

GEORG EBERS

THE BRIDE OF
THE NILE.
VOLUME 06

Georg Ebers

The Bride of the Nile. Volume 06

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CHAPTER XXII

Up to within a few days Katharina had still been a dependent and docile child, who had made it a point of honor to obey instantly, not only her mother's lightest word, but Dame Neforis, too; and, since her own Greek instructress had been dismissed, even the acid Eudoxia. She had never concealed from her mother, or the worthy teacher whom she had truly loved, the smallest breach of rules, the least naughtiness or wilful act of which she had been guilty; nay, she had never been able to rest till she had poured out a confession, before evening prayer, of all that her little heart told her was not perfectly right, to some one whom she loved, and obtained full forgiveness. Night after night the "Water- wagtail" had gone to sleep with a conscience as clear and as white as the breast of her whitest dove, and the worst sin she had ever committed during the day was some forbidden scramble, some dainty or, more frequently, some rude and angry word.

But a change had first come over her after Orion's kiss in the intoxicating perfume of the flowering trees; and almost every hour since had roused her to new hopes and new views. It had never before occurred to her to criticise or judge her mother; now she was constantly doing so. The way in which Susannah had cut herself off from her neighbors in the governor's house, to her daughter seemed perverse and in bad taste; and the bitterly vindictive attacks on her old friends, which were constantly on Susannah's lips, aggrieved the girl, and finally set her in opposition to her mother, whose judgment had hitherto seemed to her infallible. Thus, when the governor's house was closed against her, there was no one in whom she cared to confide, for a barrier stood between her and Paula, and she was painfully conscious of its height each time the wish to pass it recurred to her mind. Paula was certainly "that other" of whom Orion had spoken; when she had stolen away to see her in the evening after the funeral, she had been prompted less by a burning wish to pour out her heart to a sympathizing hearer, than by torturing curiosity mingled with jealousy. She had crept through the hedge with a strangely-mixed feeling of tender longing and sullen hatred; when they had met in the garden she had at first given herself up to the full delight of being free to speak, and of finding a listener in a woman so much her superior; but Paula's reserved replies to her bold questioning had revived her feelings of envy and grudge. Any one who did not hate Orion must, she was convinced, love him.

Were they not perhaps already pledged to each other! Very likely Paula had thought of her as merely a credulous child, and so had concealed the fact!

This "very likely" was torture to her, and she was determined to try, at any rate, to settle the doubt. She had an ally at her command; this was her foster-brother, the son of her deaf old nurse; she knew that he would blindly obey all her wishes—nay, to please her, would throw himself to the crocodiles in the Nile. Anubis had been her comrade in all her childish sports, till at the age of fourteen, after learning to read and write, her mother had obtained an appointment for him in the governor's household, as an assistant to be further trained by the treasurer Nilus. Dame Susannah intended to find him employment at a future date on her estates, or at Memphis, the centre of their administration, as he might prove himself capable. The lad was still living with his mother under the rich widow's roof, and only spent his working days at the governor's house, he was industrious and clever during office hours, though between whiles he busied himself with things altogether foreign to his future calling. At Katharina's request he had opened a communication between the two houses by means of carrier-pigeons, and many missives were thus despatched with little gossip, invitations, excuses, and the like, from Katharina to Mary and back again. Anubis took great pleasure in the pretty creatures, and by the permission of his superiors a dovecote was erected on the roof of the

treasurer's house. Mary was now lying ill, and their intercourse was at an end; still, the well-trained messengers need not be idle, and Katharina had begun to use them for a very different purpose.

Orion's envoy had been detained a long time at Rufinus' door the day before; and she had since learnt from Anubis, who was acquainted with all that took place in Nilus' office, that Paula's moneys were to be delivered over to her very shortly, and in all probability by Orion himself. They must then have an interview, and perhaps she might succeed in overhearing it. She knew well how this could be managed; the only thing was to be on the spot at the right moment.

On the morning after the full-moon, at two hours and a half before noon, the little boy whose task it was to feed the feathered messengers in their dove-cote brought her a written scrap, on which Anubis informed her that Orion was about to set out; but he was not very warmly welcomed, for the hour did not suit her at all. Early in the morning Bishop Plotinus had come to inform Susannah that Benjamin, Patriarch of Alexandria, was visiting Amru on the opposite shore, and would presently honor Memphis with his presence. He proposed to remain one day; he had begged to have no formal reception, and had left it to the bishop to find suitable quarters for himself and his escort, as he did not wish to put up at the governor's house. The vain widow had at once pressingly urged her readiness to receive the illustrious guest under her roof: The prelate's presence must bring a blessing on the house, and she thought, too, that she might turn it to advantage for several ends she just now happened to have in view.

A handsome reception must be prepared; there were but a few hours to spare, and even before the bishop had left her, she had begun to call the servants together and give them orders. The whole house must be turned upside down; some of the kitchen staff were hurried off into the town to make purchases, others bustled round the fire; the gardeners plundered the beds and bushes to weave wreaths and nosegays for decorations; from cellar to roof half a hundred of slaves, white, brown and black, were toiling with all their might, for each believed that, by rendering a service to the Patriarch, he might count on the special favor of Heaven, while their unresting mistress never ceased screaming out her orders as to what she wished done.

Susannah, who as a girl had been the eldest of a numerous and not wealthy family, and had been obliged to put her own hand to things, quite forgot now that she was a woman of position and fortune whom it ill-beseemed to do her own household work; she was here, there, and everywhere, and had an eye on all—excepting indeed her own daughter; but she was the petted darling of the house, brought up to Greek refinement, whose help in such arduous labors was not to be thought of; indeed, she would only have been in the way.

When the bishop had taken his leave Katharina was merely desired to be ready in her best attire, with a nosegay in her hand, to receive the Patriarch under the awning spread outside the entrance. More than this the widow did not require of her, and as the girl flew up the stairs to her room she was thinking: "Orion will be coming directly: it still wants fully two hours of noon, and if he stays there half an hour that will be more than enough. I shall have time then to change my dress, but I will put my new sandals on at once as a precaution; nurse and the maid must wait for me in my room. They must have everything ready for my return— perhaps he and Paula may have much to say to each other. He will not get off without a lecture, unless she has already found an opportunity elsewhere of expressing her indignation."

A few minutes later she had sprung to the top of a mound of earth covered with turf, which she had some time since ordered to be thrown up close behind the hedge through which she had yesterday made her way. Her little feet were shod with handsome gold sandals set with sapphires, and she seated herself on a low bench with a satisfied smile, as though to assist at a theatrical performance. Some broad-leaved shrubs, placed behind this place of ambush, screened her to some extent from the heat of the sun, and as she sat watching and listening in this lurking place, which she was not using for the first time, her heart began to beat more quickly; indeed, in her excitement she quite forgot some sweetmeats which she had brought to wile away the time and had poured into a large leaf in her lap.

Happily she had not long to wait; Orion arrived in his mother's four-wheeled covered chariot. By the side of the driver sat a servant, and a slave was perched on the step to the door on each side of the vehicle. It was followed by a few idlers, men and women, and a crowd of half-naked children. But they got nothing by their curiosity, for the carruca did not draw up in the road, but was driven into Rufinus' garden, and the trees and shrubs hid it from the gaze of the expectant mob, which presently dispersed.

Orion got out at the principal door of the house, followed by the treasurer; and while the old man welcomed the son of the Mukaukas, Nilus superintended the transfer of a considerable number of heavy sacks to their host's private room.

Nothing of all this had seemed noteworthy to Katharina but the quantity and size of the bags—full, no doubt, of gold—and the man, whom alone she cared to see. Never had she thought Orion so handsome; the long, flowing mourning robe, which he had flung over his shoulder in rich folds, added to the height of his stately form; his abundant hair, not curled but waving naturally, set off his face which, pale and grave as it was, both touched and attracted her irresistibly. The thought that this splendid creature had once courted her, loved her, kissed her—that he had once been hers, and that she had lost him to another, was a pang like physical agony, mounting from her heart to her brain.

After Orion had vanished indoors, she still seemed to see him; and when she thrust his image from her fancy, forced to remind herself that he was now standing face to face with that other, and was looking at Paula as, a few days since, he had looked at her, the anguish of her soul was doubled. And was Paula only half as happy as she had been in that hour of supreme bliss? Ah! how her heart ached! She longed to leap over the hedge—she could have rushed into the house and flung herself between Paula and Orion.

Still, there she sat; restless but without moving; wholly under the dominion of evil thoughts, among which a good one rarely and timidly intruded, with her eyes fixed on Rufinus' dwelling. It stood in the broad sunshine as silent as death, as if all were sleeping. In the garden, too, all was motionless but the thin jet of water, which danced up from the marble tank with a soft and fitful, but monotonous tinkle, while butterflies, dragonflies, bees, and beetles, whose hum she could not hear, seemed to circle round the flowers without a sound. The birds must be asleep, for not one was to be seen or broke the oppressive stillness by a chirp or a twitter. The chariot at the door might have been spellbound; the driver had dismounted, and he, with the other slaves, had stretched himself in the narrow strips of shade cast by the pillars of the verandah; their chins buried in their breasts, they spoke not a word. The horses alone were stirring-flicking off the flies with their flowing tails, or turning to bite the burning stings they inflicted. This now and then lifted the pole, and as the chariot crunched backwards a few inches, the charioteer growled out a sleepy "Brrr."

Katharina had laid a large leaf on her head for protection against the sun; she did not dare use a parasol or a hat for fear of being seen. The shade cast by the shrubs was but scanty, the noontide heat was torment; still, though minute followed minute and one-quarter of an hour after another crept by at a snail's pace, she was far too much excited to be sleepy. She needed no dial to tell her the time; she knew exactly how late it was as one shadow stole to this point and another to that, and, by risking the danger to her eyes of glancing up at the sun, she could make doubly sure.

It was now within three-quarters of an hour of noon, and in that house all was as still as before; the Patriarch, however, might be expected to be punctual, and she had done nothing towards dressing but putting on those gilt sandals. This brought her to swift decision she hurried to her room, desired the maid not to dress her hair, contenting herself with pinning a few roses into its natural curls. Then, in fierce haste, she made her throw on her sea-green dress of bombyx silk edged with fine embroidery, and fasten her peplos with the first pins that came to hand; and when the snap of her bracelet of costly sapphires broke, as she herself was fastening it, she flung it back among her other trinkets as she might have tossed an unripe apple back upon a heap. She slipped her little hand into a gold spiral which curled round half her arm, and gathered up the rest of her jewels, to put them on out of doors

as she sat watching. The waiting-woman was ordered to come for her at noon with the flowers for the Patriarch, and, in a quarter of an hour after leaving her lurking place, she was back there again. Just in time;—for while she was putting on the trinkets Nilus came out, followed by some slaves with several leather bags which they replaced in the chariot. Then the treasurer stepped in and with him Philippus, and the vehicle drove away.

"So Paula has entrusted her property to Orion again," thought Katharina. "They are one again; and henceforth there will be endless going and coming between the governor's house and that of Rufinus. A very pretty game!—But wait, only wait." And she set her little white teeth; but she retained enough self-possession to mark all that took place.

During her absence indoors Orion's black horse had been brought into the garden; a groom on horseback was leading him, and as she watched their movements she muttered to herself with a smile of scorn: "At any rate he is not going to carry her home with him at once."

A few minutes passed in silence, and at last Paula came out, and close behind her, almost by her side, walked Orion.

His cheeks were no longer pale, far from it, no more than Katharina's were; they were crimson! How bright his eyes were, how radiant with satisfaction and gladness!—She only wished she were a viper to sting them both in the heel!—At the same time Paula had lost none of her proud and noble dignity—and he? He gazed at his companion like a rapt soul; she fancied she could see the folds of his mourning cloak rising and falling with the beating of his heart. Paula, too, was in mourning. Of course. They were one; his sorrow must be hers, although she had fled from his father's house as though it were a prison. And of course this virtuous beauty knew full well that nothing became her better than dark colors! In manner, gait and height this pair looked like two superior beings, destined for each other by Fate; Katharina herself could not but confess it.

Some spiteful demon—a friendly one, she thought—led them past her, so close that her sharp ears could catch every word they said as they slowly walked on, or now and then stood still, dogged by the agile water- wagtail, who stole along parallel with them on the other side of the hedge.

"I have so much to thank you for," were the first words she caught from Orion, "that I am shy of asking you yet another favor; but this one indeed concerns yourself. You know how deep a blow was struck me by little Mary's childish hand; still, the impulse that prompted her had its rise in her honest, upright feeling and her idolizing love of you."

"And you would like me to take charge of her?" asked Paula. "Such a wish is of course granted beforehand -only. . . ."

"Only?" repeated Orion.

"Only you must send her here; for you know that I will never enter your doors again."

"Alas that it should be so!—But the child has been very ill and can hardly leave the house at present; and—since I must own it—my mother avoids her in a way which distresses the child, who is over-excited as it is, and fills her with new terrors."

"How can Neforis treat her little favorite so?"

"Remember," said Orion, "what my father has been to my poor mother. She is now completely crushed: and, when she sees the little girl, that last scene of her unhappy husband's life is brought back to her, with all that came upon my father and me, beyond a doubt through Mary. She looks on the poor little thing as the bane of the family?"

"Then she must come away," said Paula much touched. "Send her to us.

Kind and comforting souls dwell under Rufinus' roof."

"I thank you warmly. I will entreat my mother most urgently. . . ."

"Do so," interrupted Paula. "Have you ever seen Pulcheria, the daughter of my worthy host?"

"Yes.—A singularly lovable creature!"

"She will soon take Mary into her faithful heart—"

"And our poor little girl needs a friend, now that Susannah has forbidden her daughter to visit at our house."

The conversation now turned on the two girls, of whom they spoke as sweet children, both much to be pitied; and, when Orion observed that his niece was old for her tender years, Paula replied with a slight accent of reproach: "But Katharina, too, has ripened much during the last few days; the lively child has become a sober girl; her recent experience is a heavy burden on her light heart."

"But, if I know her at all, it will soon be cast off," replied Orion. "She is a sweet, happy little creature; and, of all the dreadful things I did on that day of horrors, the most dreadful perhaps was the woe I wrought for her. There is no excuse possible, and yet it was solely to gratify my mother's darling wish that I consented to marry Katharina.—However, enough of that.—Henceforth I must march through life with large strides, and she to whom love gives courage to become my wife, must be able to keep pace with me."

Katharina could only just hear these last words. The speakers now turned down the path, sparsely shaded from the midday sun by a few trees, which led to the tank in the centre of the garden, and they went further and further from her.

She heard no more—still, she knew enough and could supply the rest. The object of her ambush was gained: she knew now with perfect certainty who was "the other." And how they had spoken of her! Not as a deserted bride, whose rights had been trodden in the dust, but as a child who is dismissed from the room as soon as it begins to be in the way. But she thought she could see through that couple and knew why they had spoken of her thus. Paula, of course, must prevent any new tie from being formed between herself and Orion; and as for Orion, common prudence required that he should mention her—her, whom he had but lately loaded with tenderness—as a mere child, to protect himself against the jealousy of that austere "other" one. That he had loved her, at any rate that evening under the trees, she obstinately maintained in her own mind; to that conviction she must cling desperately, or lose her last foothold. Her whole being was a prey to a frightful turmoil of feeling. Her hands shook; her mouth was parched as by the midday heat; she knew that there were withered leaves between her feet and the sandals she wore, that twigs had got caught in her hair; but she could not care and when the pair were screened from her by the denser shrubs she flew back to her raised seat—from which she could again discover them. At this moment she would have given all she held best and dearest, to be the thing it vexed her so much to be called: a water-wagtail, or some other bird.

It must be very near noon if not already past; she dusted her sandals and tidied her curly hair, picking out the dry leaves and not noticing that at the same time a rose fell out on the ground. Only her hands were busy; her eyes were elsewhere, and suddenly they brightened again, for the couple on which she kept them fixed were coming back, straight towards the hedge, and she would soon be able again to hear what they were saying.

CHAPTER XXIII

Orion and Paula had had much to talk about, since the young man had arrived. The discussion over the safe keeping of the girl's money had been tedious. Finally, her counsellors had decided to entrust half of it to Gamaliel the jeweller and his brother, who carried on a large business in Constantinople. He happened to be in Memphis, and they had both declared themselves willing each to take half of the sum in question and use it at interest. They would be equally responsible for its security, so that each should make good the whole of the property in their hands in case of the other stopping payment. Nilus undertook to procure legal sanction and the necessary sixteen witnesses to this transaction.

The other half of her fortune was, by the advice of Philippus, to be placed in the hands of a brother of Haschim's, the Arab merchant, who had a large business as money changer in Fostat, the new town on the further shore, in which the merchant himself was a partner. This investment had the advantage of being perfectly safe, at any rate so long as the Arabs ruled the land.

After all this was settled Nilus departed with that half of the money which Orion was to hand over to the keeping of the Moslem money changer on the following morning.

Paula, though she had taken no part in the men's discussion, had been present throughout, and had expressed her grateful consent. The clearness, gravity, and decision which Orion had displayed had not escaped her notice; and though the treasurer's shrewd remarks, briefly and modestly made, had in every case proved final, it was Orion's reasoning and explanations that had most come home to her, for it seemed to her that he was always prompted by loftier, wider, and more statesmanlike considerations than the others.

When this was over she and Orion were left together, and neither she nor the young man had been able to escape a few moments of anxious heart-beating.

It was not till the governor's son had summoned up his courage and, sinking on his knees, was imploring her pardon, that she recovered some firmness and reminded him of the letter he had sent her. But her heart drew her to him almost irresistibly, and in order not to yield to its urgent prompts, she hastily enquired what he had meant by the exchange he had written about.

At this he went up to her with downcast eyes, drew a small box out of the breast of his robe, and took out the emerald with the damaged setting. He held them towards her with a beseeching gesture, exclaiming, with all the peculiar sweetness of his deep voice:

"It is your property! Take it and give me in return your confidence, your forgiveness."

She drew back a little, looking first at him and then at the stone and its setting—surprised, pleased, and deeply moved, with a bright light in her eyes. The young man found it impossible to utter a single word, only holding the jewel and the broken setting closer to her, and yet closer, like some poor man who makes bold to offer the best he has to a wealthy superior, though conscious that it is all too humble a gift to find favor.

And Paula was not long undecided; she took the proffered gem and feasted her glistening eyes with glad thankfulness on her recovered treasure.

Two days ago she had thought of it as defiled and desecrated; it had gratified her pride to fancy that she had cast the precious jewel at the feet, as it were, of Neforis and her son, never to see it again. So hard is it to forego the right of hating those who have basely brought grief into our lives and anguish to our souls!—and yet Paula, who would not have yielded this right at any price a short time since, now waived it of her own free will—nay, thrust it from her like some tormenting incubus which choked her pulses and kept her from breathing freely. In this gem she saw once more a cherished memorial of her lost mother, the honorable gift of a great monarch to her forefathers; and she was happy to possess it once more. But it was not this that gave life to the warm, sunny glow of happiness which thrilled through her, or occasioned its quick and delightful growth; for her eye did not linger on

the large and glittering stone, but rested spellbound on the poor gold frame which had once held it, and which had cost her such hours of anguish. This broken and worthless thing, it is true, was powerful to justify her in the opinions of her judges and her enemies; with this in her hand she would easily confute her accusers. Still, it was not that which so greatly consoled her. The physician's remark, that there was no greater joy than the discovery that we have been deceived in thinking ill of another, recurred to her mind; and she had once loved the man who now stood before her open to every good influence, deeply moved in her presence; and her judgment of him had been a hundred, a thousand times too hard. Only a noble soul could confidently expect magnanimity from a foe and he, he had put himself defenceless into the power of her who had been mortally stricken by the most fateful, and perhaps the only disgraceful act of his life. In giving up this gold frame Orion also gave himself up; with this talisman in her possession she stood before him as irresistible Fate. And now, as she looked up at him and met his large eyes, full of life and intellect but sparkling through tears of violent agitation, she felt absolutely certain that this favorite of Fortune, though he had indeed sinned deeply and disastrously, was capable of the highest and greatest aims if he had a friend to show him what life required of him and were but ready to follow such guidance. And such a friend she would be to him!

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