

"Speak out, little simpleton."

"She cannot owe you any grudge when she knows how dreadfully you are suffering on her account and that you are good at heart, and only that once ever did—you know what. Before you came home, grandfather said a hundred times over what a joy you had been to him all your life through, and now, now . . . Well, you are my uncle, and I am only a stupid little girl; still, I know that it will be just the same with you as it was with the prodigal son in the Bible. You and grandfather parted in anger. . . ."

"He cursed me," Orion put in gloomily.

"No, no! For I heard every word he said. He only spoke of your evil deed in those dreadful words and bid you go out of his sight."

"And what is the difference—Cursed or outcast?"

"Oh! a very great difference! He had good reason to be angry with you; but the prodigal son in the Bible became his father's best beloved, and he had the fatted calf slain for him and forgave him all; and so will grandfather in heaven forgive, if you are good again, as you used to be to him and to all of us. Paula will forgive you, too; I know her—you will see. Katharina loved you of course; but she, dear Heaven! She is almost as much a child as I am; and if only you are kind to her and make her some pretty present she will soon be comforted. She really deserves to be punished for bearing false witness, and her punishment cannot, at any rate, be so heavy as yours."

These words from the lips of an innocent child could not but fall like seed corn on the harrowed field of the young man's tortured soul and refresh it as with morning dew. Long after Mary had gone to rest he lay thinking them over.

CHAPTER XVIII

The funeral rites over the body of the deceased Mukaukas were performed on the day after the morrow. Since the priesthood had forbidden the old heathen practice of mummifying the dead, and even cremation had been forbidden by the Antonines, the dead had to be interred soon after decease; only those of high rank were hastily embalmed and lay in state in some church or chapel to which they had contributed an endowment. Mukaukas George was, by his own desire, to be conveyed to Alexandria and there buried in the church of St. John by his father's side; but the carrier pigeon, by which the news of the governor's death had been sent to the Patriarch, had returned with instructions to deposit the body in the family tomb at Memphis, as there were difficulties in the way of the fulfillment of his wishes.

Such a funeral procession had not been seen there within the memory of man. Even the Moslem viceroy, the great general Amru, came over from the other side of the Nile, with his chief military and civil officers, to pay the last honors to the just and revered governor. Their brown, sinewy figures, and handsome calm faces, their golden helmets and shirts of mail, set with precious stones—trophies of the war of destruction in Persia and Syria—their magnificent horses with splendid trappings, and the authoritative dignity of their bearing made a great impression on the crowd. They arrived with slow and impressive solemnity; they returned like a cloud driven before the storm, galloping homewards from the burial-ground along the quay, and then thundering and clattering over the bridge of boats. Vivid and dazzling lightnings had flashed through the wreaths of white dust that shrouded them, as their gold armor reflected the sun. Verily, these horsemen, each of them worthy to be a prince in his pride, could find it no very hard task to subdue the mightiest realms on earth.

Men and women alike had gazed at them with trembling admiration: most of all at the heroic stature and noble dusky face of Amru, and at the son of the deceased Mukaukas, who, by the Moslem's desire, rode at his side in mourning garb on a fiery black horse.

The handsome youth, and the lordly, powerful man were a pair from whom the women were loth to turn their eyes; for both alike were of noble demeanor, both of splendid stature, both equally skilled in controlling the impatience of their steeds, both born to command. Many a Memphite was more deeply impressed by the head of the famous warrior, erect on a long and massive throat, with its sharply-chiselled aquiline nose and flashing black eyes, than by the more regular features and fine, slightly-waving locks of the governor's son—the last representative of the oldest and proudest race in all Egypt.

The Arab looked straight before him with a steady, commanding gaze; the youth, too, looked up and forwards, but turned from time to time to survey the crowd of mourners. As he caught sight of Paula, among the group of women who had joined the procession, a gleam of joy passed over his pale face, and a faint flush tinged his cheeks; his fixed outlook had knit his brows and had given his features an expression of such ominous sternness that one and another of the bystanders whispered:

"Our gay and affable young lord will make a severe ruler."

The cause of his indignation had not escaped the notice either of his noble companion or of the crowd. He alone knew as yet that the Patriarch had prohibited the removal of his father's remains to Alexandria; but every one could see that the larger portion of the priesthood of Memphis were absent from this unprecedented following. The Bishop alone marched in front of the six horses drawing the catafalque on which the costly sarcophagus was conveyed to the burying-place, in accordance with ancient custom:—Bishop Plotinus, with John, a learned and courageous priest, and a few choristers bearing a crucifix and chanting psalms.

On arriving at the Necropolis they all dismounted, and the barefooted runners in attendance on the Arabs came forward to hold the horses. By the tomb the Bishop pronounced a few warm words of eulogy, after which the thin chant of the choristers sounded trivial and meagre enough; but scarcely

had they ceased when the crowd uplifted its many thousand voices, and a hymn of mourning rang out so loud and grand that this burial ground had scarcely ever heard the like. The remaining ceremonies were hasty and incomplete, since the priests who were indispensable to their performance had not made their appearance.

Amru, whose falcon eye nothing could escape, at once noted the omission and exclaimed, in so loud and inconsiderate a voice that it could be heard even at some distance.

"The dead is made to atone for what the living, in his wisdom, did for his country's good, hand-in-hand with us Moslems."

"By the Patriarch's orders," replied Orion, and his voice quavered, while the veins in his forehead swelled with rage. "But I swear, by my father's soul, that as surely as there is a just God, it shall be an evil day for Benjamin when he closes the gate of Heaven against this noblest of noble souls."

"We carry the key of ours under our own belt," replied the general, striking his deep chest, while he smiled consciously and with a kindly eye on the young man. "Come and see me on Saturday, my young friend; I have something to say to you! I shall expect you at sundown at my house over there. If I am not at home by dusk, you must wait for me."

As he spoke he twisted his hand in his horse's mane and Orion prepared to assist him to mount; but the Arab, though a man of fifty, was too quick for him. He flung himself into the saddle as lightly as a youth, and gave his followers the signal for departure.

Paula had been standing close to the entrance of the tomb with Dame Neforis, and she had heard every word of the dialogue between the two men. Pale, as she beheld him, in costly but simple, flowing, mourning robes, stricken by solemn and manly indignation, it was impossible that she should not confess that the events of the last days had had a powerful effect on the misguided youth.

When Paula had led the grief-worn but tearless widow to her chariot, and had then returned home with Perpetua, the image of the handsome and wrathful youth as he lifted his powerful arm and tightly-clenched fist and shook them in the air, still constantly haunted her. She had not failed to observe that he had seen her standing opposite to him by the open tomb and she had been able to avoid meeting his eye; but her heart had throbbed so violently that she still felt it quivering, she had not succeeded in thinking of the beloved dead with due devotion.

Orion, as yet, had neither come near her in her peaceful retreat, nor sent any messenger to deliver her belongings, and this she thought very natural; for she needed no one to tell her how many claims there must be on his time.

But though, before the funeral, she had firmly resolved to refuse to see him if he came, and had given her nurse full powers to receive from his hand the whole of her property, after the ceremony this line of conduct no longer struck her as seemly; indeed, she considered it no more than her duty to the departed not to repel Orion if he should crave her forgiveness.

And there was another thing which she owed to her uncle. She desired to be the first to point out to Orion, from Philip's point of view, that life was a post, a duty; and then, if his heart seemed opened to this admonition, then—but no, this must be all that could pass between them—then all must be at an end, extinct, dead, like the fires in a sunken raft, like a soap-bubble that the wind has burst, like an echo that has died away—all over and utterly gone.

And as to the counsel she thought of offering to the man she had once looked up to? What right had she to give it? Did he not look like a man quite capable of planning and living his own life in his own strength? Her heart thirsted for him, every fibre of her being yearned to see him again, to hear his voice, and it was this longing, this craving to which she gave the name of duty, connecting it with the gratitude she owed to the dead.

She was so much absorbed in these reflections and doubts that she scarcely heard all the garrulous old nurse was saying as she walked by her side.

Perpetua could not be easy over such a funeral ceremony as this; so different to anything that Memphis had been wont to see. No priests, a procession on horseback, mourners riding, and among them the son even of the dead—while of old the survivors had always followed the body on foot, as was everywhere the custom! And then a mere chirping of crickets at the tomb of such illustrious dead, followed by the disorderly squalling of an immense mob—it had nearly cracked her ears! However, the citizens might be forgiven for that, since it was all in honor of their departed governor!—this thought touched even her resolute heart and brought the tears to her eyes; but it roused her wrath, too, for had she not seen quite humble folk buried in a more solemn manner and with worthier ceremonial than the great and good Mukaukas George, who had made such a magnificent gift to the Church. Oh those Jacobites! They only were capable of such ingratitude, only their heretical prelate could commit such a crime. Every one in the Convent of St. Cecilia, from the abbess down to the youngest novice, knew that the Patriarch had sent word by a carrier pigeon forbidding the Bishop to allow the priests to take part in the ceremony. Plotinus was a worthy man, and he had been highly indignant at these instructions; it was not in his power to contravene them; but at any rate he had led the procession in person, and had not forbidden John's accompanying him. Orion, however, had not looked as though he meant to brook such an insult to his father or let it pass unpunished. And whose arm was long enough to reach the Patriarch's throne if not.... But no, it was impossible! the mere thought of such a thing made her blood run cold. Still, still... And how graciously the Moslem leader had talked with him!—Merciful Heaven! If he were to turn apostate from the holy Christian faith, like so many reprobate Egyptians, and subscribe to the wicked doctrines of the Arabian false prophet! It was a tempting creed for shameless men, allowing them to have half a dozen wives or more without regarding it as a sin. A man like Orion could afford to keep them, of course; for the abbess had said that every one knew that the great Mukaukas was a very rich man, though even the chief magistrate of the city could not fully satisfy himself concerning the enormous amount of property left. Well, well; God's ways were past finding out. Why should He smother one under heaps of gold, while He gave thousands of poor creatures too little to satisfy their hunger!

By the end of this torrent of words the two women had reached the house; and not till then was Paula clear in her own mind: Away, away with the passion which still strove for the mastery, whether it were in deed hatred or love! For she felt that she could not rightly enjoy her recovered freedom, her new and quiet happiness in the pretty home she owed to the physician's thoughtful care, till she had finally given up Orion and broken the last tie that had bound her to his house.

Could she desire anything more than what the present had to offer her? She had found a true haven of rest where she lacked for nothing that she could desire for herself after listening to the admonitions of Philip pus. Round her were good souls who felt with and for her, many occupations for which she was well-fitted, and which suited her tastes, with ample opportunities of bestowing and winning love. Then, a few steps through pleasant shades took her to the convent where she could every day attend divine service among pious companions of her own creed, as she had done in her childhood. She had longed intensely for such food for the spirit, and the abbess—who was the widow of a distinguished patrician of Constantinople and had known Paula's parents—could supply it in abundance. How gladly she talked to the girl of the goodness and the beauty of those to whom she owed her being and whom she had so early lost! She could pour out to this motherly soul all that weighed on her own, and was received by her as a beloved daughter of her old age.

And her hosts—what kind-hearted though singular folks! nay, in their way, remarkable. She had never dreamed that there could be on earth any beings at once so odd and so lovable.

First there was old Rufinus, the head of the house, a vigorous, hale old man, who, with his long silky, snow-white hair and beard, looked something like the aged St. John and something like a warrior grown grey in service. What an amiable spirit of childlike meekness he had, in spite of the rough ways he sometimes fell into. Though inclined to be contradictory in his intercourse with his fellow-men, he was merry and jocose when his views were opposed to theirs. She had never met a

more contented soul or a franker disposition, and she could well understand how much it must fret and gall such a man to live on,—day after day, appearing, in one respect at any rate, different from what he really was. For he, too, belonged to her confession; but, though he sent his wife and daughter to worship in the convent chapel, he himself was compelled to profess himself a Coptic Christian, and submit to the necessity of attending a Jacobite church with all his family on certain holy days, averse as he was to its unattractive form of worship.

Rufinus possessed a sufficient fortune to secure him a comfortable maintenance; and yet he was hard at work, in his own way, from morning till night. Not that his labors brought him any revenues; on the contrary, they led to claims on his resources; every one knew that he was a man of good means, and this would have certainly involved him in persecution if the Patriarch's spies had discovered him to be a Melchite, resulting in exile and probably the confiscation of his goods. Hence it was necessary to exercise caution, and if the old man could have found a purchaser for his house and garden, in a city where there were ten times as many houses empty as occupied, he would long since have set out with all his household to seek a new home.

Most aged people of vehement spirit and not too keen intellect, adopt a saying as a stop-gap or resting-place, and he was fond of using two phrases one of which ran: "As sure as man is the standard of all things" and the other—referring to his house—"As sure as I long to be quit of this lumber." But the lumber consisted of a well-built and very spacious dwellinghouse, with a garden which had commanded a high price in earlier times on account of its situation near the river. He himself had acquired it at very small cost shortly before the Arab incursion, and—so quickly do times change—he had actually bought it from a Jacobite Christian who had been forced by the Melchite Patriarch Cyrus, then in power, to fly in haste because he had found means to convert his orthodox slaves to his confession.

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