

GEORG EBERS

THE BRIDE OF

THE NILE,

VOLUME 07

Georg Ebers

The Bride of the Nile. Volume 07

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Содержание

CHAPTER I.1	5
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	11

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The Bride of the Nile – Volume 07

CHAPTER I.¹

If Philippus found no sleep that night, neither did Orion. He no longer doubted Paula, but his heart was full of longing to hear her say once more that she loved him and him alone, and the yearning kept him awake. He sprang from his bed at the first glimmer of dawn, glad that the night was past, and started to cross the Nile in order to place half of Paula's fortune in the hands of Salech, the brother of Haschim the merchant.

In Memphis all was still silent, and all he saw in the old town struck him as strangely worn-out, torpid, and decayed; it seemed only fit to be left to ruin, while on the other side of the river, in the new town of Fostat, on all hands busy, eager, new-born vitality met his eyes.

He involuntarily compared the old capital of the Pharaohs to a time-eaten mummy, and Amru's new city to a vigorous youth. Here every one was astir and in brisk activity. The money-changer, who had risen, like all Moslems, to perform his morning prayer, "as soon as a white thread could be distinguished from a black one," was already busy with his rolls of gold and silver coin; and how quick, clear, and decisive the Arab was in concluding his bargain with Orion and with Nilus, who had accompanied him!

Whichever way the young man turned, bright and flashing eyes met his gaze, energetic, resolute, and enterprising faces; no bowed heads, no dull, brooding looks, no gloomy resignation like those in his native town on the other shore. Here, in Fostat, his blood flowed more swiftly; there, existence was an oppressive burden. Everything attracted him to the Arabs!

The changer's shop, like all those in the Sook or Bazaar of Fostat, consisted of a wooden stall in which he sat with his assistants. On the side open to the street he transacted business with his customers, who, when the affair promised to be lengthy, were invited by the Arab to seat themselves with him on his little platform.

Orion and Nilus had accepted such an invitation, and it happened that, while they sat in treaty with Salech, visible to the passers-by, the Vekeel Obada, who had so deeply stirred the wrath of the governor's son on the previous evening, came by, close to him. To Orion's amazement he greeted him with great amiability, and he, remembering Amru's warning, responded, though not without an effort, to his hated foe's civility. When Obada passed the stall a second and a third time, Orion felt that he was watching him; however, it was quite possible that the Vekeel might also have business with the money-changer and be waiting only for the conclusion of his.

At any rate Orion ere long forgot the incident, for matters of more pressing importance claimed his attention at home.

As often happens, the death of one man had changed everything in his house so utterly as to make it unlike the same; though his removal had made it neither richer nor poorer, and though his secluded presence of late had scarcely had an appreciable influence. The rooms formerly so full of life now seemed dead. Petitioners and suppliants no longer crowded the anteroom, and all visits of condolence had, according to the ancient custom, been received on the day after the funeral. The Lady Neforis had ceased fussing and bustling, the clatter of her keys and her scolding were no longer to be heard; she sat apart, either in her sleeping-room or the cool hall with the fountain which had been her husband's favorite room, excepting when she was at church whither she went twice every day. She returned from thence with the same weary, abstracted expression that she took there, and

¹ In the print copy of this eBook, the chapter numbers and page numbers here start over at one.

any one seeing her lying on the divan which her husband had formerly occupied, idly absorbed in gloomy thought, would hardly have recognized her as the same woman who had but lately been so active and managing. She did not exactly mourn or bewail her loss; indeed, she had no tears for her grief, as though she had shed them all, once for all, during the night after his death and burial. But she could not attain to that state of sadness made sacred by memories with which consoling angels so often mingle some drops of sweetness, after the first anguish is overpast. She felt—she knew—that with her husband a portion of her own being had been riven from her, but she could not yet perceive that this last portion was nothing less than the very foundations of her whole moral and social being.

Her father and her husband's father had been the two leading men in Memphis, nay, in all Egypt. She had given her hand and a heart full of love to the son of Menas, a proud and happy woman. It was as one with her, and not by himself alone, that he had risen to the highest dignity attainable by a native Egyptian, and she had done everything that lay in her power to uphold him in a position which many envied him, and in filling it with dignity and effect. After many years of rare happiness their grief at the loss of their murdered sons only bound the attached couple more closely, and when her husband had fallen into bad health she had gladly shared his seclusion, had devoted herself entirely to caring for him, and divided all the doubts and anxieties which came upon him from his political action. The consciousness of being not merely much but everything to him, was her pride and her joy. Her dislike of Paula had its rise, in the first instance, in the discovery that she, his wife, was no longer indispensable to the sufferer when he had his fair young niece's company. And now?

At night, after long lying awake, when she woke from a snatch of uneasy sleep, she involuntarily listened for the faint panting breath, but no heart now throbbed by her side; and when she quitted her lonely couch at dawn the coming day lay before her as a desert and treeless solitude. By night, as by day, she constantly tried to call up the image of the dead, but whenever her small imaginative power had succeeded in doing so—not unfrequently at first—she had seen him as in the last moments of his life, a curse on his only son on his trembling lips. This horrible impression deprived her of the last consolation of the mourner: a beautiful memory, while it destroyed her proud and glad satisfaction in her only child. The youth, who had till now been her soul's idol, was stigmatized and branded in her eyes. She might not ignore the burden laid on Orion by that most just man; instead of taking him to her heart with double tenderness and softening or healing the fearful punishment inflicted by his father, she could only pity him. When Orion came to see her she would stroke his waving hair and, as she desired not to wound him and make him even more unhappy than he must be already, she neither blamed nor admonished him, and never reminded him of his father's curse. And how beggared was that frugal heart, accustomed to spend all its store of love on so few objects—nay, chiefly on one alone who was now no more!

The happy voices of the children had always given her pleasure, so long as they did not disturb her suffering husband; now, they too were silent. She had withdrawn the sunshine of her narrow affection from her only grandchild, who had hitherto held a place in it, for little Mary had had a share in the horrors that had come upon her and Orion in her husband's last moments. Indeed, the bereaved woman's excited fancy had firmly conceived the mad notion that the child was the evil genius of the house and the tool of Satan.

Neforis had, however, enjoyed some hours of greater ease during the last two days. In the misery of wakefulness which was beginning to torture her like an acute pain, she had suddenly recollected what relief from sleeplessness her husband had been wont to find in the opium pillules, and a box of the medicine, only just opened, was at hand. And was not she, too, suffering unutterable wretchedness? Why should she neglect the remedy which had so greatly mitigated her husband's distress? It was said to have a bad effect after long and frequent use, and she had often checked the Mukaukas in taking it too freely; but could her sufferings be greater? Would she not, indeed, be thankful to the drug if it should shorten her miserable existence?

So she took the familiar remedy, at first hesitatingly and then more freely; and on the second day again, with real pleasure and happy expectancy, for it had not merely procured her a good night but had brought her joy in the morning: The dead had appeared to her, and for the first time not in the act of cursing, but as a young and happy man.

No one in the house knew what comfort the widow had had recourse to; the physician and her son had been glad yesterday to find her more composed.

When Orion returned home, after concluding his business with the money-changer at Fostat, he had to make his way through a crowd of people, and found the court-yard full of men, and the guards and servants in the greatest excitement. No less a personage than the Patriarch had arrived on a visit, and was now in conference with Neforis. Sebek, the steward, informed Orion that he had asked for him, and that his mother wished that he should immediately join them and pay his respects to the very reverend Father.

"She wished it?" asked the young man, as he tossed his riding-hat to a slave, and he stood hesitating.

He was too much a son of his time, and the Church and her ministers had exercised too marked influence on his education, for the great prelate's visit to be regarded otherwise than as a high honor. At the same time he could not forget the insult done to his father's vanes, nor the Arab general's warning to be on his guard against Benjamin's enmity; and perhaps, he said to himself, it might be better to avoid a meeting with the powerful priest than to expose himself to the danger of losing his self-control and finding fresh food for his wrath.

However, he had in fact no choice, for the patriarch just now came out of the fountain-hall into the viridarium. The old man's tall figure was not bent, his snowy hair flowed in abundance round his proud head, and a white beard fell in soft waves far down his breast. His fine eyes rested on the young man with a keen glance, and though he had last seen Orion as a boy he recognized him at once as the master of the house. While Orion bowed low before him, the patriarch, in his deep, rich voice, addressed him with cheerful dignity.

"All hail, son of my never-to-be-forgotten friend! The child I remember, has, I see, grown to a fine man. I have devoted a short time to the mother, and now I must say what is needful to the son."

"In my father's study," Orion said to the steward; and he led the way with the ceremonious politeness of a chamberlain of the imperial court.

The patriarch, as he followed him, signed to his escort to remain behind, and as soon as the door was closed upon them, he went up to Orion and exclaimed: "Again I greet you! This, then, is the descendant of the great Menas, the son of Mukaukas George, the adored ruler of my flock at Memphis, who held the first place among the gilded youth of Constantinople in their gay whirl! A strange achievement for an Egyptian and a Christian! But first of all, child, first give me your hand!" He held out his right hand and Orion accepted it, but not without reserve, for he had suspected a scornful ring in the patriarch's address, and he could not help asking himself whether this man honestly meant so well by him, that he could address him thus paternally as "child" in all sincerity of heart? To refuse his hand was, however, impossible; still, he found courage to reply:

"I can but obey your desire, holy Father; but, at the same time, I do not know whether it becomes the son to grasp the hand of the foe who was not to be appeased even by Death, the reconciler—who grossly insulted the father, the noblest of men, and, in him, the son too, at the grave itself."

The patriarch shook his head with a supercilious smile, and a hot thrill shot through Orion as Benjamin laid his hand on his shoulder and said with grave kindness:

"A Christian does not find it hard to forgive a sinner, an antagonist, an enemy; and it is a joy to me to pardon the son who feels himself injured through his lost father, blind and foolish as his indignation may be. Your wrath can no more affect me, Child, than the Almighty in Heaven, and it would not even be blameworthy, but that—and of this we must speak presently—but that—well, I will be frank with you at once—but that your manner clearly and unmistakably betrays what you lack

to make you a true Christian, and such a man as he must be who fills so conspicuous a position in this land governed by infidels. You know what I mean?"

The prelate let his hand slip from the young man's shoulder, looking enquiringly in his face; and when Orion, finding no reply ready, drew back a step or two, the old man went on with growing excitement:

"It is humility, pious and submissive faith, that I find you lack, my friend. Who, indeed, am I? But as the Vicar, the representative of Him before whom we all are as worms in the dust, I must insist that every man who calls himself a Christian, a Jacobite, shall submit to my will and orders, without hesitation or doubt, as obediently and unresistingly as though salvation or woe had fallen on him from above. What would become of us, if individuals were to take upon themselves to defy me and walk in their own way? In one miserable generation, and with the death of the elders who had grown up as true Christians, the doctrine of the Saviour would be extinct on the shores of the Nile, the crescent would rise in the place of the Cross, and our cry would go up to Heaven for so many lost souls. Learn, haughty youth, to bow humbly and submissively to the will of the Most High and of His vicar on earth, and let me show you, from your demeanor to myself especially, how far your own judgment is to be relied on. You regard me as your father's enemy?"

"Yes," said Orion firmly.

"And I loved him as a brother!" replied the patriarch in a softer voice. "How gladly would I have heaped his bier with palm branches of peace, such as the Church alone can grow, wet with my own tears!"

"And yet," cried Orion, "you denied to him, whom you call your friend, what the Church does not refuse to thieves and murderers, if only they desire forgiveness and have received absolution from a priest; and that. . . ."

"And that your father did!" interrupted the old man. "Peace be to him!"

He is now, no doubt, gazing on the glory of the Lord. And nevertheless I could forbid the priesthood here showing him honor at the grave.—Why?

For what urgent reason was such a prohibition spoken by a friend against a friend?"

"Because you wished to brand him, in the eyes of the world, as the man who lent his support to the unbelievers and helped them to victory," said Orion gloomily.

"How well the boy can read the thoughts of men!" exclaimed the prelate, looking at the young man with approbation in which, however, there was some irony and annoyance. "Very good. We will assume that my object was to show the Christians of Memphis what fate awaits the man, who surrenders his country to the enemy and walks hand-in-hand with unbelievers? And may I not possibly have been right?"

"Do you suppose my father invited the Arabs?" interrupted the young man.

"No, Child," replied the patriarch, "the enemy came of his own free will."

"And you," Orion went on, "after the Greeks had driven you into exile, prophesied from the desert that they would come and overthrow the Melchites, the Greek enemies of our faith, drive them out of the country."

"It was revealed to me by the Lord!" replied the old man, bowing his head reverently. "And yet other things were shown to me while I dwelt a devout ascetic, mortifying my flesh under the scorching sun of the desert. Beware my son, beware! Heed my warning, lest it should be fulfilled and the house of Menas vanish like clouds swept before the wind.—Your father, I know, regarded my prophecy as advice given by me to receive the infidels as the instrument of the Almighty and to support them in driving the Melchite oppressors out of the land."

"Your prophecy," replied Orion, "had, no doubt, a marked effect on my father; and when the cause of the emperor and the Greeks was lost, your opinion that the Melchites were unbelievers as much as the sons of Islam, was of infinite comfort to him. For he, if any one—as you know—had good reason to hate the sectarians who killed his two sons in their prime. What followed, he did to

rescue his and your unfortunate brethren and dependants from destruction. Here, here in this desk, lies his answer to the emperor's accusations, as given to the Greek deputation who had speech of him in this very room. He wrote it down as soon as they had left him. Will you hear it?"

"I can guess its purport."

"No, no!" cried the excited youth; he hastily opened his father's desk, laid his hand at once on the wax tablet, and exclaimed: "This was his reply!" And he proceeded to read:

"These Arabs, few as they are, are stronger and more powerful than we with all our numbers. One man of them is equal to a hundred of us, for they rush on death and love it better than life. Each of them presses to the front in battle, and they have no longing to return home and to their families. For every Christian they kill they look for a great reward in Heaven, and they say that the gates of Paradise open at once for those who fall in the fight. They have not a wish in this world beyond the satisfaction of their barest need of food and clothing. We, on the contrary, love life and dread death;—how can we stand against them? I tell you that I will not break the peace I have concluded with the Arabs. . . ."

"And what is the upshot of all this reply?" interrupted the patriarch shrugging his shoulders.

"That my father found himself compelled to conclude a peace, and that— but read on.—That as a wise man he was forced to ally himself with the foe."

"The foe to whom he yielded more readily and paid much greater honor than became him as a Christian!—Does not this discourse convey the idea that the joys of Paradise solely and exclusively await our damned and blood-thirsty oppressors?—And the Moslem Paradise! What is it but a gulf of iniquity, in which they are to wallow in sensual delight? The false prophet invented it to tempt his followers to force his lying creed, by might of arms and in mad contempt of death, on nation after nation. Our Lord, the Word made flesh, came down on earth to win hearts and souls by the persuasive power of the living truth, one and eternal, which emanates from Him as light proceeds from the sun; this Mohammed, on the contrary, is a sword made flesh! For me, then, there is no choice but to submit to superior strength; but I can still hate and loathe their accursed and soul-destroying superstition.—And so I do, and so I shall, to the last throb of this old heart, which only longs for rest, the sooner the better. . . ."

"But you? And your father? Verily, verily, the man who, even for an instant, ceases to hate unbelief or false doctrine has sinned for his whole life on this side of the grave and beyond it; sinned against the only true and saving faith and its divine Founder. Blasphemous and flattering praise of the piety and moderation of our foes, the very antichrist incarnate, who kill both body and soul.—With these your father fouled his heart and tongue. . . ."

"Fouled?" cried Orion and the blood tingled in his cheeks. "He kept his heart and tongue alike pure and honorable; never did a false word pass his lips. Justice, justice to all, even to his enemies, was the ruling principle, the guiding clue of his blameless life; and the noblest of the heathen Greeks admired the man who could so far triumph over himself as to recognize what was fine and good in a foe."

"And they were right," replied the patriarch, "for they were not yet acquainted with truth. In a worldly sense, even now, each of us may aim at such magnanimity; but the man who forgives those who tamper with the sacred truth, which is the bread, meat, and wine of the Christian's soul, sins against that truth; and, if he is a leader of men, he draws on those who look up to him, and who are only too ready to follow his example, into everlasting fire. Where your father ought to have been a recalcitrant though conquered enemy, he became an ally; nay, so far as the leader of the infidels was concerned, a friend—how many tears it cost me! And our hapless people were forced to see this attitude of their chief, and imitated it.—Forgive their seducer, Merciful God!—forming their conduct on his. Thousands fell away from our saving faith and went over to those, who in their eyes could not be reprobate, could not be damned, since they saw them dwelling and working hand-in-hand with their wise and righteous leader; and it was simply and solely to warn his misguided people that I did

not hesitate to wound my own heart, to raise the voice of reproof at the grave of a dear friend, and to refuse the honor and blessing of which his just and virtuous life rendered him more worthy than thousands of others. I have spoken, and now your foolish anger must be appeased; now you will grasp the hand held out to you by the shepherd of the souls entrusted to him with an easy and willing heart."

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