

**GEORG EBERS**

THE BRIDE OF

THE NILE.

VOLUME 08

Georg Ebers

**The Bride of the Nile. Volume 08**

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# Georg Ebers

## The Bride of the Nile – Volume 08

### CHAPTER V

After that interview with Orion, Philippus hurried off through the town, paying so little heed to the people he met and to the processions besieging Heaven with loud psalms to let the Nile at last begin to rise, that he ran up against more than one passer-by, and had many a word of abuse shouted after him. He went into two or three houses, and neither his patients nor their attendants could recognize, in this abrupt and hasty visitor, the physician and friend who was usually so sympathetic to the sufferer: who would speak with a cordiality that brought new life to his heart, who would toss the children in the air, kiss one and nod merrily to another. To-day their elders even felt shy and anxious in his presence. For the first time he found the duty he loved a wearisome burthen; the sick man was a tormenting spirit in league with the world against his peace of mind. What possessed him, that he should feel such love of his fellow-men as to deprive himself of all comfort in life and of his night's rest for their sake? Rufinus was right. In these times each man lived solely to spite his neighbor, and he who could be most brazenly selfish, looking neither to the right hand nor to the left, was the most certain to get on in life. Fool that he was to let other folks' woes destroy his peace and hinder him in his scientific advancement!

Tormented by such bitter thoughts as these, he went into a neat little house by the harbor where a worthy pilot lay dying, surrounded by his wife and children; and there, at once, he was himself again, putting forth all his knowledge and heartfelt kindness, quitting the scene with a bleeding heart and an empty purse; but no sooner was he out of doors than his former mood closed in upon him with double gloom. The case was plain: Even with the fixed determination not to sacrifice himself for others he could not help doing it; the impulse was too strong for him. He could no more help suffering with the sufferer, and giving the best he had to give with no hope of a return, than the drunkard can help drinking. He was made to be plundered; it was his fate!

With a drooping head he returned to his old friend's work-room. Horapollo was sitting, just as he had sat the night before, at his writing-table with his scrolls and his three lamps, a slave below, snoring while he awaited his master's pleasure.

The leech's pretty Greek greeting "Rejoice !" sounded rather like "May you choke!" as he flung aside his upper garment; and to the old man's answer and anxious exclamation: "How badly you look, Philip!" he answered crossly: "Like a man who deserves a kick rather than a welcome; a booby who has submitted to have his nose pulled; a cur who has licked the hand of the lout who has thrashed him!"

He threw himself on the divan and told Horapollo all that had passed between him and Orion. "And the maddest part of it all," he ended, "is that I almost like the man; that he really seems to me to be on the high road to become a capital fellow; and that I no longer feel inclined to pitch him into a lime-kiln at the mere thought of his putting out a hand to Paula. At the same time," and he started to his feet, "even if I help him to bring the poor little girl away from that demented old hag, I cannot and will not continue to be her physician. There are plenty of quacks about in this corpse of a town, and they may find one of them.

"You will continue to treat the child," interrupted the old man quietly.

"To have my heart daily flogged with nettles!" exclaimed the leech, going towards Horapollo with wild gesticulations. "And do you believe that I have any desire to meet that young fellow's sweetheart day after day, often twice a day, that the barb may be twisted round and round in my bleeding wound?"

"I expect a quite different result from your frequent meeting," said the other. "You will get accustomed to see her under the aspect which alone she can hence forth bear to you: that of a handsome girl—there are thousands such in Egypt,—and the betrothed of another."

"Certainly, if my heart were like a hunting-dog that lies down the moment it is bid," said Philippus with a scornful laugh. "The end of it is that I must go away, away from Memphis—away from this miserable world for all I care! I?—Recover my peace of mind within reach of her? Alas, for my blissful, lost peace!"

"And why not? To every man a thing is only as he conceives of it. Only listen to me: I had finished a treatise on the old and new Calendars, and my master desired me to deliver a lecture on it in the Museum—if the school of pedants in Alexandria now deserves the name; but I did not wish to do so because I knew that the presence of such a large and learned audience would embarrass me. But my master advised me to imagine that my hearers were not men, but mere cabbages. This gave me new light; I took his advice, got over my shyness, and my speech flowed like oil."

"A very good story," said Philippus, "but I do not see..."

"The moral of it for you," interrupted the old man, "is that you must regard the supremely adorable lady of your love as one among a dozen others—I will not say as a cabbage—as one with whom your heart has no more concern. Put a little strength of will into it, and you will succeed."

"If a heart were a cipher, and if passion were calendar-making! . . ." retorted Philippus. "You are a very wise man, and your manuscripts and tables have stood like walls between you and passion."

"Who can tell?" said Horapollo. "But at any rate, it never should have had such power over me as to make me embitter the few remaining days under the sun yet granted to my father and friend for the sake of a woman who scorned my devotion. Will you promise me to talk no more nonsense about flying from Memphis, or anything of the kind?"

"Teach me first to measure my strength of will."

"Will you try, at any rate?"

"Yes, for your sake."

"Will you promise to continue your treatment of that poor little girl, whom I love dearly in spite of her forbears?"

"As long as I can endure the daily meeting with her—you know. . ."

"That, then, is a bargain.—Now, come and let us translate a few more chapters."

The friends sat at work together till a late hour, and when the old man was alone again he reflected: "So long as he can be of use to the child he will not go away, and by that time I shall have dug a pit for that damned siren."

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Orion had his hands full of work for the next morning. Before it was light he sent off two trustworthy messengers to Doomiat, giving each of them a letter with instructions that a sailing vessel should be held in readiness for the fugitives. One was to start three hours after the other, so that the business in hand should not fail if either of them should come to grief.

He then went out; first to the harbor, where he succeeded in hiring a large, good Nile-boat from Doomiat, whose captain, a trustworthy and experienced man, promised to keep their agreement a secret and to be prepared to start by noon next day. Next, after taking council with himself, he went to the treasurer's office, and there, with the assistance of Nilus, made his will, to be ratified and signed next morning in the presence of a notary and witnesses. His mother, little Mary, and Paula were to inherit the bulk of his property. He also bequeathed a considerable sum as a legacy to the hospitals and orphan asylums, as well as to the Church, to the end that they might pray for his soul; and a legacy to Nilus "as the most just judge of his household." Eudoxia, Mary's Greek governess, was not forgotten; and finally he commanded that all his house-slaves should be liberated, and to the end that they might not suffer from want he bequeathed to them one of his largest estates in Upper

Egypt, where they might settle and labor for their common good. He increased the handsome sums already devised by his father to the freedmen of his family.

This business occupied several hours. Nilus, who wrote while Orion dictated, giving the document a legal form, was deeply touched by the young man's fore thought and kindness; for in truth, since his desecration of the judgment-seat, he had given him up for a lost soul.

By Orion's orders this will was to be opened after four weeks, in case he should not have returned from a journey on which he proposed starting on the morrow, and this injunction revealed to the faithful steward, who had grown grey in the service, that the last scion of the house expected to run considerable risk; however, he was too modest to ask any questions, and his master did not take him into his confidence.

When, after all this, the two men went back into the anteroom, Anubis, the young clerk and Katharina's ally, was standing there. Nilus took no notice of him, and while he, with tearful eyes, stooped to kiss the hand Orion held out to him as he bid him come to take leave of him once more next evening, Anubis, who had withdrawn respectfully to a little distance, keeping his ears open, however, officiously opened the heavy iron-plated door.

Orion was exhausted and hungry; he enquired for his mother, and hearing that she had gone to lie down, he went into the dining-room to get some food. Although breakfast had but just been served, Eudoxia was awaiting him with evident impatience. Her heart was bursting with a great piece of news, and as Orion entered, greeting her, she cried out:

"Have you heard? Do you know?" Then she began, encouraged by his curt negative, to pour out to him how that Neforis, by the desire of the physician who had lately been to see her, had decided on sending her, Eudoxia, away with her granddaughter to enjoy better air under the roof of a friend of the leech's; they were to go this very day, or to-morrow at latest.

Orion was disagreeably startled by this intelligence. He had not expected that Philippus would come so early, and he himself had been the first to promote a scheme which now no longer seemed advisable.

"How very provoking!" he muttered between his teeth, as a slave offered him a roast fowl and asparagus.

"Is it not? And perhaps we shall have to go quite far into the country," said the Greek, with a languishing look, as she drew one of the long stems between her teeth.

The words and the glance made Orion feel as if he grudged the old fool the good food she was eating, and his voice was not particularly ingratiating as he replied that town and country were all the same, the only point was which would be best for the child. When he went on to say that he was quitting home next evening, Eudoxia cried out, let a stick of asparagus drop in her lap, and said despairingly: "Oh, then everything is at an end!"

He, however, interposed reproachfully: "On the contrary, then your duty begins; you must devote yourself wholly and exclusively to the child. You know that her own grandmother is averse to her. Give her your best affection, as you have already begun to do, be a mother to her; and if you really are my well-wisher, show it in that way. For my part you will find me grateful, and not in words alone. Go tomorrow to the treasurer's office; Nilus will give you the only thing by which I can at present prove my gratitude. Do your best to cherish the child; I have taken care to provide for your old age."

He rose, cutting short the Greek's profuse expressions of thanks, and betook himself to his mother. She was still in her room; however, he now sent word that he had come to see her, and she was ready to admit him, having expected that he would come even sooner.

She was reclining, half-sitting, on a divan in her cool and shady bedroom, and she at once told her son of her determination to follow the physician's advice and entrust the little girl to his friend. She spoke in a tone of sleepy indifference; but as soon as Orion opposed her and begged her to keep Mary at home, she grew more lively, and looking him wrathfully in the face exclaimed: "Can you wish that? How can you ask me?" and she went on in repining lamentation:

"Everything is changed nowadays. Old age no longer forgets; it is youth that has a short memory. Your head has long been full of other things, but I—I still remember who it was that made my lost dear one's last hours on earth a hell, even in view of the gates of Heaven!" Her breast heaved with feeble, tearless sobs—a short, convulsive gasping, and Orion did not dare contravene her wishes. He sought to soothe her with loving words and, when she recovered herself, he told her that he proposed to leave her for a short time to look after his estates, as the law required, and this information gladdened her greatly. To be alone—solitary and unobserved now seemed delightful. Those white pills did more for her, raised her spirits better, than any human society. They brought her dreams, sleeping or waking; dreams a thousand times more delightful than her real, desolate existence. To give herself up to memory, to pray, to dream, to picture herself in the other world among her beloved dead—and besides that to eat and drink, which she was always ready to do very freely—this was all she asked henceforth of life on earth.

When, to her further questions, Orion replied that he was going first to the Delta, she expressed her regret, since, if he had gone to Upper Egypt, he might have visited his sister-in-law, Mary's mother, in her convent. She sat up as she spoke, passed her hand across her forehead, and pointed to a little table near the head of the couch, on which, by the side of a cup with fruit syrup, phials, boxes, and other objects, lay a writing-tablet and a letter-scroll. This she took up and handed to Orion, saying:

"A letter from your sister-in-law. It came last evening and I began to read it; but the first words are a complaint of your father, and that—you know, just before going to sleep—I could not read any more; I could not bear it! And to-day; first there was church, and then the physician came with his request about the child; I have not yet found courage to read the rest of it.—What can any letter bring to me but evil! Do you know at all whence anything pleasant could come to me? But now: read me the letter. Not that part again about your father; that I will keep till presently for myself alone."

Orion undid the roll, and with quivering lips glanced over the nun's accusations against his father. The wildest fanaticism breathed in every line of this epistle from the martyr's widow. She had found in the cloister all she sought: she lived now, she said, in God alone and in the Divine Saviour. She thought of her child, even, only as an alien, one of God's young creatures for whom it was a joy to pray. At the same time it was her duty to care for the little one's soul, and if it were not too hard for her grandmother to part from her, she longed to see Mary once more. She had lately been chosen abbess of her convent—and no one could prevent her taking possession of the child; but she feared lest an overwhelming natural affection might drag her back to the carnal world, which she had for ever renounced, so she would have Mary brought up in a neighboring nunnery, and led to Heavenly joys, not to earthly misery—to be the wife of no sinful husband, but a pure bride of Christ.

Orion shuddered as he read and, when he laid the letter down, his mother exclaimed:

"Perhaps she is right, perhaps it is already ordained that the child should be sent to the convent, and not to the leech's friend, and started on the only path that leads to Heaven without danger or hindrance!"

But Orion said to himself that he would make it his duty to guard the happy-hearted child from this fate, and he begged his mother to consider that the first important point was to restore the little girl to health. He now saw that she had been right. His father had always obeyed the prescriptions of Philippus, and for that reason, if for no other, it would be her duty to act by his advice.

Neforis, who for some time had been casting longing eyes at a small box by her side, did not contradict him; and in the course of the afternoon Orion conducted little Mary and her governess to the house of Rufinus, who, notwithstanding the doubts he had expressed the day before, made them heartily welcome.

When Mary was lying in her bed, close by the side of Paula's, the child threw her arms round the young girl's neck as she leaned over her, and laying her head on her bosom, felt herself in soft and warm security. There, as one released from prison and bondage, she wept out her woes, pouring all the grief of her deeply wounded child's heart into that of her friend.

Paula, however, heard Orion's voice, and she longed to go down to her lover, whom she had greeted but briefly on his arrival; still, she could not bear to snatch the child from her bosom, to disturb her in her newly- found happiness and leave her at this very moment! And yet, she must— she must see him! Every impulse urged her towards him and, when Pulcheria came into the room, she placed Mary's hand in hers and said: "There, now make friends and stay together like good children till I come back again and have something nice to tell you. You are fond of Orion, little one, my story shall be all about him."

"He was obliged to go," said Pulcheria, interrupting her. "Here is his message on this tablet. He was almost dying of impatience, and when he could wait no longer he wrote this for you."

Paula took the tablet, with a cry of regret, and carried it to her room to read. He had longed for their meeting as eagerly as herself, but at last he could wait no longer. How differently—so he wrote—had he hoped to end this day which must be devoted to the rescue of her friends.

Why, oh why had she allowed herself to be detained here? Why had she not flown to him, at least for a few moments, to thank him for his kindness and faithfulness, and to hear him confess publicly and aloud what he had but murmured in her ear the day before? She returned to the little girl, anxious and dissatisfied with herself.

Orion had in fact postponed his departure till the last moment; he thought it necessary to give Amru due notice of his journey and of his rupture with the patriarch. Of all the motives which could prompt him to aid the nuns, revenge was that which the Arab could best understand.

## CHAPTER VI

As Orion rode across the bridge of boats to Fostat, the gladness that had inspired him died away. Could not—ought not Paula to have spared him a small part of the time she had devoted to the child? He had been left to make the most of a kind grasp of the hand and a grateful look of welcome. Would she not have flown to meet him, if the love of which she had assured him yesterday were as fervent, as ardent as his own? Was the proud spirit of this girl, who, as his mother said, was cold and unapproachable, incapable of passionate, self-forgetting devotion? Was there no way of lighting up in her the sacred fire which burnt in him? He was tormented by many doubts and a bitter feeling of disappointment, and a crowd of suspicions forced themselves upon him, which would never have troubled him if only he had seen her once more, had heard her happy words of love, and felt his lips consecrated by his mistress' first kiss.

He was out of spirits, indeed out of temper, as he entered the Arab general's dwelling. In the anteroom he was met by rejected petitioners, and he said to himself, with a bitter smile, that he had just been sent about his business in the same unsatisfied mood—yes, sent about his business—and by whom?

He was announced, and his spirits rose a little when he was at once admitted and led past many, who were left waiting, into the Arab governor's presence-chamber. He was received with paternal warmth; and, when Amru heard that Orion and the patriarch had come to high words, he jumped up and holding out both his hands exclaimed:

"My right hand on that, my friend; come over to Islam, and with my left I will appoint you your father's successor, in the Khaliff's name, in spite of your youth. Away with hesitation! Clasp hands; at once, quickly! I cannot bear to quit Egypt and know that there is no governor at Memphis!"

The blood tingled in the young man's veins. His father's successor! He, the new Mukaukas! How it flattered his ambition, what a way to all activity it opened out to him! It dazzled his vision, and moved him strongly to grasp the right hand which his generous patron still held out to him. But suddenly his excited fancy showed him the image of the Redeemer with whom he had entered into a silent covenant in the church, sadly averting his gentle face. At this he remembered what he had vowed; at this he forgot all his grievance against Paula; he took the general's hand, indeed, but only to raise it to his lips as he thanked him with all his heart. But then he implored him, with earnest, pleading urgency, not to be wroth with him if he remained firm and clung to the faith of his father and his ancestors. And Amru was not wroth, though it was with none of the hearty interest with which he had at first welcomed him, that he hastily warned Orion to be on his guard against the prelate, since, so long as he remained a Christian, he had no power to protect him against Benjamin.

When Orion went on to tell him that he was intending to travel for a short time, and had, in fact, come to take leave of him, the Arab was much annoyed. He, too, he said, must be going away and was starting within two days for Medina.

"And in casting my eye on you," he went on, "in spite of your youth, to fill your father's place, I took care to find a task for you which would enable you to prove that I had not put too great confidence in you. But, if you persist in your own opinions, I cannot possibly entrust so important a post as the governorship of Memphis to a Christian so young as you are; with the youthful Moslem I might have ventured on it.—However, I will not deprive you of the enterprise which I had intended for you. If you succeed in it, it will be a good thing for yourself, and I can, I believe, turn it to the benefit of the whole province—for what could take me from hence at this time, when my presence is so needful for a hundred incomplete projects, but my anxiety for the good of this country—in which I am but an alien, while you must love it as your native soil, the home of your race?—I am going to Medina because the Khaliff, in this letter, complains that I send too small a revenue into the treasury from so rich a land as Egypt. And yet not a single dinar of your taxes finds its way into my own coffers.

I keep a hundred and fifty thousand laborers at work to restore the canals and waterworks which my predecessors, the blood-sucking Byzantines, neglected so disgracefully and left to fall to ruin—I build, and plan, and sow seed for posterity to reap. All this costs money. It swallows up the lion's share of the revenue. And I am making the journey, not merely to purge myself from reproach, but to obtain Omar's permission for the future to exact no extortionate payments, but to consider only the true weal of the province. I am most unwilling to go, for a thousand reasons; and you, young man, if you care for your native land, ought . . . . Do you really love it and wish it well?"

"With all my soul!" cried Orion.

"Well then, at this time, if by any possibility you can arrange it so, you ought to remain at home, and devote yourself heart and soul to the task I have to propose to you. I hate postponements. Ride straight at the foe, and do not canter up and down till you tire the horses! that is my principle, and not in battle only. Take the moral to heart!—And you will have no time to waste; what I require is no light matter: It is that you should endeavor to sketch a new division of the districts, drawing on your own knowledge of the country and its inhabitants, and using the records and lists in the archives of your ancient government-offices, of which your father has told me; you must have special regard to the financial condition of each district. That the old mode of levying taxes is unsatisfactory we find every day; you will have ample room for improvements in every respect. Overthrow the existing arrangements, if you consider it necessary. Other men have attempted to redistribute the divisions and devise new modes of collecting the revenue. The best scheme will have the preference; and you seem to me to be the man to win the prize, and, with it, a wide and noble field of work in the future. It is not a mere sense of tedium, or a longing for the pleasures of the capital to which you are accustomed, that are tempting you to quit Memphis the melancholy. . . ."

"No, indeed, my Lord," Orion assured him. "The duty I have in view does not even profit me, and if I had not given my word I would throw myself, heart and soul, into so grand a task, no later than to-morrow. That you should expect me to solve so hard a problem is the most precious incense ever offered me. If it is only to be worthy of your confidence, I will return as soon as possible and put forth my utmost powers of intelligence and prudence, of endurance and patriotism. I have always been a diligent student; and it would be a shame indeed, if my experiences as a youth could hinder the man from outdoing the school-boy."

"That is right, well said!" replied Amru, holding out his hand. "Do your best, and you shall have ample opportunity of proving your powers.—Take my warnings to heart as regards the patriarch and the black Vekeel. I unfortunately have no one who could fill his place except the worthy Kadi Othman; but he is no soldier, and he cannot be spared from his post. Keep out of Obada's way, return soon, and may the All-merciful protect you. . . ."

When Orion had recrossed the bridge on his way home, he saw a gaily-dressed Nile-boat, such as now but rarely stopped at Memphis, lying at anchor in the dock, and on the road he met two litters followed by beasts of burden and a train of servants. The whole party had a brilliant and wealthy appearance, and at any other time would have roused his curiosity; but to-day he merely wondered for a moment who these new-comers might be, and then continued to meditate on the task proposed to him by Amru. From the bottom of his heart he cursed the hour in which he had pledged himself to take the part of these strangers; for after such long idleness he longed to be able to prove his powers. Suddenly, and as if by a miracle, he saw the way opened before him which he had himself hoped to tread, and now he was fettered and held back from an enterprise which he felt he could carry out with success and benefit to his country, while it attracted him as with a hundred lode-stones.

Next morning, when his will had been duly signed and witnessed, he called the treasurer for an interview alone with him. He had made up his mind that one person, at least, must be informed of the enterprise he had planned, and that one could be no other than Nilus. So he begged him to accompany him to the impluvium of his private residence; and several office scribes who were present heard the invitation given. They did not, however, allow themselves to be disturbed in their work;

the youngest only—a handsome lad of sixteen, an olive-complexioned Egyptian, with keen, eager black eyes, who had listened sharply to every word spoken by the treasurer and his master, quietly rose from his squatting posture as soon as they had quitted the office, and, stole, unobserved into the anteroom. From thence he flew up the ladder-like steps which led to the dovecote of which he had the care, sprang on to the roof of the lower story, and crept flat on his face till he was close to the edge of the large square opening which gave light and air to the impluvium below. With a swift movement of the hand he pushed back the awning which shaded it at midday, and listened intently to the dialogue that went on below.

This listener was Anubis, the water-wagtail's foster-brother; and he seemed to be in no way behind his beloved mistress in the art of listening; for no one could prick up his ears more sharply than Anubis. He knew, too, what was to be his reward for exposing himself on a roof to the shafts of the pitiless African sun, for Katharina, his adored play-fellow and the mistress of his ardent boy's heart, had promised him a sweet kiss, if only he would bring her back some more exact news as to Orion's perilous journey. Anubis had told her, the evening before, all he had heard in the anteroom to the office, but such general information had not satisfied her. She must see clearly before her, must know exactly what was going on, and she was not mistaken when she imagined that the reward she had promised the lad would spur him to the utmost.

Anubis had not indeed expected to gain his end so soon, boldly as he dared to hope; scarcely had he pushed aside the awning, when Orion began to explain to Nilus all his plan and purpose.

When he had finished speaking, the boy did not wait to hear Nilus reply. Intoxicated with his success, and the prospect of a guerdon which to him included all the bliss of heaven, he crept back to the dovecote. But he could not go back by the way by which he had come; for if one of the older scribes should meet him in the anteroom, he would be condemned to return to his work. He therefore wriggled along the ridge of the roof towards the fishing-cove, got over it, and laid hold of a gutter pipe, intending to slip down it; unfortunately it was old and rotten-rain was rare in Memphis—and hardly had he trusted his body after his hands when the lead gave way. The rash youth fell with the clattering fragments of the gutter from a height of four men; a heavy thump on the pavement was followed by a loud cry, and in a few minutes all the officials had heard that poor Anubis, nimble as he was, had fallen from the roof while attending to his pets, and had broken his leg.

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