

GEORG EBERS

THE BRIDE OF

THE NILE.

VOLUME 10

Georg Ebers

The Bride of the Nile. Volume 10

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CHAPTER XIII

The Vekeel, like the Persian lovers, did not allow the heat of the day to interfere with his plans. He regarded the governor's house as his own; all he found there aroused, not merely his avarice, but his interest. His first object was to find some document which might justify his proceedings against Orion and the sequestration of his estates, in the eyes of the authorities at Medina.

Great schemes were brewing there; if the conspiracy against the Khaliff Omar should succeed, he had little to fear; and the greater the sum he could ere long forward to the new sovereign, the more surely he could count on his patronage—a sum exceeding, if possible, the largest which his predecessor had ever cast into the Khaliff's treasury.

He went from room to room with the curiosity and avidity of a child, touching everything, testing the softness of the pillows, peeping into scrolls which he did not understand, tossing them aside, smelling at the perfumes in the dead woman's rooms, and the medicines she had used. He showed his teeth with delight when he found in her trunks some costly jewels and gold coins, stuck the finest of her diamond rings on his finger, already covered with gems, and then eagerly searched every corner of the rooms which Orion had occupied.

His interpreter, who could read Greek, had to translate every document he found that did not contain verses. While he listened, he clawed and strummed on the young man's lyre and poured out the scented oil which Orion had been wont to use to smear it over his beard. In front of the bright silver mirror he could not cease from making faces.

To his great disgust he could find nothing among the hundred objects and trifles that lay about to justify suspicion, till, just as he was leaving the room, he noticed in a basket near the writing-table some discarded tablets. He at once pointed them out to the interpreter and, though there was but little to read on the Diptychon,—[Double writing-tablets, which folded together]—it seemed important to the negro for it ran as follows:

"Orion, the son of George, to Paula the daughter of Thomas!

"You have heard already that it is now impossible for me to assist in the rescue of the nuns. But do not misunderstand me. Your noble, and only too well-founded desire to lend succor to your fellow-believers would have sufficed. . ."

From this point the words written on the wax were carefully effaced, and hardly a letter was decipherable; indeed, there were so few lines that it seemed as though the letter had never been ended—which was the fact.

Though it gave the Vekeel no inculpatory evidence against Orion it pointed to his connection with the guilty parties: Paula, doubtless, had been concerned in the scheme which had cost the lives of so many brave Moslems. The negro had learnt, through the money-changer at Fostat, that she was on terms of close intimacy with the Mukaukas' son and had entrusted her property to his stewardship. They must both be accused as accomplices in the deed, and the document proved Orion's knowledge of it, at any rate.

Plotinus, the bishop, at whose instigation the fugitives had been chased, could fill up what the damsel might choose to conceal.

He had started to follow the patriarch immediately after the pursuers had set out, and had only returned from Upper Egypt early on the previous day. On his arrival he had forwarded to the Vekeel two indictments brought against Orion by the prelate: the first relating to the evasion of the nuns; the other to the embezzlement of a costly emerald; the rightful property of the church. These accusations

were what had encouraged the Negro to confiscate the young man's estate, particularly as the bitter tone of the patriarch's document sufficiently proved that in him he had found an ally.

Paula must next be placed in safe custody, and he had no doubt whatever that her statement would incriminate Orion in some degree. He would gladly have cross-examined her at once, but he had other matters in hand to-day.

The longest part of his task was ransacking the treasurer's office; Nilus himself had to conduct the search. Everything which he pointed out as a legal document, title-deed, contract for purchase or sale, revenue account or the like, was at once placed in oxcarts or on camels, with the large sums of gold and silver coin, and carried across the river under a strong escort. All the more antique deeds and the family archives, the Vekeel left untouched. He was indeed an indefatigable man, for although these details kept him busy the whole day, he allowed himself no rest nor did he once ask for the refreshment of food or a cooling draught. As the day went on he enquired again and again for the bishop, with increasing impatience and irritation. It would have been his part to wait on the patriarch, but who was Plotinus? Thin-skinned, like all up-starts in authority, he took the bishop's delay as an act of personal contumely. But the shepherd of the flock at Memphis was not a haughty prelate, but a very humble and pious minister. His superior, the patriarch, had entrusted him with an important mission to Amru or his lieutenant, and yet he could let the Vekeel wait in vain, and not even send him a message of explanation; in the afternoon, however, his old housekeeper dispatched the acolyte who was attached to his person to seek Philippus. Her master, a hale and vigorous man, had gone to bed by broad day-light a few hours after his return home, and had not again left it. He was hot and thirsty, and did not seem fully conscious of where he was or of what was happening.

Plotinus had always maintained that prayer was the Christian's best medicine; still, as his poor body had become alarmingly heated the old woman ventured to send for the physician; but the messenger came back saying that Philippus was absent on a journey. This was in fact the case: He had quitted Memphis in obedience to a letter from Haschim. The merchant's unfortunate son was not getting better. There seemed to be an injury to some internal organ, which threatened his life. The anxious father besought the leech, in whom he had the greatest confidence, to hasten to Djidda, there to examine the sufferer and undertake the case. At the same time he desired that Rustem should join him as soon as his health would permit.

This letter—which ended with greetings to Paula, for whose father he was making diligent search—agitated Philippus greatly. How could he leave Memphis at a time of such famine and sickness?—And Dame Joanna and her daughter!

On the other hand he was much drawn to get away on Paula's account—away, far away; and then how gladly would he do his best to save that fine old man's son. In spite of all this he would have remained, but that his old friend, quite unexpectedly, took Haschim's side of the question and implored him to make the journey. He would make it his business and his pleasure to take charge of the women in Rufinus' house; Philip's assistant could fill his place at the bedside of many of the sick, and the rest could die without him. Had not he himself said that there was no remedy for the disease? Again, Philip had said not long since that there could be no peace for him within reach of Paula: here was a favorable opportunity for escape without attracting remark, and at the same time for doing a work of the truest charity.

So Philippus had yielded, and had started on his journey with very mixed feelings.

Horapollo did not devote any particular attention to his personal comfort; but in one respect he took especial care of himself. He had great difficulty in walking and, as he loved to breathe the fresh air at sundown, and sometimes to study the stars at a late hour, he kept an ass of the best and finest breed. He did not hesitate to pay a high price for such a beast if it really answered his requirements; that is to say if it were strong, surefooted, gentle, and light-colored. His father and grandfather, priests of Isis, had always ridden white asses, and so he would do the same.

During the last few sultry weeks he had rarely gone out of doors, and to-day he waited till the hour before sunset before starting to keep his promise.

Robed in snowy-white linen, with new sandals on his feet, freshly shaven, and protected from the sun's rays by a crisply curled, flowing wig, after the manner of his fathers, as well as by an umbrella, he mounted his beautiful white ass in the conviction that he had done his best for his outer man, and set forth, followed by his black slave trotting on foot.

It was not yet dark when he stopped at the house of Rufinus. His heart had not beat so high for many a day.

"I feel as if I had come courting," said he, laughing at himself. "Well, and I really am come to propose an alliance for the rest of my life! Still, curiosity, one would think, might be shed with the hair and the teeth!" However, it still clung to him, and he could not deny to himself that he was very curious as to the person whom he hated, though he had never seen her, simply because she was the daughter of a patrician and a prefect, and had made his Philippus miserable. As he was dismounting, a graceful young girl and an older woman, in very costly though simple dresses, came through the garden. These must be the waterwagtail, and Orion's Byzantine guest.—How annoying! So many women at once!

Their presence here could only embarrass and disturb him—a lonely student unused to the society of women. However, there was no help for it; and the new-comers were not so bad after all.

Katharina was a very attractive, pretty little mouse, and even without her millions much too good for the libertine Orion. The matron, who had a kind, pleasant face, was exactly what Philippus had described her. But then—and this spoilt all—in their presence he must not allude to the death of Rufinus, so that he could not mention his proposed arrangement. He had swallowed all that dust, and borne that heat for nothing, and to-morrow he must ignominiously go through it all again!

The first people he met were a handsome young couple: Rustem and Mandane. There could be no doubt as to their identity; so he went up to them and gave Rustem the merchant's message, offering in Philip's name to advance the money for the journey. But the Masdakite patted his sleeve, in which he carried a good round sum in gold pieces, and exclaimed cheerily:

"It is all here, and enough for two travellers to the East.—My little wife, by your leave; the time has come, little pigeon! Off we go, homeward bound!"

The huge fellow shouted it out in his deep voice with such effervescent contentment, and the pretty girl, as she looked up at him, was so glad, so much in love, and so grateful, that it quite cheered the old man; and he, who read an omen in every incident, accepted this meeting as of good augury at his first entering the house which was probably to be his home.

His visit went on as well as it had begun, for he was welcomed very warmly both by the widow and daughter of Rufinus. Pulcheria at once pushed forward her father's arm-chair and placed a pillow behind his back, and she did it so quietly, so simply, and so amiably that it warmed his old heart, and he said to himself that it would be almost too much of a good thing to have such care given him every day and every hour.

He could not forbear from a kindly jest with the young girl over her attentions, and Martina at once entered into the joke. She had seen him coming on his fine ass; she praised the steed, and then refused to believe that the rider was past eighty. His news of Philip's departure was regretted by all, and he was delighted to perceive that Pulcheria seemed startled and presently shrank into the background. What a sweet, pure, kind face the child had—and pretty withal; she must and should be his little daughter; and all the while he was talking, or listening to Katharina's small jokes and a friendly catechism from Martina and Dame Joanna, in his mind's eye he saw Philippus and that dear little creature as man and wife, surrounded by pretty children playing all about him.

He had come to comfort and to condole, and lo! he was having as pleasant an hour as he had known in a long time.

He and the other visitors had been received in the vindarium, which was now brightly lighted up, and now and then he glanced at the doors which opened on this, the centre of the house, trying to imagine what the different rooms should by-and-by be used for.

But he heard a light step behind him; Martina rose, the water-wagtail hurried to meet the new-comer, and there appeared on the scene the tall figure of a girl dressed in mourning-robcs. She greeted the matron with distinguished dignity, cast a cordial glance of sympathetic intelligence to Joanna and Pulcheria, and when the mistress of the house told her who the old man was, she went up to him and held out her hand—a cool, slender hand, as white as marble; the true patrician hand.

Yes, she was beautiful, wonderfully beautiful! He could hardly remember ever to have seen her equal. A spotless masterpiece of the Creator's hand, made like some unapproachable goddess, to command the worship of subject adorers; however, she must renounce all hope of his, for those marble features, all the whiter by contrast with her black dress, had no attraction for him. No warming glow shone in those proud eyes; and under that lordly bosom beat no loving or lovable heart; he shivered at the touch of her fingers, and her presence, he thought, had a chilling and paralyzing influence on all the party.

This was, in fact, the case.

Paula had been sent for to see the senator's wife and Katharina. Martina, thought she, had come out of mere curiosity, and she had a preconceived dislike to any one connected with Heliodora. She had lost her confidence in the water-wagtail, for only two days ago the acolyte in personal attendance on the bishop—and whose child Rufinus had cured of a lame foot—had been to the house to warn Joanna against the girl. Katharina, he told her, had a short while since betrayed to Plotinus some important secret relating to her husband, and the bishop had immediately gone over to Fostat. It was hard to believe such a thing of any friend, still, the girl who, by her own confession, had been so ready to play the part of spy in the neighboring garden, was the only person who would have told the prelate what plan was in hand for the rescue of the sisters. The acolyte's positive statement, indeed, left no room for doubt.

It was not in Paula's nature to think ill of others; but in this case her candid spirit, incapable of falsehood, would not suffer her to be anything but cool to the child; the more effusively Katharina clung to her, the more icily Paula repelled her.

The old man saw this, and he concluded that this mien and demeanor were natural to Paula at all times patrician haughtiness, cold-hearted selfishness, the insolent and boundless pride of the race he loathed— noble by birth alone—stood before him incarnate. He hated the whole class, and he hated this specimen of the class; and his aversion increased tenfold as he remembered what woe this cold siren had wrought for the son of his affections and might bring on him if she should thwart his favorite project. Sooner would he end his days in loneliness, parted even from Philippus, than share his home, his table, and his daily life with this woman, who could repel the sincerely-meant caresses of that pretty, childlike, simple little Katharina with such frigid and supercilious haughtiness. The mere sight of her at meals would embitter every mouthful; only to hear her domineering tones in the next room would spoil his pleasure in working; the touch of her cold hand as she bid him good-night would destroy his night's rest!

Here and now her presence was more than he could bear. It was an offense to him, a challenge; and if ever he had wished to clear her out of his path and the physician's—by force, if need should be—the idea wholly possessed him now.

Irritated and provoked, he took leave of all the others, carefully avoiding a glance even at Paula, though, after he rose, she went up to him on purpose to say a few pleasant words, and to assure him how highly she esteemed his adopted son.

Pulcheria escorted him through the garden and he promised her to return on the morrow, or the day after, and then she must take care that he found her and her mother alone, for he had no fancy to allow Paula to thrust her pride and airs under his nose a second time.

He angrily rejected Pulcheria's attempts to take her friend's part, and he trotted home again, mumbling curses between his old lips.

Martina, meanwhile, had made friends with Paula in her genial, frank way. She had met her parents in time past in Constantinople and spoke of them with heart-felt warmth. This broke the ice between them, and when Martina spoke of Orion—her 'great Sesostris'—of the regard and popularity he had enjoyed in Constantinople, and then, with due recognition and sympathy, of his misfortune, Paula felt drawn towards her indeed. Her reserve vanished entirely, and the conversation between the new acquaintances became more and more eager, intimate, and delightful.

When they parted both felt that they could only gain by further intercourse. Paula was called away at the very moment of leave-taking, and left the room with warm expressions intended only for the matron: "Not good-bye—we must meet again. But of course it is my part, as the younger, to go to you!" And she was no sooner gone than Martina exclaimed:

"What a lovely creature! The worthy daughter of a noble father! And her mother! O dame Joanna! A sweeter being has rarely graced this miserable world; she was born to die young, she was only made to bloom and fade!" Then, turning to Katharina, she went on: with kindly reproof. "Evil tongues gave me a very false idea of this girl. 'A silver kernel in a golden shell,' says the proverb, but in this case both alike are of gold.—Between you two—good God!—But I know what has blinded your clear eyes, poor little kitten. After all, we all see things as we wish to see them. I would lay a wager, dame Joanna, that you are of my opinion in thinking the fair Paula a perfectly noble creature. Aye, a noble creature; it is an expressive word and God knows! How seldom is it a true one? It is one I am little apt to use, but I know no other for such as she is, and on her it is not ill-bestowed."

"Indeed it is not!" answered Joanna with warm assent; but Martina sighed, for she was thinking to herself! "Poor Heliodora! I cannot but confess that Paula is the only match for my 'great Sesostris.' But what in Heaven's name will become of that poor, unfortunate, love-sick little woman?"

All this flashed through her quick brain while Katharina was trying to justify herself, and asserting that she fully recognised Paula's great qualities, but that she was proud, fearfully proud—she had given Martina herself some evidence of that.

At this Pulcheria interposed in zealous defense of her friend. She, however, had hardly begun to speak when she, too, was interrupted, for men's voices were heard in loud discussion in the vestibule, and Perpetua suddenly rushed in with a terrified face, exclaiming, heedless of the strangers: "Oh Dame Joanna! Here is another, dreadful misfortune! Those Arab devils have come again, with an interpreter and a writer. And they have been sent—Merciful Saviour, is it possible?—they have brought a warrant to take away my poor dear child, to take her to prison—to drag her all through the city on foot and throw her into prison."

The faithful soul sobbed aloud and covered her face with her hands. Terror fell upon them all; Joanna left the viridarium in speechless dismay, and Martina exclaimed:

"What a horrible, vile country! Good God, they are even falling on us women. Children, children—give me a seat, I feel quite ill.—In prison! that beautiful, matchless creature dragged through the streets to prison. If the warrant is all right she must go—she must! Not an angel from heaven could save her. But that she should be marched through the town, that noble and splendid creature, as if she were a common thief—it is not to be borne. So much as one woman can do for another at any rate shall be done, so long as I am here to stand on two feet!—Katharina, child, do not you understand? Why do you stand gaping at me as if I were a feathered ape? What do your fat horses eat oats for? What, you do not understand me yet? Be off at once, this minute, and have the horses put in the large closed chariot in which I came here, and bring it to the door.—Ah! At last you see daylight; now, take to your heels and fly!"

And she clapped her hands as if she were driving hens off a garden-bed; Katharina had no alternative but to obey.

Martina then felt for her purse, and when she had found it she added confidently:

"Thank God! I can talk to these villains! This is a language," and she clinked the gold pieces, intelligible to all. "Come, where are the rascals?"

The universal tongue had the desired effect. The chief of the guard allowed it to persuade him to convey Paula to prison in the chariot, and to promise that she should find decent accommodation there, while he also granted old Betta the leave she insisted on with floods of tears, to share the girl's captivity.

Paula maintained her dignity and composure under this unexpected shock. Only when it came to taking leave of Pulcheria and Mary, who clung to her in frantic grief and begged to go with her and Betta to prison, she could not restrain her tears.

The scribe had informed her that she was charged by Bishop Plotinus with having plotted the escape and flight of the nuns, and Joanna's knees trembled under her when Paula whispered in her ear:

"Beware of Katharina! No one else could have betrayed us; if she has also revealed what Rufinus did for the sisters we must deny it, positively and unflinchingly. Fear nothing: they will get not a word out of me." Then she added aloud: "I need not beg you to remember me lovingly; thanks to you both—the warmest, deepest thanks for all.... You, Pul. . . ." And she clasped the mother and daughter to her bosom, while Mary, clinging to her, hid her little face in her skirts, weeping bitterly. . . . "You, Dame Joanna, took me in, a forlorn creature, and made me happy till Fate fell on us all—you know, ah! you know too well. —The kindness you have shown to me show now to my little Mary. And there is one thing more—here comes the interpreter again!—A moment yet, I beg!—If the messenger should return and bring news of my father or, my God! my God!—my father himself, let me know, or bring him to me!—Or, if I am dead by the time he comes, tell him that to find him, to see him once more, was my heart's dearest wish. And beg my father," she breathed the words into Joanna's ear, "to love Orion as a son. And tell them both that I loved them to the last, deeply, perfectly, beyond words!" Then she added aloud as she kissed each on her eyes and lips: "I love you and shall always love you—you, Joanna, and you, my Pulcheria, and you, Mary, my sweet, precious darling."

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