

GEORG EBERS

THE BRIDE OF

THE NILE,

VOLUME 09

Georg Ebers

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CHAPTER IX

Philippus started up from the divan on which he had been reclining at breakfast with his old friend. Before Horapollo was a half-empty plate; he had swallowed his meal less rapidly than his companion, and looked disapprovingly at the leech, who drank off his wine and water as he stood, whereas he generally would sit and enjoy it as he talked to the old man of matters light or grave. To the elder this was always the pleasantest hour of the day; but now Philippus would hardly allow himself more than just time enough to eat, even at their principal evening meal.

Indeed, not he alone, but every physician in the city, had as much as he could do with the utmost exertion. Nearly three weeks had elapsed since the attack on the nuns, and the fearful heat had still gone on in creasing. The river, instead of rising had sunk lower and lower; the carrier-pigeons from Ethiopia, looked for day by day with growing anxiety and excitement, brought no news of a rising stream even in the upper Nile, and the shallow, stagnant and evil-smelling waters by the banks began to be injurious, nay, fatal, to the health of the whole population.

Close to the shore, especially, the water had a reddish tinge, and the usually sweet, pure fluid in the canals was full of strange vegetable growths and other foreign bodies putrid and undrinkable. The common people usually shirked the trouble of filtering it, and it was among them that the greater number died of a mortal and infectious pestilence, till then unknown. The number of victims swelled daily, and the approach of the comet kept pace with the growing misery of the town. Every one connected it with the intense heat of the season, with the delay in the inundation, and the appearance of the sickness; and the leech and his friend often argued about these matters, for Philippus would not admit that the meteor had any influence on human affairs, while Horapollo believed that it had, and supported his view by a long series of examples.

His antagonist would not accept them and asked for arguments; at the same time he, like every one else, felt the influence of a vague dread of some imminent and terrible disaster hanging over the earth and humanity at large.

And, just as every heart in Memphis felt oppressed by such forebodings, and by the weight of a calamity, which indeed no longer threatened them but had actually come upon them, so the roads, the gardens, the palms and sycamores by the way-side were covered by thick layers of dingy, choking dust. The hedges of tamarisk and shrubs looked like decaying walls of colorless, unburnt mud-bricks; even in the high-roads the wayfarer walked in the midst of dense white clouds raised by his feet, and if a chariot, or a horseman galloped down the scorching street, fine, grey sand at once filled the air, compelling the foot-passengers to shut their eyes and lips.

The town was so silent, so empty, so deserted! No one came out of doors unless under pressure of business or piety. Every house was a furnace, and even a bath brought no refreshment, for the water had long since ceased to be cold. A disease had also attacked the ripening dates as they hung; they dropped off in thousands from the heavy clusters under the beautiful bending crown of leaves; and now for two days hundreds of dead fish had been left on the banks. Even the scaly natives of the river were plague-stricken; and the physician explained to his friend that this brought the inhabitants a fresh danger; for who could clear the shores of the dead fish?—And, in such heat, how soon they would become putrid!

The old man did not conceal from himself that it was hard, cruelly hard, for the physician to follow his calling conscientiously at such a time; but he knew his friend; he had seen him during months of pestilence two years since—always brisk, decisive and gay, indeed inspired to greater effort

by the greater demands on him. What had so completely altered him, had poisoned and vexed his soul as with a malignant spell? It was not the almost superhuman sacrifices required by his duties;— it came of the unfortunate infatuation of his heart, of which he could not rid himself.

Philippus had kept his promise. He went every day to the house of Rufinus, and every day he saw Paula; but, as a murdered body bleeds afresh in the presence of the assassin, so every day the old pain revived when he was forced to meet her and speak with her. The only cure for this particular sufferer was to remove the cause of his pain: that is to say, to take Paula away out of his path; and this the old man made his care and duty.

Little Mary and the other patients under Rufinus' roof were on the way to recovery; still there was much to cast gloomy shadows over this happy termination. Joanna and Pulcheria were very anxious as to the fate of Rufinus. No news had been received of him or of the sisters, and Philippus was the vessel into which the forsaken wife and Pulcheria— who looked up to him as to a kind, faithful, and all-powerful protecting spirit—poured all their sorrows, cares, and fears. Their forebodings were aggravated by the fact that three times Arab officials had come to the house to enquire about the master and his continued absence. All that the women told them was written down, and Dame Joanna, whose lips had never yet uttered a lie, had found herself forced to give a false clue by saying that her husband had gone to Alexandria on business, and might perhaps have to proceed to Syria. —What could these enquiries forebode? Did they not indicate that Rufinus' complicity in the rescue of the nuns was known at Fostat?

The authorities there were, in fact, better informed than the women could suspect. But they kept their knowledge a secret, for it would never do to let the oppressed people know that a handful of Egyptians had succeeded in defeating a party of Arab soldiers; so the Memphites heard no more than a dark rumor of what had occurred.

Philippus had known nothing of the old man's purpose till he had gone too far to be dissuaded; and it was misery to him now to reflect that his dear old friend, and his whole household, might come to ruin for the sake of the sisterhood who were nothing to them; for he had received private information that there had been a skirmish between the Moslems and the deliverers of the nuns, which had cost the lives of several combatants on both sides.

And Paula! If only he could have seen her happy—But she was pale; and that which robbed the young girl—healthy as she was in mind and body— of her proud, frank, independent bearing was not the heat, which tormented all creation, but a secret, devouring sorrow; and this sorrow was the work of one alone—of him on whom she had set her heart, and who made, ah! what a return, for the royal gift of her love.

Philippus had frequent business at the governor's residence, and a fortnight since he had plainly perceived what it was that had brought Neforis into this strange state. She was taking the opium that her husband had had, taking it in excessive quantities; and she could easily procure more through some other physician. However, her piteous prayer that Philippus would not abandon her to her fate had prevailed to induce him to continue to see her, in the hope of possibly restricting her use of the drug.

The senator's wife, Martina, also required his visits to the palace. She was not actually ill, but she suffered cruelly from the heat, and she had always been wont to see her worthy old house-physician every day, to hear all the latest gossip, and complain of her little ailments when anything went wrong with her usually sound health. Philippus was indeed too much overburdened to chatter, but his professional advice was good and helped her to endure the fires of this pitiless sky. She liked this incisive, shrewd, plain-spoken man—often indeed sharp and abrupt in his freedom— and he appreciated her bright, natural ways. Now and then Martina even succeeded in winning a smile from "Hermes Trismegistus," who was "generally as solemn as though there was no such thing on earth as a jest," and in spurring him to a rejoinder which showed that this dolorous being had a particularly keen and ready wit.

Heliadora attracted him but little. There was, to be sure, an unmistakable likeness in her "imploring eyes" to those of Pulcheria; but the girl's spoke fervent yearning for the grace and love of God, while the widow's expressed an eager desire for the admiration of the men she preferred. She was a graceful creature beyond all question, but such softness, which never even attempted to assert a purpose or an opinion, did not commend itself to his determined nature; it annoyed him, when he had contradicted her, to hear her repeat his last statement and take his side, as if she were ashamed of her own silliness. Her society, indeed, did not seem to satisfy the clever older woman, who at home, was accustomed to a succession of visitors, and to whom the word "evening" was synonymous with lively conversation and a large gathering. She spoke of the leech's visits as the oasis in the Egyptian desert, and little Katharina even she regarded as a Godsend.

The water-wagtail was her daily visitant, and the girl's gay and often spiteful gossip helped to beguile her during this terrific heat. Katharina's mother made no difficulties; for Heliadora had gone to see her in all her magnificence, and had offered her and her daughter hospitality, some day, at Constantinople. They were very likely going thither; at any rate they would not remain in Memphis, and then it would be a piece of good fortune to be introduced to the society of the capital by such people as their new acquaintances.

Martina thus heard a great deal about Paula; and though it was all adverse and colored to her prejudice she would have liked to see the daughter of the great and famous Thomas whom she had known; besides, after all she had heard, she could fear nothing from Paula for her niece: uncommonly handsome, but haughty, repellent, unamiable, and—like Heliadora herself—of the orthodox sect.—What could tempt "great Sesostris" to give her the preference?

Katharina herself proposed to Martina to make them acquainted; but nothing would have induced Dame Martina to go out of her rooms, protected to the utmost from the torrid sunshine, so she left it to Heliadora to pay the visit and give her a report of the hero's daughter. Heliadora had devoted herself heart and soul to the little heiress, and humored her on many points.

This was carried out. Katharina actually had the audacity to bring the rivals together, even after she had reported to each all she knew of Orion's position with regard to the other. It was exquisite sport; still, in one respect it did not fulfil her intentions, for Paula gave no sign of suffering the agonies of jealousy which Katharina had hoped to excite in her. Heliadora, on the other hand, came home depressed and uneasy; Paula had received her coldly and with polite formality, and the young widow had remained fully aware that so remarkable a woman might well cast her own image in Orion's heart into the shade, or supplant it altogether.

Like a wounded man who, in spite of the anguish, cannot resist touching the wound to assure himself of its state, Heliadora went constantly to see Katharina in order to watch her rival from the garden or to be taken to call on her, though she was always very coldly received.

At first Katharina had pitied the young woman whose superior in intelligence she knew herself to be; but a certain incident had extinguished this feeling; she now simply hated her, and pricked her with needle-thrusts whenever she had a chance. Paula seemed invulnerable; but there was not a pang which Katharina would not gladly have given her to whom she owed the deepest humiliation her young life had ever known. How was it that Paula failed to regard Heliadora as a rival? She had reflected that, if Orion had really returned the widow's passion, he could not have borne so long a separation. It was on purpose to avoid Heliadora, and to remain faithful to what he was and must always be to Paula, that he had gone with the senator, far from Memphis. Heliadora—her instinct assured her—was the poor, forsaken woman with whom he had trifled at Byzantium, and for whom he had committed that fatal theft of the emerald. If Fate would but bring him home to her, and if she then yielded all he asked—all her own soul urged her to grant, then she would be the sole mistress and queen of his heart—she must be, she was sure of it! And though, even as she thought of it, she bowed her head in care, it was not from fear of losing him; it was only her anxiety about her father, her good old friend, Rufinus, and his family, whom she had made so entirely her own.

This was the state of affairs this morning, when to his old friend's vexation, Philippus had so hastily and silently drunk off his after-breakfast draught; just as he set down the cup, the black door-keeper announced that a hump-backed man wished to see his master at once on important business.

"Important business!" repeated the leech. "Give me four more legs in addition to my own two, or a machine to make time longer than it is, and then I will take new patients—otherwise no! Tell the fellow. . . ."

"No, not sick. . . ." interrupted the negro. "Come long way.

Gardener to Greek man Rufinus."

Philippus started: he could guess what this messenger had to say, and his heart sank with dread as he desired that he might be shown in.

A glance at Gibbus told him what he had rightly feared. The poor fellow was hardly recognizable. He was coated with dust from head to foot, and this made him look like a grey-haired old man; his sandals hung to his feet in strips; the sweat, pouring down his cheeks, had made gutters as it were in the dust on his face, and his tears, as the physician held out his hand to him, washed out other channels.

In reply to the leech's anxious, long drawn "Dead?" he nodded silently; and when Philippus, clasping his hands to his temples, cried out: "Dead!

My poor old Rufinus dead! But how, in Heaven's name, did it happen?

Speak, man, speak!"—Gibbus pointed to the old philosopher and said:

"Come out then, with me, Master. No third person. . . ."

Philippus, however, gave him to understand that Horapollo was his second self; and the hunch-back went on to tell him what he had seen, and how his beloved master had met his end. Horapollo sat listening in astonishment, shaking his head disapprovingly, while the physician muttered curses. But the bearer of evil tidings was not interrupted, and it was not till he had ended that Philippus, with bowed head and tearful eyes, said:

"Poor, faithful old man; to think that he should die thus—he who leaves behind him all that is best in life, while I—I. . . ." And he groaned aloud. The old man glanced at him with reproachful displeasure.

While the leech broke the seals of the tablets, which the abbess had carefully closed, and began to read the contents, Horapollo asked the gardener: "And the nuns? Did they all escape?"

"Yes, Master! on the morning after we reached Doomiat, a trireme took them all out to sea."

And the old man grumbled to himself: "The working bees killed and the Drones saved!"

Gibbus, however, contradicted him, praising the laborious and useful life of the sisters, in whose care he himself had once been.

Meanwhile Philippus had read his friend's last letter. Greatly disturbed by it he turned hither and thither, paced the room with long steps, and finally paused in front of the gardener, exclaiming: "And what next? Who is to tell them the news?"

"You," replied Gibbus, raising his hands in entreaty.

"I—oh, of course, I!" growled the physician. "Whatever is difficult, painful, intolerable, falls on my shoulders as a matter of course! But I cannot—ought not—I will not do it. Had I any part or lot in devising this mad expedition? You observe, Father?—What he, the simpleton, brewed, I—I again am to drink. Fate has settled that!"

"It is hard, it is hard, child!" replied the old man. "Still, it is your duty. Only consider—if that man, as he stands before us now, were to appear before the women. . . ."

But Philippus broke in: "No, no, that would not do! And you, Gibbus— this very day there has been an Arab again to see Joanna; and if they were to suspect that you had been with your master—for you look strangely.—No, man; your devotion merits a better reward. They shall not catch you. I release you from your service to the widow, and we— what do you say, Father?—we will keep him here."

"Right, very right," said Horapollo. "The Nile must some day rise again. Stay with us; I have long had a fancy to eat vegetables of my own growing."

But Gibbus firmly declined the offer, saying he wished to return to his old mistress. When the physician again pointed out to him how great a danger he was running into, and the old man desired to know his reasons, the hunch-back exclaimed:

"I promised my master to stay with the women; and now, while in all the household I am the only free man, shall I leave them unprotected to secure my own miserable life? Sooner would I see a scimitar at my throat. When my head is off the rascals are welcome to all that is left."

The words came hollow and broken from his parched tongue, and as he spoke the faithful fellow's face changed. Even under the dust he turned pale, and Philippus had to support him, for his feet refused their office. His long tramp through the torrid heat had exhausted his strength; but a draught of wine soon brought him to himself again and Horapollo ordered the slave to lead him to the kitchen and desire the cook to take the best care of him.

As soon as the friends were alone, the elder observed:

"That worthy, foolhardy, old child who is now dead, seems to have left you some strange request. I could see that as you were reading."

"There—take it!" replied Philippus; and again he walked up and down the room, while Horapollo took the letter. Both faces of the tablets were covered with irregular, up-and-down lines of writing to the following effect:

"Rufinus, in view of death, to his beloved Philippus:

"One shivering fit after another comes over me; I shall certainly die to-day. I must make haste. Writing is difficult. If only I can say what is most pressing.—First: Joanna and the poor child. Be everything you can be to them. Protect them as their guardian, Kyrios, and friend. They have enough to live on and something still to spare for others. My brother Leonax manages the property, and he is honest. Joanna knows all about it.—Tell her and the poor child that I send them ten thousand blessings—and to Joanna endless thanks for all her goodness.—And to you, my friend: heed the old man's words. Rid your heart of Paula. She is not for you: you know, young Orion. But as to yourself: Those who were born in high places rarely suit us, who have dragged ourselves up from below to a better position. Be her friend; that she deserves—but let that be all. Do not live alone, a wife brings all that is best into a man's life; it is she who weaves sweet dreams into his dull sleep. You know nothing of all this as yet; and your worthy old friend—to whom my greetings—has held aloof from it all his life....

"For your private eye: it is a dying man who speaks thus. You must know that my poor child, our Pul, regards you as the most perfect of men and esteems you above all others. You know her and Joanna. Bear witness to your friend that no evil word ever passed the lips of either of them. Far be it from me to advise you, who bear the image of another woman in your heart,—to say: marry the child, she is the wife for you. But this much to you both—Father and son—I do advise you to live with the mother and daughter as true and friendly house-mates. You will none of you repent doing so. This is a dying man's word. I can write no more. You are the women's guardian, Philip, a faithful one I know. A common aim makes men grow alike. You and I, for many a year.—Take good care of them for me; I entreat you—good care."

The last words were separated and written all astray; the old man could hardly make them out. He now sat looking, as Phillipus had done before, sorely puzzled and undecided over this strange document.

"Well?" asked the leech at last.

"Aye-well?" repeated the other with a shrug. Then both again were silent; till Horapollo rose, and taking his staff, also paced the room while he murmured, half to himself and half to his younger friend "They are two quiet, reasonable women. There are not many of that sort, I fancy. How the little one helped me up from the low seat in the garden!" It was a reminiscence that made him chuckle to himself; he stopped Philippus, who was pacing at his side, by lightly patting his arm, exclaiming with unwonted vivacity: "A man should be ready to try everything—the care of women even, before he steps into the grave. And is it a fact that neither of them is a scold or a chatter-box?"

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