

**GEORG EBERS**

THE BRIDE OF

THE NILE.

VOLUME 03

Georg Ebers

**The Bride of the Nile. Volume 03**

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## The Bride of the Nile – Volume 03

### CHAPTER X

After the great excitement of the night Paula had thrown herself on her bed with throbbing pulses. Sleep would not come to her, and so at rather more than two hours after sunrise she went to the window to close the shutters. As she did so she looked out, and she saw Hiram leap into a boat and push the light bark from the shore. She dared neither signal nor call to him; but when the faithful soul had reached open water he looked back at her window, recognized her in her white morning dress and flourished the oar high in the air. This could only mean that he had fulfilled his commission and sold her jewel. Now he was going to the other side to engage the Nabathæan.

When she had closed the shutters and darkened the room she again lay down. Youth asserted its rights the weary girl fell into deep, dreamless slumbers.

When she woke, with the heat drops on her forehead, the sun was nearly at the meridian, only an hour till the Ariston would be served, the Greek breakfast, the first meal in the morning, which the family eat together as they also did the principal meal later in the day. She had never yet failed to appear, and her absence would excite remark.

The governor's household, like that of every Egyptian of rank, was conducted more on the Greek than the Egyptian plan; and this was the case not merely as regarded the meals but in many other things, and especially the language spoken. From the Mukaukas himself down to the youngest member of the family, all spoke Greek among themselves, and Coptic, the old native dialect, only to the servants. Nay, many borrowed and foreign words had already crept into use in the Coptic.

The governor's granddaughter, pretty little Mary, had learnt to speak Greek fluently and correctly before she spoke Coptic, but when Paula had first arrived she could not as yet write the beautiful language of Greece with due accuracy. Paula loved children; she longed for some occupation, and she had therefore volunteered to instruct the little girl in the art. At first her hosts had seemed pleased that she should render this service, but ere long the relation between the Lady Neforis and her husband's niece had taken the unpleasant aspect which it was destined to retain. She had put a stop to the lessons, and the reason she had assigned for this insulting step was that Paula had dictated to her pupil long sentences out of her Orthodox Greek prayerbook. This, it was true, she had done; but without the smallest concealment; and the passages she had chosen had contained nothing but what must elevate the soul of every Christian, of whatever confession.

The child had wept bitterly over her grandmother's fiat, though Paula had always taken the lessons quite seriously, for Mary loved her older companion with all the enthusiasm of a half-grown girl—as a child of ten really is in Egypt; her passionate little heart worshipped the beautiful maiden who was in every respect so far above her, and Paula's arms had opened wide to embrace the child who brought sunshine into the gloomy, chill atmosphere she breathed in her uncle's house. But Neforis regarded the child's ardent love for her Melchite relation as exaggerated and morbid, imperilling perhaps her religious faith; and she fancied that under Paula's influence Mary had transferred her affections from her to the younger woman with added warmth. Nor was this idea wholly fanciful; the child's strong sense of justice could not bear to see her friend misunderstood and slighted, often simply and entirely misjudged and hardly blamed, so Mary felt it her duty, as far as in her lay, to make up for her grandmother's delinquencies in regard to the guest who in the child's eyes was perfection.

But Neforis was not the woman to put up with this demeanor in a child. Mary was her granddaughter, the only child of her lost son, and no one should come between them. So she forbid the little girl to go to Paula's room without an express message, and when a Greek teacher was engaged

for her, her instructions were that she should keep her pupil as much as possible out of the Syrian damsel's way. All this only fanned the child's vehement affection; and tenderly as her grandmother would sometimes caress her—while Mary on her part never failed in dutiful obedience—neither of them ever felt a true and steady warmth of heart towards the other; and for this Paula was no doubt to blame, though against her will and by her mere existence.

Often, indeed, and by a hundred covert hints Dame Neforis gave Paula to understand that she it was who had alienated her grandchild; there was nothing for it but to keep the child for whom she yearned, at a distance, and only rarely reveal to her the abundance of her love. At last her life was so full of grievance that she was hardly able to be innocent with the innocent—a child with the child; Mary was not slow to note this, and ascribed Paula's altered manner to the suffering caused by her grandmother's severity.

Mary's most frequent opportunities of speaking to her friend were just before meals; for at that time no one was watching her, and her grandmother had not forbidden her calling Paula to table. A visit to her room was the child's greatest delight—partly because it was forbidden— but no less because Paula, up in her own room, was quite different from what she seemed with the others, and because they could there look at each other and kiss without interference, and say what ever they pleased. There Mary could tell her as much as she dared of the events in their little circle, but the lively and sometimes hoydenish little girl was often withheld from confessing a misdemeanor, or even an inoffensive piece of childishness, by sheer admiration for one who to her appeared nobler, greater and loftier than other beings.

Just as Paula had finished putting up her hair, Mary, who would rush like a whirlwind even into her grandmother's presence, knocked humbly at the door. She did not fly into Paula's arms as she did into those of Susannah or her daughter Katharina, but only kissed her white arm with fervent devotion, and colored with happiness when Paula bent down to her, pressed her lips to her brow and hair, and wiped her wet, glowing cheeks. Then she took Mary's head fondly between her hands and said:

"What is wrong with you, madcap?"

In fact the sweet little face was crimson, and her eyes swelled as if she had been crying violently.

"It is so fearfully hot," said Mary. "Eudoxia"—her Greek governess— "says that Egypt in summer is a fiery furnace, a hell upon earth. She is quite ill with the heat, and lies like a fish on the sand; the only good thing about it is. . ."

"That she lets you run off and gives you no lessons?"

Mary nodded, but as no lecture followed the confession she put her head on one side and looked up into Paula's face with large roguish eyes.

"And yet you have been crying!—a great girl like you?"

"I—I crying?"

"Yes, crying. I can see it in your eyes. Now confess: what has happened?"

"You will not scold me?"

"Certainly not."

"Well then. At first it was fun, such fun you cannot think, and I do not mind the heat; but when the great hunt had gone by I wanted to go to my grand mother and I was not allowed. Do you know, something very particular had been going on in the fountain-room; and as they all came out again I crept behind Orion into the tablinum—there are such wonderful things there, and I wanted just to frighten him a little; we have often played games together before. At first he did not see me, and as he was bending over the hanging, from which the gem was stolen—I believe he was counting the stones in the faded old thing—I just jumped on to his shoulder, and he was so frightened—I can tell you, awfully frightened! And he turned upon me like a fighting-cock and—and he gave me a box on the ear; such a slap, it is burning now—and all sorts of colors danced before my eyes. He always used to be so nice and kind to me, and to you, too, and so I used to be fond of him—he is my uncle too — but a box on the ears, a slap such as the cook might give to the turnspit—I am too big for that; that

I will certainly not put up with it! Since my last birthday all the slaves and upper servants, too, have had to treat me as a lady and to bow down to me! And now!—it was just here.—How dare he?" She began to cry again and sobbed out: "But that was not all. He locked me into the dark tablinum and left—left me...." her tears flowed faster and faster, "left me sitting there! It was so horrible; and I might have been there now if I had not found a gold plate; I seized my great-grandfather—I mean the silver image of Menas, and hammered on it, and screamed Fire! Then Sebek heard me and fetched Orion, and he let me out, and made such a fuss over me and kissed me. But what is the good of that; my grandfather will be angry, for in my terror I beat his father's nose quite flat on the plate."

Paula had listened, now amused and now grave, to the little girl's story; when she ceased, she once more wiped her eyes and said:

"Your uncle is a man, and you must not play with him as if he were a child like yourself. The reminder you got was rather a hard one, no doubt, but Orion tried to make up for it.—But the great hunt, what was that?"

At this question Mary's eyes suddenly sparkled again. In an instant all her woes were forgotten, even her ancestor's flattened nose, and with a merry, hearty laugh she exclaimed:

"Oh! you should have seen it! You would have been amused too. They wanted to catch the bad man who cut the emerald out of the hanging. He had left his shoes and they had held them under the dogs' noses and then off they went! First they rushed here to the stairs; then to the stables, then to the lodgings of one of the horse-trainers, and I kept close behind, after the terriers and the other dogs. Then they stopped to consider and at last they all ran out at the gate towards the town. I ought not to have gone beyond the court-yard, but—do not be cross with me—it was such fun!—Out they went, along Hapi Street, across the square, and at last into the Goldsmith's Street, and there the whole pack plunged into Gamaliel's shop—the Jew who is always so merry. While he was talking to the others his wife gave me some apricot tartlets; we do not have such good ones at home."

"And did they find the man?" asked Paula, who had changed color repeatedly during the child's story.

"I do not know," said Mary sadly. "They were not chasing any one in particular. The dogs kept their noses to the ground, and we ran after them."

"And only to catch a man, who certainly had nothing whatever to do with the theft.—Reflect a little, Mary. The shoes gave the dogs the scent and they were set on to seize the man who had worn them, but whom no judge had examined. The shoes were found in the hall; perhaps he had dropped them by accident, or some one else may have carried them there. Now think of yourself in the place of an innocent man, a Christian like ourselves, hunted with a pack of dogs like a wild beast. Is it not frightful? No good heart should laugh at such a thing!"

Paula spoke with such impressive gravity and deep sorrow, and her whole manner betrayed such great and genuine distress that the child looked tip at her anxiously, with tearful eyes, threw herself against her, and hiding her face in Paula's dress exclaimed: "I did not know that they were hunting a poor man, and if it makes you so sad, I wish I had not been there! But is it really and truly so bad? You are so often unhappy when we others laugh!" She gazed into Paula's face with wide, wondering eyes through her tears, and Paula clasped her to her, kissed her fondly, and replied with melancholy sweetness:

"I would gladly be as gay as you, but I have gone through so much to sadden me. Laugh and be merry to your heart's content; I am glad you should. But with regard to the poor hunted man, I fear he is my father's freedman, the most faithful, honest soul! Did your exciting hunt drive any one out of the goldsmith's shop?"

Mary shook her head; then she asked:

"Is it Hiram, the stammerer, the trainer, that they are hunting?"

"I fear it is."

"Yes, yes," said the child. "Stay—oh, dear! it will grieve you again, but I think—I think they said—the shoes belonged—but I did not attend. However, they were talking of a groom—a freedman—a stammerer. . . ."

"Then they certainly are hunting down an innocent man," cried Paula with a deep sigh; and she sat down again in front of her toilet-table to finish dressing. Her hands still moved mechanically, but she was lost in thought; she answered the child vaguely, and let her rummage in her open trunk till Mary pulled out the necklace that had been bereft of its gem, and hung it round her neck. Just then there was a knock at the door and Katharina, the widow Susannah's little daughter, came into the room. The young girl, to whom the governor's wife wished to marry her tall son scarcely reached to Paula's shoulder, but she was plump and pleasant to look upon; as neat as if she had just been taken out of a box, with a fresh, merry lovable little face. When she laughed she showed a gleaming row of small teeth, set rather wide apart, but as white as snow; and her bright eyes beamed on the world as gladly as though they had nothing that was not pleasing to look for, innocent mischief to dream of. She too, tried to win Paula's favor; but with none of Mary's devoted and unvarying enthusiasm. Often, to be sure, she would devote herself to Paula with such stormy vehemence that the elder girl was forced to be repellent; then, on the other hand, if she fancied her self slighted, or treated more coolly than Mary, she would turn her back on Paula with sulky jealousy, temper and pouting. It always was in Paula's power to put an end to the "Water-wagtails tantrums"—which generally had their comic side—by a kind word or kiss; but without some such advances Katharina was quite capable of indulging her humors to the utmost.

On the present occasion she flew into Paula's arm, and when her friend begged, more quietly than usual that she would allow her first to finish dressing, she turned away without any display of touchiness and took the necklace from Mary's hand to put it on herself. It was of fine workmanship, set with pearls, and took her fancy greatly; only the empty medallion from which Hiram had removed the emerald with his knife spoiled the whole effect. Still, it was a princely jewel, and when she had also taken from the chest a large fan of ostrich feathers she showed off to her play-fellow, with droll, stiff dignity, how the empress and princesses at Court curtsied and bowed graciously to their inferiors. At this they both laughed a great deal. When Paula had finished her toilet and proceeded to take the necklace off Katharina, the empty setting, which Hiram's knife had bent, caught in the thin tissue of her dress. Mary disengaged it, and Paula tossed the jewel back into the trunk.

While she was locking the box she asked Katharina whether she had met Orion.

"Orion!" repeated the younger girl, in a tone which implied that she alone had the right to enquire about him. "Yes, we came upstairs together; he went to see the wounded man. Have you anything to say to him?"

She crimsoned as she spoke and looked suspiciously at Paula, who simply replied: "Perhaps," and then added, as she hung the ribbon with the key round her neck: "Now, you little girls, it is breakfast time; I am not going down to-day."

"Oh, dear!" cried Mary disappointed, "my grandfather is ailing and grandmother will stay with him; so if you do not come I shall have to sit alone with Eudoxia; for Katharina's chariot is waiting and she must go home at once. Oh! do come. Just to please me; you do not know how odious Eudoxia can be when it is so hot."

"Yes, do go down," urged Katharina. "What will you do up hereby yourself? And this evening mother and I will come again."

"Very well," said Paula. "But first I must go to see the invalids."

"May I go with you?" asked the Water wagtail, coaxingly stroking Paula's arm. But Mary clapped her hands, exclaiming:

"She only wants to go to Orion—she is so fond of him. . . ."

Katharina put her hand over the child's mouth, but Paula, with quickened breath, explained that she had very serious matters to discuss with Orion; so Katharina, turning her back on her with a hasty

gesture of defiance, sulkily went down stairs, while Mary slipped down the bannister rail. Not many days since, Katharina, who was but just sixteen, would gladly have followed her example.

Paula meanwhile knocked at the first of the sickrooms and entered it as softly as the door was opened by a nursing-sister from the convent of St. Katharine. Orion, whom she was seeking, had been there, but had just left.

In this first room lay the leader of the caravan; in that beyond was the crazy Persian. In a sitting-room adjoining the first room, which, being intended for guests of distinction, was furnished with royal magnificence, sat two men in earnest conversation: the Arab merchant and Philippus the physician, a young man of little more than thirty, tall and bony, in a dress of clean but very coarse stuff without any kind of adornment. He had a shrewd, pale face, out of which a pair of bright black eyes shone benevolently but with keen vivacity. His large cheek-bones were much too prominent; the lower part of his face was small, ugly and, as it were, compressed, while his high broad forehead crowned the whole and stamped it as that of a thinker, as a fine cupola may crown an insignificant and homely structure.

This man, devoid of charm, though his strongly-characterized individuality made it difficult to overlook him even in the midst of a distinguished circle, had been conversing eagerly with the Arab, who, in the course of their two-days' acquaintance, had inspired him with a regard which was fully reciprocated. At last Orion had been the theme of their discourse, and the physician, a restless toiler who could not like any man whose life was one of idle enjoyment, though he did full justice to his brilliant gifts and well-applied studies, had judged him far more hardly than the older man. To the leech all forms of human life were sacred, and in his eyes everything that could injure the body or soul of a man was worthy of destruction. He knew all that Orion had brought upon the hapless Mandane, and how lightly he had trifled with the hearts of other women; in his eyes this made him a mischievous and criminal member of society. He regarded life as an obligation to be discharged by work alone, of whatever kind, if only it were a benefit to society as a whole. And such youths as Orion not only did not recognize this, but used the whole and the parts also for base and selfish ends. The old Moslem, on the contrary, viewed life as a dream whose fairest portion, the time of youth, each one should enjoy with alert senses, and only take care that at the waking which must come with death he might hope to find admission into Paradise. How little could man do against the iron force of fate! That could not be forefended by hard work; there was nothing for it but to take up a right attitude, and to confront and meet it with dignity. The bark of Orion's existence lacked ballast; in fine weather it drifted wherever the breeze carried it, He himself had taken care to equip it well; and if only the chances of life should freight it heavily—very heavily, and fling it on the rocks, then Orion might show who and what he was; he, Haschim, firmly believed that his character would prove itself admirable. It was in the hour of shipwreck that a man showed his worth.

Here the physician interrupted him to prove that it was not Fate, as imagined by Moslems, but man himself who guided the bark of life—but at this moment Paula looked into the room, and he broke off. The merchant bowed profoundly, Philippus respectfully, but with more embarrassment than might have been expected from the general confidence of his manner. For some years he had been a daily visitor in the governor's house, and after carefully ignoring Paula on her first arrival, since Dame Neforis had taken to treating her so coolly he drew her out whenever he had the opportunity. Her conversations with him had now become dear and even necessary to her, though at first his dry, cutting tone had displeased her, and he had often driven her into a corner in a way that was hard to bear. They kept her mind alert in a circle which never busied itself with anything but the trivial details of family life in the decayed city, or with dogmatic polemics—for the Mukaukas seldom or never took part in the gossip of the women.

The leech never talked of daily events, but expressed his views as to other and graver subjects in life, or in books with which they were both familiar; and he had the art of eliciting replies from her which he met with wit and acumen. By degrees she had become accustomed to his bold mode of

thought, sometimes, it is true, too recklessly expressed; and the gifted girl now preferred a discussion with him to any other form of conversation, recognizing that a childlike and supremely unselfish soul animated this thoughtful reservoir of all knowledge. Almost everything she did displeased her uncle's wife, and so, of course, did her familiar intercourse with this man, whose appearance certainly had in it nothing to attract a young girl.—The physician to a family of rank was there to keep its members in good health, and it was unbecoming in one of them to converse with him on intimate terms as an equal. She reproached Paula— whose pride she was constantly blaming—for her unseemly condescension to Philippus; but what chiefly annoyed her was that Paula took up many a half-hour which otherwise Philippus would have devoted to her husband; and in him and his health her life and thoughts were centred.

The Arab at once recognized his foe of the previous evening; but they soon came to a friendly understanding—Paula confessing her folly in holding a single and kindly-disposed man answerable for the crimes of a whole nation. Haschim replied that a right-minded spirit always came to a just conclusion at last; and then the conversation turned on her father, and the physician explained to the Arab that she was resolved never to weary of seeking the missing man.

"Nay, it is the sole aim and end of my life," cried the girl.

"A great mistake, in my opinion," said the leech. But the merchant differed: there were things, he said, too precious to be given up for lost, even when the hope of finding them seemed as feeble and thin as a rotten reed.

"That is what I feel!" cried Paula. "And how can you think differently, Philip? Have I not heard from your own lips that you never give up all hope of a sick man till death has put an end to it? Well, and I cling to mine—more than ever now, and I feel that I am right. My last thought, my last coin shall be spent in the search for my father, even without my uncle and his wife, and in spite of their prohibition."

"But in such a task a young girl can hardly do without a man's succor," said the merchant. "I wander a great deal about the world, I speak with many foreigners from distant lands, and if you will do me the honor, pray regard me as your coadjutor, and allow me to help you in seeking for the lost hero."

"Thanks—I fervently thank you!" cried Paula, grasping the Moslem's hand with hearty pleasure. "Wherever you go bear my lost father in mind; I am but a poor, lonely girl, but if you find him. . ."

"Then you will know that even among the Moslems there are men. . ."

"Men who are ready to show compassion and to succor friendless women!" interrupted Paula.

"And with good success, by the blessing of the Almighty," replied the Arab. "As soon as I find a clue you shall hear from me; now, however, I must go across the Nile to see Amru the great general; I go in all confidence for I know that my poor, brave Rustem is in good hands, friend Philippus. My first enquiries shall be made in Fostat, rely upon that, my daughter."

"I do indeed," said Paula with pleased emotion. "When shall we meet again?"

"To-morrow, or the morning after at latest."

The young girl went up to him and whispered: "We have just heard of a clue; indeed, I hope my messenger is already on his way. Have you time to hear about it now?"

"I ought long since to have been on the other shore; so not to-day, but to-morrow I hope." The Arab shook hands with her and the physician, and hastily took his leave.

Paula stood still, thinking. Then it struck her that Hiram was now on the further side of the Nile, within the jurisdiction of the Arab ruler, and that the merchant could perhaps intercede for him, if she were to tell him all she knew. She felt the fullest confidence in the old man, whose kind and sympathetic face was still visible to her mind's eye, and without paying any further heed to the physician she went quickly towards the door of the sick-room. A crucifix hung close by, and the nun had fallen on her knees before it, praying for her infidel patient, and beseeching the Good Shepherd

to have mercy on the sheep that was not of His fold. Paula did not venture to disturb the worshipper, who was kneeling just in the narrow passage; so some minutes elapsed before the leech, observing her uneasiness, came out of the larger room, touched the nun on the shoulder, and said in a low voice of genuine kindness:

"One moment, good Sister. Your pious intercession will be heard—but this damsel is in haste." The nun rose at once and made way, sending a wrathful glance after Paula as she hurried down the stairs.

At the door of the court-yard she looked out and about for the Arab, but in vain. Then she enquired of a slave who told her that the merchant's horse had waited for him at the gate a long time, that he had just come galloping out, and by this time must have reached the bridge of boats which connected Memphis with the island of Rodah and, beyond the island, with the fort of Babylon and the new town of Fostat.

## CHAPTER XI

Paula went up-stairs again, distressed and vexed with herself. Was it the heat that had enervated her and robbed her of the presence of mind she usually had at her command? She herself could not understand how it was that she had not at once taken advantage of the opportunity to plead to Haschim for her faithful retainer. The merchant might have interested himself for Hiram.

The slave at the gate had told her that he had not yet been taken; the time to intercede, then, had not yet come. But she was resolved to do so, to draw the wrath of her relations down on herself, and, if need should be, to relate all she had seen in the course of the night, to save her devoted servant. It was no less than her duty: still, before humiliating Orion so deeply she would warn him. The thought of charging him with so shameful a deed pained her like the need for inflicting an injury on herself. She hated him, but she would rather have broken the most precious work of art than have branded him—him whose image still reigned in her heart, supremely glorious and attractive.

Instead of following Mary to breakfast, or offering herself as usual to play draughts with her uncle, she went back to the sick-room. To meet Neforis or Orion at this moment would have been painful, indeed odious to her. It was long since she had felt so weary and oppressed. A conversation with the physician might perhaps prove refreshing; after the various agitations of the last few hours she longed for something, be it what it might, that should revive her spirits and give a fresh turn to her thoughts.

In the Masdakite's room the Sister coldly asked her what she wanted, and who had given her leave to assist in tending the sufferers. The leech, who at that moment was moistening the bandage on the wounded man's head, at this turned to the nun and informed her decidedly that he desired the young girl's assistance in attending on both his patients. Then he led the way sitting-room, saying in subdued into the adjoining tones:

"For the present all is well. Let us rest here a little while."

She sat down on a divan, and he on a seat opposite, and Philippus began:

"You were seeking handsome Orion just now, but you must. . . ."

"What?" she asked gravely. "And I would have you to know that the son of the house is no more to me than his mother is. Your phrase 'Handsome Orion' seems to imply something that I do not again wish to hear. But I must speak to him, and soon, in reference to an important matter."

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