

GEORG EBERS

THE BRIDE OF

THE NILE.

VOLUME 04

Georg Ebers

The Bride of the Nile. Volume 04

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CHAPTER XIII

Paula's report of the day's proceedings, of Orion's behavior, and of the results of the trial angered the leech beyond measure; he vehemently approved the girl's determination to quit this cave of robbers, this house of wickedness, of treachery, of imbecile judges and false witnesses, as soon as possible. But she had no opportunity for a quiet conversation with him, for Philippus soon had his hands full in the care of the sufferers.

Rustem, the Masdakite, who till now had been lying unconscious, had been roused from his lethargy by some change of treatment, and loudly called for his master Haschim. When the Arab did not appear, and it was explained to him that he could not hope to see him before the morning, the young giant sat up among his pillows, propping himself on his arms set firmly against the couch behind him, looked about him with a wandering gaze, and shook his big head like an aggrieved lion—but that his thick mane of hair had been cut off—abusing the physician all the time in his native tongue, and in a deep, rolling, bass voice that rang through the rooms though no one understood a word. Philippus, quite undaunted, was trying to adjust the bandage over his wound, when Rustem suddenly flung his arms round his body and tried with all his might, and with foaming lips, to drag him down. He clung to his antagonist, roaring like a wild beast; even now Philippus never for an instant lost his presence of mind but desired the nun to fetch two strong slaves. The Sister hurried away, and Paula remained the eyewitness of a fearful struggle. The physician had twisted his ancles round those of the stalwart Persian, and putting forth a degree of strength which could hardly have been looked for in a stooping student, tall and large-boned as he was, he wrenched the Persian's hands from his hips, pressed his fingers between those of Rustem, forced him back on to his pillows, set his knees against the brazen frame of the couch, and so effectually held him down that he could not sit up again. Rustem exerted every muscle to shake off his opponent; but the leech was the stronger, for the Masdakite was weakened by fever and loss of blood. Paula watched this contest between intelligent force and the animal strength of a raving giant with a beating heart, trembling in every limb. She could not help her friend, but she followed his every movement as she stood at the head of the bed; and as he held down the powerful creature before whom her frail uncle had cowered in abject terror, she could not help admiring his manly beauty; for his eyes sparkled with unwonted fire, and the mean chin seemed to lengthen with the frightful effort he was putting forth, and so to be brought into proportion with his wide forehead and the rest of his features. Her spirit quaked for him; she fancied she could see something great and heroic in the man, in whom she had hitherto discovered no merit but his superior intellect.

The struggle had lasted some minutes before Philip felt the man's arms grow limp, and he called to Paula to bring him a sheet—a rope—what not—to bind the raving man. She flew into the next room, quite collected; fetched her handkerchief, snatched off the silken girdle that bound her waist, rushed back and helped the leech to tie the maniac's hands. She understood her friend's least word, or a movement of his finger; and when the slaves whom the nun had fetched came into the room, they found Rustem with his hands firmly bound, and had only to prevent him from leaping out of bed or throwing himself over the edge. Philippus, quite out of breath, explained to the slaves how they were to act, and when he opened his medicine-chest Paula noticed that his swollen, purple fingers were trembling. She took out the phial to which he pointed, mixed the draught according to his orders, and was not afraid to pour it between the teeth of the raving man, forcing them open with the help of the slaves.

The soothing medicine calmed him in a few minutes, and the leech himself could presently wash the wound and apply a fresh dressing with the practised aid of the Sister.

Meanwhile the crazy girl had been waked by the ravings of the Persian, and was anxiously enquiring if the dog—the dreadful dog—was there. But she soon allowed herself to be quieted by Paula, and she answered the questions put to her so rationally and gently, that her nurse called the physician who could confirm Paula in her hope that a favorable change had taken place in her mental condition. Her words were melancholy and mild; and when Paula remarked on this Philippus observed:

"It is on the bed of sickness that we learn to know our fellow-creatures. The frantic girl, who perhaps fell on the son of this house with murderous intent, now reveals her true, sweet nature. And as for that poor fellow, he is a powerful creature, an honest one too; I would stake my ten fingers on it!"

"What makes you so sure of that?"

"Even in his delirium he did not once scratch or bite, but only defended himself like a man.—Thank you, now, for your assistance. If you had not flung the cord round his hands, the game might have ended very differently."

"Surely not!" exclaimed Paula decidedly. "How strong you are, Philip.

I feel quite alarmed!"

"You?" said the leech laughing. "On the contrary, you need never be alarmed again now that you have seen by chance that your champion is no weakling.—Pfooh! I shall be glad now of a little rest." She offered him her handkerchief, and while he thankfully used it to wipe his brow—controlling with much difficulty the impulse to press it to his lips, he added lightly:

"With such an assistant everything must go well. There is no merit in being strong; every one can be strong who comes into the world with healthy blood and well-knit bones, who keeps all his limbs well exercised, as I did in my youth, and who does not destroy his inheritance by dissipated living.—However, I still feel the struggle in my hands; but there is some good wine in the next room yet, and two or three cups of it will do me good." They went together into the adjoining room where, by this time, most of the lamps were extinguished. Paula poured out the wine, touched the goblet with her lips, and he emptied it at a draught; but he was not to be allowed to drink off a second, for he had scarcely raised it, when they heard voices in the Masdakite's room, and Neforis came in. The governor's careful wife had not quitted her husband's couch—even Rustem's storming had not induced her to leave her post; but when she was informed by the slaves what had been going on, and that Paula was still up-stairs with the leech, she had come to the strangers' rooms as soon as her husband could spare her to speak to Philippus, to represent to Paula what the proprieties required, and to find out what the strange noises could be which still seemed to fill the house—at this hour usually as silent as the grave. They proceeded from the sick-rooms, but also from Orion, who had just come in, and from Nilus the treasurer, who had been called by the former into his room, though the night was fast drawing on to morning. To the governor's wife everything seemed ominous at the close of this terrible day, marked in the calendar as unlucky; so she made her way up-stairs, escorted by her husband's night watcher, and holding in her hand a small reliquary to which she ascribed the power of banishing vile spirits.

She came into the sick-room swiftly and noiselessly, put the nun through a strict cross-examination with the fretful sharpness of a person disturbed in her night's rest. Then she went into the sitting-room where Philippus was on the point of pledging Paula in his second cup of wine, while she stood before him with dishevelled hair and robe ungirt. All this was an offence against good manners such as she would not suffer in her house, and she stoutly ordered her husband's niece to go to bed. After all the offences that had been pardoned her this day—no, yesterday—she exclaimed, it would have been more becoming in the girl to examine herself in silence, in her own room, to exorcise the lying spirits which had her in their power, and implore her Saviour for forgiveness, than to pretend

to be nursing the sick while she was carrying on, with a young man, an orgy which, as the Sister had just told her, had lasted since mid-day.

Paula spoke not a word, though the color changed in her face more than once as she listened to this speech. But when Neforis finally pointed to the door, she said, with all the cold pride she had at her command when she was the object of unworthy suspicions:

"Your aim is easily seen through. I should scorn to reply, but that you are the wife of the man who, till you set him against me, was glad to call himself my friend and protector, and who is also related to me. As usual, you attribute to me an unworthy motive. In showing me the door of this room consecrated by suffering, you are turning me out of your house, which you and your son—for I must say it for once—have made a hell to me."

"I! And my—No! this is indeed—" exclaimed the matron in panting rage. She clasped her hands over her heaving bosom and her pale face was dyed crimson, while her eyes flashed wrathful lightnings. "That is too much; a thousand times too much—a thousand times—do you hear?—And I—I condescend to answer you! We picked her up in the street, and have treated her like a daughter, spent enormous sums on her, and now. . . ."

This was addressed to the leech rather than to Paula; but she took up the gauntlet and replied in a tone of unqualified scorn:

"And now I plainly declare, as a woman of full age, free to dispose of myself, that to-morrow morning I leave this house with everything that belongs to me, even if I should go as a beggar;—this house, where I have been grossly insulted, where I and my faithful servant have been falsely condemned, and where he is even now about to be murdered."

"And where you have been dealt with far too mildly," Neforis shrieked at her audacious antagonist, "and preserved from sharing the fate of the robber you smuggled into the house. To save a criminal—it is unheard of:—you dared to accuse the son of your benefactor of being a corrupt judge."

"And so he is," exclaimed Paula furious. "And what is more, he has inveigled the child whom you destine to be his wife into bearing false witness. More—much more could I say, but that, even if I did not respect the mother, your husband has deserved that I should spare him."

"Spare him-spare!" cried Neforis contemptuously. "You—you will spare us! The accused will be merciful and spare the judge! But you shall be made to speak;—aye, made to speak! And as to what you, a slanderer, can say about false witness. . . ."

"Your own granddaughter," interrupted the leech, "will be compelled to repeat it before all the world, noble lady, if you do not moderate yourself."

Neforis laughed hysterically.

"So that is the way the wind blows!" she exclaimed, quite beside herself. "The sick-room is a temple of Bacchus and Venus; and this disgraceful conduct is not enough, but you must conspire to heap shame and disgrace on this righteous house and its masters."

Then, resting her left hand which held the reliquary on her hip, she added with hasty vehemence:

"So be it. Go away; go wherever you please! If I find you under this roof to-morrow at noon, you thankless, wicked girl, I will have you turned out into the streets by the guard. I hate you—for once I will ease my poor, tormented heart—I loathe you; your very existence is an offence to me and brings misfortune on me and on all of us; and besides —besides, I should prefer to keep the emeralds we have left."

This last and cruelest taunt, which she had brought out against her better feelings, seemed to have relieved her soul of a hundred-weight of care; she drew a deep breath, and turning to Philippus, went on far more quietly and rationally:

"As for you, Philip, my husband needs you. You know well what we have offered you and you know George's liberal hand. Perhaps you will think better of it, and will learn to perceive. . . ."

"I! . . ." said the leech with a lofty smile. "Do you really know me so little? Your husband, I am ready to admit, stands high in my esteem, and when he wants me he will no doubt send for me. But

never again will I cross this threshold uninvited, or enter a house where right is trodden underfoot, where defenceless innocence is insulted and abandoned to despair.

"You may stare in astonishment! Your son has desecrated his father's judgment-seat, and the blood of guiltless Hiram is on his head.—You— well, you may still cling to your emeralds. Paula will not touch them; she is too high-souled to tell you who it is that you would indeed do well to lock up in the deepest dungeon-cell! What I have heard from your lips breaks every tie that time had knit between us. I do not demand that my friends should be wealthy, that they should have any attractions or charm, any special gifts of mind or body; but we must meet on common ground: that of honorable feeling. That you did not bring into the world, or you have lost it; and from this hour I am a stranger to you and never wish to see you again, excepting by the side of your husband when he requires me."

He spoke the last words with such immeasurable dignity that Neforis was startled and bereft of all self-control. She had been treated as a wretch worthy of utter scorn by a man beneath her in rank, but whom she always regarded as one of the most honest, frank and pure-minded she had ever known; a man indispensable to her husband, because he knew how to mitigate his sufferings, and could restrain him from the abuse of his narcotic anodyne. He was the only physician of repute, far and wide. She was to be deprived of the services of this valuable ally, to whom little Mary and many of the household owed their lives, by this Syrian girl; and she herself, sure that she was a good and capable wife and mother, was to stand there like a thing despised and avoided by every honest man, through this evil genius of her house!

It was too much. Tortured by rage, vexation, and sincere distress, she said in a complaining voice, while the tears started to her eyes:

"But what is the meaning of all this? You, who know me, who have seen me ruling and caring for my family, you turn your back upon me in my own house and point the finger at me? Have I not always been a faithful wife, nursing my husband for years and never leaving his sick-bed, never thinking of anything but how to ease his pain? I have lived like a recluse from sheer sense of duty and faithful love, while other wives, who have less means than I, live in state and go to entertainments.—And whose slaves are better kept and more often freed than ours? Where is the beggar so sure of an alms as in our house, where I, and I alone, uphold piety?—And now am I so fallen that the sun may not shine on me, and that a worthy man like you should withdraw his friendship all in a moment, and for the sake of this ungrateful, loveless creature—because, because, what did you call it—because the mind is wanting in me—or what did you call it that I must have before you...?"

"It is called feeling," interrupted the leech, who was sorry for the unhappy woman, in whom he knew there was much that was good. "Is the word quite new to you, my lady Neforis?—It is born with us; but a firm will can elevate the least noble feeling, and the best that nature can bestow will deteriorate through self-indulgence. But, in the day of judgment, if I am not very much mistaken, it is not our acts but our feeling that will be weighed. It would ill-become me to blame you, but I may be allowed to pity you, for I see the disease in your soul which, like gangrene in the body. . ."

"What next!" cried Neforis.

"This disease," the physician calmly went on—"I mean hatred, should be far indeed from so pious a Christian. It has stolen into your heart like a thief in the night, has eaten you up, has made bad blood, and led you to treat this heavily-afflicted orphan as though you were to put stocks and stones in the path of a blind man to make him fall. If, as it would seem, my opinion still weighs with you a little, before Paula leaves your house you will ask her pardon for the hatred with which you have persecuted her for years, which has now led you to add an intolerable insult—in which you yourself do not believe—to all the rest."

At this Paula, who had been watching the physician all through his speech, turned to Dame Neforis, and unclasped her hands which were lying in her lap, ready to shake hands with her uncle's wife if she only offered hers, though she was still fully resolved to leave the house.

A terrible storm was raging in the lady's soul. She felt that she had often been unkind to Paula. That a painful doubt still obscured the question as to who had stolen the emerald she had unwillingly confessed before she had come up here. She knew that she would be doing her husband a great service by inducing the girl to remain, and she would only too gladly have kept the leech in the house;—but then how deeply had she, and her son, been humiliated by this haughty creature!

Should she humble herself to her, a woman so much younger, offer her hand, make....

At this moment they heard the tinkle of the silver bowl, into which her husband threw a little ball when he wanted her. His pale, suffering face rose before her inward eye, she could hear him asking for his opponent at draughts, she could see his sad, reproachful gaze when she told him to-morrow that she, Neforis, had driven his niece, the daughter of the noble Thomas, out of the house—, with a swift impulse she went towards Paula, grasping the reliquary in her left hand and holding out her right, and said in a low voice.

"Shake hands, girl. I often ought to have behaved differently to you; but why have you never in the smallest thing sought my love? God is my witness that at first I was fully disposed to regard you as a daughter, but you—well, let it pass. I am sorry now that I should—if I have distressed you."

At the first words Paula had placed her hand in that of Neforis. Hers was as cold as marble, the elder woman's was hot and moist; it seemed as though their hands were typical of the repugnance of their hearts. They both felt it so, and their clasp was but a brief one. When Paula withdrew hers, she preserved her composure better than the governor's wife, and said quite calmly, though her cheeks were burning:

"Then we will try to part without any ill-will, and I thank you for having made that possible. To-morrow morning I hope I may be permitted to take leave of my uncle in peace, for I love him; and of little Mary."

"But you need not go now! On the contrary, I urgently request you to stay," Neforis eagerly put in.

"George will not let you leave. You yourself know how fond he is of you."

"He has often been as a father to me," said Paula, and even her eyes shone through tears. "I would gladly have stayed with him till the end. Still, it is fixed—I must go."

"And if your uncle adds his entreaties to mine?"

"It will be in vain."

Neforis took the maiden's hand in her own again, and tried with genuine anxiety to persuade her, —but Paula was firm. She adhered to her determination to leave the governor's house in the morning.

"But where will you find a suitable house?" cried Neforis. "A residence that will be fit for you?"

"That shall be my business," replied the physician. "Believe me, noble lady, it would be best for all that Paula should seek another home. But it is to be hoped that she may decide on remaining in Memphis."

At this Neforis exclaimed:

"Here, with us, is her natural home!—Perhaps God may turn your heart for your uncle's sake, and we may begin a new and happier life." Paula's only reply was a shake of the head; but Neforis did not see it the metal tinkle sounded for the third time, and it was her duty to respond to its call.

As soon as she had left the room Paula drew a deep breath, exclaiming:

"O God! O God! How hard it was to refrain from flinging in her teeth the crime her wicked son.... No, no; nothing should have made me do that. But I cannot tell you how the mere sight of that woman angers me, how light-hearted I feel since I have broken down the bridge that connected me with this house and with Memphis."

"With Memphis?" asked Philippus.

"Yes," said Paula gladly. "I go away—away from hence, out of the vicinity of this woman and her son!—Whither? Oh! back to Syria, or to Greece—every road is the right one, if it only takes me away from this place."

"And I, your friend?" asked Philippus.

"I shall bear the remembrance of you in a grateful heart."

The physician smiled, as though something had happened just as he expected; after a moment's reflection he said:

"And where can the Nabathæan find you, if indeed he discovers your father in the hermit of Sinai?"

The question startled and surprised Paula, and Philippus now adduced every argument to convince her that it was necessary that she should remain in the City of the Pyramids. In the first place she must liberate her nurse—in this he could promise to help her—and everything he said was so judicious in its bearing on the circumstances that had to be reckoned with, and the facts actual or possible, that she was astonished at the practical good sense of this man, with whom she had generally talked only of matters apart from this world. Finally she yielded, chiefly for the sake of her father and Perpetua; but partly in the hope of still enjoying his society. She would remain in Memphis, at any rate for the present, under the roof of a friend of the physician's—long known to her by report—a Melchite like herself, and there await the further development of her fate.

To be away from Orion and never, never to see him again was her heartfelt wish. All places were the same to her where she had no fear of meeting him. She hated him; still she knew that her heart would have no peace so long as such a meeting was possible. Still, she longed to free herself from a desire to see what his further career would be, which came over her again and again with overwhelming and terrible power. For that reason, and for that only, she longed to go far, far away, and she was hardly satisfied by the leech's assurance that her new protector would be able to keep away all visitors whom she might not wish to receive. And he himself, he added, would make it his business to stand between her and all intruders the moment she sent for him.

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