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THE BRIDE OF THE NILE

By Georg Ebers

Volume 7.

CHAPTER I. [Note: In the print copy of this eBook, the chapter numbers and page numbers here start over at one.]

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

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

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

accompanied him!

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

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

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

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

As often happens, the death of one man had changed everything in his house so utterly as to make it unlike the same; though his removal had made it neither richer nor poorer, and though his secluded presence of late had scarcely had an appreciable influence. The rooms formerly so full of life now seemed dead. Petitioners and suppliants no longer crowded the anteroom, and all visits of condolence had, according to the ancient custom, been received on the day after the funeral. The Lady Neforis had ceased fussing and bustling, the clatter of her keys and her scolding were no longer to be heard; she sat apart, either in her sleeping-room or the cool hall with the fountain which had been her husband's favorite room, excepting when she was at church whither she went twice every day. She returned from thence with the same weary, abstracted expression that she took there, and any one seeing her lying on the divan which her husband had formerly occupied, idly absorbed in gloomy thought, would hardly have recognized her as the same woman who had but lately been so active and managing. She did not exactly mourn or bewail her loss; indeed, she had no tears for her grief, as though she had shed them all, once for all, during the night after his death and burial. But she could not attain to that state of sadness made sacred by memories with which consoling angels so often mingle some drops of sweetness, after the first anguish is overpast. She felt—she knew—that with her husband a portion of her own being had been riven from her, but she could not yet perceive that this last portion was nothing less than the very foundations of her whole moral and social being.

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

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

frugal heart, accustomed to spend all its store of love on so few objects—nay, chiefly on one alone who was now no more!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I can but obey your desire, holy Father; but, at the same time, I do not know whether it becomes the son to grasp the hand of the foe who was not to be appeased even by Death, the reconciler—who

grossly insulted the father, the noblest of men, and, in him, the son too, at the grave itself."

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

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

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

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

"Yes," said Orion firmly.

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

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

"And that your father did!" interrupted the old man. "Peace be to him! He is now, no doubt, gazing on the glory of the Lord. And nevertheless I could forbid the priesthood here showing him honor at the grave.—Why? For what urgent reason was such a prohibition spoken by a friend against a friend?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Your prophecy," replied Orion, "had, no doubt, a marked effect on my father; and when the cause of the emperor and the Greeks was lost, your opinion that the Melchites were unbelievers as much as the sons of Islam, was of infinite comfort to him. For he, if any one—as you know—had good reason to hate the sectarians who killed his two sons in their prime. What followed, he did to rescue his and your unfortunate brethren and dependants from destruction. Here, here in this desk, lies his answer to the emperor's accusations, as given to the Greek deputation who had speech of him in this very room. He wrote it down as soon as they had left him. Will you hear it?"

"I can guess its purport."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And they were right," replied the patriarch, "for they were not yet acquainted with truth. In a worldly sense, even now, each of us may aim at such magnanimity; but the man who forgives those who tamper with the sacred truth, which is the bread, meat, and wine of the Christian's soul, sins against that truth; and, if he is a leader of men, he draws on those who look up to him, and who are only too ready to follow his example, into everlasting fire. Where your father ought to have been a recalcitrant though conquered enemy, he became an ally; nay, so far as the leader of the infidels was concerned, a friend—how many tears it cost me! And our hapless people were forced to see this attitude of their chief, and imitated it.—Forgive their seducer, Merciful God!—forming their conduct on his. Thousands fell away from our saving faith and went over to those, who in their eyes could not be reprobate, could not be damned, since they saw them dwelling and working hand-in-hand with their wise and righteous leader; and it was simply and solely to warn his misguided people that I did not hesitate to wound my own heart, to raise the voice of reproof at the grave of a dear friend, and to refuse the honor and blessing of which his just and virtuous life rendered him more worthy than thousands of others. I have spoken, and now your foolish anger must be appeased; now you will grasp the hand held out to you by the shepherd of the souls entrusted to him with an easy and willing heart."

And again he offered his hand to Orion, who, however, again took it doubtfully, and instead of looking the prelate in the face, cast down his eyes in gloomy bewilderment. The patriarch appeared not to

observe the young man's repulsion and clasped his hand warmly. Then he changed the subject, speaking of the grieving widow, of the decadence of Memphis, of Orion's plans for the future, and finally of the gems dedicated to the Church by the deceased Mukaukas. The dialogue had taken a calm, conversational tone; the patriarch was sitting in the dead man's arm-chair, and there was nothing forced or unnatural in his asking, in the course of discussing the jewels, what had become of the great emerald.

Orion replied, in the same tone, that this stone was not, strictly speaking, any part of his father's gift; but Benjamin expressed an opposite opinion.

All the tortures Orion had endured since that luckless deed in the tablinum revived in his soul during this discussion; however, it was some small relief to him to perceive, that neither his mother nor Dame Susannah seemed to have told the patriarch the guilt he had incurred by reason of that gem. Susannah, of course, had said nothing of the incident in order to avoid speaking of her daughter's false evidence; still, this miserable business might easily have come to the ears of the stern old man, and to the guilty youth no sacrifice seemed too great to smother any enquiry for the ill-fated jewel. He unhesitatingly explained that the emerald had disappeared, but that he was quite ready to make good its value. Benjamin might fix his own estimate, and name any sum he wished for some benevolent purpose, and he, Orion, was ready to pay it to him on the spot.

The prelate, however, calmly persisted in his demand, enjoined Orion to have a diligent search made for the gem, and declared that he regarded it as the property of the Church. He added that, when his patience was at an end, he should positively insist on its surrender and bring every means at his disposal into play to procure it.

Orion had no choice but to say that he would prosecute his search for the lost stone; but his acquiescence was sullen, as that of a man who accedes to an unreasonable demand.

At first the patriarch took this coolly; but presently, when he rose to take leave, his demeanor changed; he said, with stern solemnity:

"I know you now, Son of Mukaukas George, and I end as I began: The humility of the Christian is far from you, you are ignorant of the power and dignity of our Faith, you do not even know the vast love that animates it, and the fervent longing to lead the straying sinner back to the path of salvation.—Your admirable mother has told me, with tears in her eyes, of the abyss over which you are standing. It is your desire to bind yourself for life to a heretic, a Melchite—and there is another thing which fills her pious mother's heart with fears, which tortures it as she thinks of you and your eternal welfare. She promised to confide this to my ear in church, and I shall find leisure to consider of it on my return home; but at any rate, and be it what it may, it cannot more greatly imperil your soul than marriage with a Melchite.

"On what have you set your heart? On the mere joys of earth! You sue for the hand of an unbeliever, the daughter of an unbelieving heretic; you go over to Fostat—nay, hear me out—and place your brain and your strong arm at the service of the infidels—it is but yesterday; but I, I, the shepherd of my flock, will not suffer that he who is the highest in rank, the richest in possessions, the most powerful by the mere dignity of his name, shall pervert thousands of the Jacobite brethren. I have the will and the power too, to close the sluice gates against such a disaster. Obey me, or you shall rue it with tears of blood."

The prelate paused, expecting to see Orion fall on his knees before him; but the young man did nothing of the kind. He stood looking at him, open-eyed and agitated, but undecided, and Benjamin went on with added vehemence:

"I came to you to lift up my voice in protest, and I desire, I require, I command you: sever all ties with the enemies of your nation and of your faith, cast out your love for the Melchite Siren, who will seduce your immortal part to inevitable perdition. . . ."

Till this Orion had listened with bowed head and in silence to the diatribe which the patriarch had hurled at him like a curse; but at this point his whole being rose in revolt, all self-control forsook him, and he interrupted the speaker in loud tones:

"Never, never, never will I do such a thing! Insult me as you will. What I am, I will still be: a faithful son of the Church to which my fathers belonged, and for which my brothers died. In all humility I acknowledge Jesus Christ as my Lord. I believe in him, believe in the God-made-man who died to save us, and who brought love into the world, and I will remain unpersuaded and faithful to my own love. Never will I forsake her who has been to me like a messenger from God, like a good angel to teach me how to lay hold on what is earnest and noble in life—her whom my father, too, held dear. Power, indeed,

is yours. Demand of me anything reasonable, and within my attainment, and I will try to force myself to obedience; but I never can and never will be faithless to her, to prove my faith to you; and as to the Arabs...."

"Enough!" exclaimed the prelate. "I am on my way to Upper Egypt. Make your choice by my return. I give you till then to come to a right mind, to think the matter over; and it is quite deliberately that I bid you to forget the Melchite. That you, of all men, should marry a heretic would be an abomination not to be borne. With regard to your alliance with the Arabs, and whether it becomes you—being what you are—to take service with them, we will discuss it at a future day. If, by the time I return, you have thought better of the matter as regards your marriage—and you are free to choose any Jacobite maiden—then I will speak to you in a different tone. I will then offer you my friendship and support; instead of the Church's curse I will pronounce her blessing on you—the pardon and grace of the Almighty, a smooth path to eternity and peace, and the prospect of giving new joy to the aching heart of your sorrowing mother. My last word is that you must and shall give up the woman from whom you can look for nothing but perdition."

"I cannot, and shall not, and I never will!" replied Orion firmly.

"Then I can, and shall, and will make you feel how heavily the curse falls which, in the last resort, I shall not hesitate to pronounce upon you!"

"It is in your power," said Orion. "But if you proceed to extremities with me, you will drive me to seek the blessing for which my soul thirsts more ardently than you, my lord, can imagine, and the salvation I crave, with her whom you hold reprobate, and on the further side of the Nile."

"I dare you!" cried the patriarch, quitting the room with a resolute step and flaming cheeks.

CHAPTER II.

Orion was alone in the spacious room, feeling as though the whole world were sinking into nothingness after the rack of storm and tempest. At first he was merely conscious of having gone through a fearful experience, which threatened to fling him far outside the sphere of everything he was wont to reverence and hold sacred. For love and honor of his guardian angel he had declared war to the patriarch, and that man's power was as great as his stature. Still, the image of Paula rose high and supreme above that of the terrible old man, in Orion's fancy, and his father, as it seemed to him, was like an ally in the battle he was destined to wage in his own strength.

The young man's vivid imagination and excellent memory recapitulated every word the prelate had uttered. The domineering old man, overflowing with bigoted zeal, had played with him as a cat with a mouse. He had tried to search his soul and sift him to the bottom before he attacked the subject with which he ought to have begun, and concerning which he was fully informed when he offered him his hand that first time— as cheerfully, too, as though he had no serious grievance seething in his soul. Orion resolved that he would cling fast to his faith without Benjamin's interposition, and not allow his hold on the two other Christian graces, Hope and Love, to be weakened by his influence.

By some miracle his mother had not yet told the prelate of his father's curse, in spite of the anguish of her aching heart; and what a weapon would not that have been in Benjamin's hand. It was with the deepest pity that he thought of that poor, grief-stricken woman, and the idea flashed through his mind that the patriarch might have gone back to his mother to accuse him and to urge her to further revelations.

Many minutes had passed since the patriarch had left him; Orion had allowed his illustrious guest to depart unescorted, and this could not fail to excite surprise. Such a breach of good manners, of the uncodified laws of society, struck Orion, the son of a noble and ancient house, who had drunk in his regard for them as it were with his mother's milk, as an indignity to himself; and to repair it he started up, hastily smoothing down his tumbled hair, and hurried into the viridarium. His fears were confirmed, for the patriarch's following were standing in the fountain-hall close to the exit; his mother, too, was there and Benjamin was in the act of departure.

The old man accepted his offered escort with dignified affability, as if nothing but what was pleasant had passed between him and Orion. As they crossed the viridarium he asked his young host what was the name of some rare flower, and counselled him to take care that shade-giving trees were planted in

abundance on his various estates. In the outer hall, on either side of the door, was a statue: Truth and justice, two fine works by Aristreas of Alexandria, who flourished in the time of the Emperor Hadrian. Justice held the scales and sword, Truth was gazing into her mirror. As the patriarch approached them, he said to the priest who walked by his side: "Still here!" Then, standing still, he said, partly to Orion and partly to his companion:

"Your father, I see, neglected my suggestion that these heathen images had no place in any Christian house, and least of all in one attached, as this is, to a public function. We, no doubt, know the meaning of the symbols they bear; but how easily might the ordinary man, waiting here, mistake the figure with the mirror for Vanity and that with the scales Venality: 'Pay us what we ask,' she might be saying, 'or else your life is a forfeit,'—so the sword would imply."

He smiled and walked on, but added airily to Orion:

"When I come again—you know—I shall be pleased if my eye is no longer offended by these mementos of an extinct idolatry."

"Truth and justice!" replied Orion in a constrained voice. "They have dwelt on this spot and ruled in this house for nearly five hundred years."

"It would look better, and be more suitable," retorted the patriarch, "if you could say that of Him to whom alone the place of honor is due in a Christian house; in His presence every virtue flourishes of itself. The Christian should proscribe every image from his dwelling; at the door of his heart only should he raise an image on the one hand of Faith and on the other of Humility."

By this time they had reached the court-yard, where Susannah's chariot was waiting. Orion helped the prelate into it, and when Benjamin offered him his hand to kiss, in the presence of several hundred slaves and servants, all on their knees, the young man lightly touched it with his lips. He stood bowed low in reverence so long as the holy father remained visible, in the attitude of blessing the crowd from the open side of the chariot; then he hurried away to join his mother.

He expected to find her exhausted by the excitement of the patriarch's visit; but, in fact, she was more composed than he had seen her yet since his father's death. Her eyes indeed, commonly so sober in their expression, were bright with a kind of rapture which puzzled Orion. Had she been thinking of his father? Could the patriarch have succeeded in inspiring her pious fervor to such a pitch, that it had carried her, so to speak, out of herself?

She was dressed to go to church, and after expressing her delight at the honor done to herself and her whole household by the prelate's visit, she invited Orion to accompany her. Though he had proposed devoting the next few hours to a different purpose, the dutiful son at once acceded to this wish; he helped her into her chariot, bid the driver go slowly, and seated himself by her side.

As they drove along he asked her what she had told the patriarch, and her replies might have reassured him but that she filled him with grave anxiety on fresh grounds. Her mind seemed to have suffered under the stress of grief. It was usually so clear, so judicious, so reasonable; and now all she said was incoherent and not more than half intelligible. Still, one thing he distinctly understood: that she had not confided to the patriarch the fact of his father's curse. The prelate must certainly have censured the conduct of the deceased to her also and that had sealed her lips. She complained to her son that Benjamin had never understood her lost husband, and that she had felt compelled to repress her desire to disclose everything to him. Nowhere but in church, in the very presence of the Redeemer, could she bring herself to allow him to read her heart as it were an open book. A voice had warned her that in the house of God alone, could she find salvation for herself and her son; that voice she heard day and night, and much as it pained her to grieve him he must hear it now—: That voice never ceased to enjoin her to tear asunder his connection with the Melchite maiden. Last evening it had seemed to her that it was her eldest son, who had died for the Jacobite faith, that was speaking to her. The voice had sounded like his, and it had warned her that the ancient house of Menas must perish, if a Melchite should taint the pure blood of their race. And Benjamin had confirmed her fears; he had come back to her on purpose to beseech her to oppose Orion's sinful affection for Thomas' daughter with the utmost maternal authority, and, as the patriarch expressed the same desire as the voice, it must be from God and she must obey it.

Her old grudge against Paula had revived, and her very tones betrayed that it grew stronger with every word she spoke which had any reference to the girl.

At this Orion begged her to be calm, reminding her of the promise she had made him by his father's deathbed; and just as his mother was about to reply in a tone of pitiful recrimination, the chariot stopped at the door of the church. He did everything in his power to soothe her; his gentle and tender

tones comforted her, and she nodded to him more happily, following him into the sanctuary.

Beyond the narthex—the vestibule of the church, where three penitents were flaying their backs with scourges by the side of a small marble fountain, and in full view of the crowd—they were forced to part, as the women were divided from the men by a screen of finely-carved woodwork.

As Neforis went to her place, she shook her bowed head: she was meditating on the choice offered her by Orion, of yielding to the patriarch's commands or to her son's wishes. How gladly would she have seen her son in bright spirits again. But Benjamin had threatened her with the loss of all the joys of Heaven, if she should agree to Orion's alliance with the heretic—and the joys of Heaven to her meant a meeting, a recognition, for which she would willingly have sacrificed her son and everything else that was dear to her heart.

Orion assisted at the service in the place reserved for the men of his family, close to the hekel, or holy of holies, where the altar stood and the priests performed their functions. A partition, covered with ill-wrought images and a few gilt ornaments, divided it from the main body of the church, and the whole edifice produced an impression that was neither splendid nor particularly edifying. The basilica, which had once been richly decorated, had been plundered by the Melchites in a fight between them and the Jacobites, and the impoverished city had not been in a position to restore the venerable church to anything approaching its original splendor. Orion looked round him; but could see nothing calculated to raise his devotion.

The congregation were required to stand all through the service; and as it often was a very long business, not the women only, behind the screen, but many of the men supported themselves like cripples on crutches. How unpleasing, too, were the tones of the Egyptian chant, accompanied by the frequent clang of a metal cymbal and mingled with the babble of chattering men and women, checked only when the talk became a quarrel, by a priest who loudly and vehemently shouted for silence from the hekel.

Generally the chanted liturgy constituted the whole function, unless the Lord's Supper was administered; but in these anxious times, for above a week past, a priest or a monk preached a daily sermon. This began a short while after the young man had taken his place, and it was with painful feelings that he recognized, in the hollow-eyed and ragged monk who mounted the pulpit, a priest whom he had seen more than once drunk to imbecility, in Nesptah's tavern, And the revolting creature, who thus flaunted his dirty, dishevelled person even in the pulpit, thundered down on the trembling congregation declarations that the delay in the rising of the Nile was the consequence of their sins, and God's punishment for their evil deeds. Instead of comforting the terrified souls, or encouraging their faith and bidding them hope for better times, he set before them in burning words the punishment that awaited their wicked despondency.

God Almighty was plaguing them and the land with great heat; but this was like the cool north wind at Advent-tide, as compared with the fierceness of the furnace of hell which Satan was making hot for them. The scorching sun on earth at any rate gave them daylight, but the flames of hell shed no light, that the terrors might never cease of those whom the devil's myrmidons drove over the narrow bridge leading to his horrible realm, goading them with spears and pitchforks, with heavy cudgelling or gnawing of their flesh. In the anguish of death, and the crush by the way, mothers trod down their infants and fathers their daughters; and when the damned reached the spiked threshold of hell itself, a hideous and poisoned vapor rose up to meet them, choking them, and yet giving them renewed strength to feel fresh torments with increased keenness of every sense. Then the devil's shrieks of anguish, which shake the vault of hell, came thundering on their ears; with hideous yells he snatched at them from the grate on which he lay, crushed and squeezed them in his iron jaws like a bunch of grapes, and swallowed them into his fiery maw; or else they were hung up by their tongues by attendant friends in Satan's fiery furnace, or dragged alternately through ice and flames, and finally beaten to pieces on the anvil of hell, or throttled and wrung with ropes and cloths.—As compared with the torments they would suffer there, every present anxiety was as the kiss of a lover. Mothers would hear the brain seething in their infants' skulls....

At this point of the monk's grewsome discourse, Orion turned away with a shudder. The curse with which the patriarch had threatened him recurred to his mind; he could have fancied that the hot, stuffy, incense-laden air of the church was full of flapping daws and hideous bats. Deadly horror crept over him; but then, suddenly, the rebound came of youthful vigor, longing for freedom and joy in living; a voice within cried out: "Away with coercion and chains! Winged spirit, use your pinions! Down with the god of terrors! He is not that Heavenly Father whose love embraces mankind. Forward, leap up and be free! Trusting in your own strength, guided by your own will, go boldly forth into the open sunshine of life! Be free, be free!—Still, be not like a slave who is no sooner cut adrift and left to himself than he falls a slave again to his own senses. No; but striving unceasingly and of your own free will, in the

sweat of your brow, to reach the high goal, to work out to its fulfilment and fruition everything that is best in your soul and mind. Yes—life is a ministry.... I, like the disciples of the Stoa, will strive after all that is known as virtue, with no other end in view than to practise it for its own sake, because it is fair and gives unmixed joys. I will rely on myself to seek the truth—and do what I feel to be right and good; this, henceforth, shall be the lofty aim of my existence. To the two chief desires of my heart—: atonement to my father and union with Paula, I here add a third: the attainment of the loftiest goal that I may reach, by valiant striving to get as near to it as my strength will allow. The road thither is by Work; the guiding star I must keep before me that I may not go astray is my Love!"

His cheeks were burning, and with a deep breath he looked about him as though to find an adversary with whom he might measure his strength. The horrible sermon was ended and the words of the chanting crowd fell on his ear. "Lord, reward me not according to mine iniquities!" The load of his own sin fell on his heart again, and his dying father's curse; his proud head drooped on his breast, and he said to himself that his burthen was too heavy for him to venture on the bold flight for which he had but now spread his wings. The ban was not yet lifted; he was not yet redeemed from its crushing weight. But the mere word "redeemed" brought to his mind the image of Him who took on Himself the sins of the world; and the more deeply he contemplated the nature of the Saviour whom he had loved from his childhood, the more surely he felt that it would be doing no violence to the freedom of his own will, but rather be the fulfilment of a long-felt desire, if he were to tell Jesus simply all that oppressed him; that his love for Him, his faith in Him, had a saving power even for his soul. He lifted up his eyes and heart to Him, and to Him, as to a trusted friend, confided all that troubled and hindered him and besought His aid.

In loving Him, he and Paula were one, he knew, though they had not the same idea of His nature.

Orion, as he meditated, thought out the points on which her views deviated from his own: she believed that the divine and the human natures were distinct in the person of Christ. And as he reflected on this creed, till now so horrible in his eyes, he felt that the unique individuality of the Saviour, shedding forth love and truth, came home to him more closely when he pictured Him perfect and spotless, yet feeling as a man; walking among men with all their joy in life in His heart, alive to every pang and sorrow which can torture mortals, rejoicing with them, and taking upon Himself unspeakable humiliation, suffering, and death, with a stricken, bleeding, and yet self-devoting heart, for pure love of the wretched race to which He could stoop from His glory. Yes, this Christ could be his Redeemer too. The Almighty Lord had become his perfect and most loving friend, his glorious, but lenient and tender brother, to whom he could gladly give his whole heart, who understood everything, who was ready to forgive everything—even all that was seething in his aching heart which longed for purification—and all because He once had suffered as a man suffers.

For the first time he, the Jacobite, dared to confess so much to himself; and not solely for Paula's sake. A violent clanging on a cracked metal plate roused him from his meditations by its harsh clamor; the sacrament of the Last Supper was about to be administered: the invariable conclusion of the Jacobite service. The bishop came forth from behind the screen of the inner sanctuary, poured some wine into a silver cup and crumbled into it two little cakes stamped with the Coptic cross. Of this mixture he first partook, and then gave it in a spoon to each member of the congregation who came up to receive it. Orion approached after two elders of the Church. Finally the priest rinsed out the cup, and drained the very washings, that no drop of the saving liquid should be lost.

How high had Orion's heart throbbed when, as a youth, he had been admitted for the first time to this most sacred of all Christian privileges! He was instructed in its deep and glorious symbolism, and had often felt the purifying, saving, and refreshing effect of the sacrament, strengthening him in all goodness, when he had partaken of it with his parents and brothers. Hand-in-hand, they had gone home feeling as if newly robed in body and soul and more closely bound together than before. And to-day, insensible as he was to the repulsiveness of the forms of worship of his confession he felt as though the bread and wine—the Flesh and Blood of the Saviour—had sealed the bond he had silently entered into with himself; as though the Lord had put forth an invisible hand to remove the guilt and the curse that crushed him so sorely. Deep devotion fell on his soul: his future life, he thought, should bring him nearer to God than ever before, and be spent in loving, and in the more earnest, full, and laborious exercise of the gifts Heaven had bestowed on him.

CHAPTER III.

Orion had dreaded the drive home with his mother, but after complaining to him of Susannah's conduct in having made a startling display of her vexation in the women's place behind the screen, she had leaned on him and fallen fast asleep. Her head was on her son's shoulder when they reached home, and Orion's anxiety for the mother he truly loved was enhanced when he found it difficult to rouse her. He felt her stagger like a drunken creature, and he led her not into the fountain-room but to her bed-chamber, where she only begged to lie down; and hardly had she done so when she was again overcome by sleep.

Orion now made his way to Gamaliel the jeweller, to purchase from him a very large and costly diamond, plainly set, and the Israelite's brother undertook to deliver it to the fair widow at Constantinople, who was known to him as one of his customers. Orion, in the jeweller's sitting-room, wrote a letter to his former mistress, in which he begged her in the most urgent manner to accept the diamond, and in exchange to return to him the emerald by a swift and trustworthy messenger, whom Simeon the goldsmith would provide with everything needful.

After all this he went home hungry and weary, to the late midday meal which he shared, as for many days past, with no one but Eudoxia, Mary's governess. The little girl was not yet allowed to leave her room, and of this, for one reason, her instructress was glad, for a dinner alone with the handsome youth brought extreme gratification to her mature heart. How considerate was the wealthy and noble heir in desiring the slaves to offer every dish to her first, how kind in listening to her stories of her young days and of the illustrious houses in which she had formerly given lessons! She would have died for him; but, as no opportunity offered for such a sacrifice, at any rate she never omitted to point out to him the most delicate morsels, and to supply his room with fresh flowers.

Besides this, however, she had devoted herself with the most admirable unselfishness to her pupil, since the child had been ill and her grandmother had turned against her, noticing, too, that Orion took a tender and quite fatherly interest in his little niece. This morning the young man had not had time to enquire for Mary, and Eudoxia's report that she seemed even more excited than on the day before disturbed him so greatly, that he rose from table, in spite of Eudoxia's protest, without waiting till the end of the meal, to visit the little invalid.

It was with genuine anxiety that he mounted the stairs. His heart was heavy over many things, and as he went towards the child's room he said to himself with a melancholy smile, that he, who had contemned many a distinguished man and many a courted fair one at Constantinople because they had fallen short of his lofty standard, had here no one but this child who would be sure to understand him. Some minutes elapsed before his knock was answered with the request to 'come in,' and he heard a hasty bustle within. He found Mary lying, as the physician had ordered, on a couch by the window, which was wide open and well-shaded; her couch was surrounded by flowering plants and, on a little table in front of her, were two large nosegays, one fading, the other quite fresh and particularly beautiful.

How sadly the child had changed in these few days. The soft round cheeks had disappeared, and the pretty little face had sunk into nothingness by comparison with the wonderful, large eyes, which had gained in size and brilliancy. Yesterday she had been free from fever and very pale, but to-day her cheeks were crimson, and a twitching of her lips and of her right shoulder, which had come on since the scene at the grandfather's deathbed, was so incessant that Orion sat down by her side in some alarm.

"Has your grandmother been to see you?" was his first question, but the answer was a mournful shake of her head.

The blossoming plants were his own gift and so was the fading nosegay; the other, fresher one had not come from him, so he enquired who was the giver, and was not a little astonished to see his favorite's confusion and agitation at the question. There must be something special connected with the posey, that was very evident, and the young man, who did not wish to excite her sensitive nerves unnecessarily, but could not recall his words, was wishing he had never spoken them, when the discovery of a feather fan cut the knot of his difficulty; he took it up, exclaiming: "Hey—what have we here?"

A deeper flush dyed Mary's cheek, and raising her large eyes imploringly to his face, she laid a finger on her lips. He nodded, as understanding her, and said in a low voice:

"Katharina has been here? Susannah's gardener ties up flowers like that. The fan—when I knocked—she is here still perhaps?"

He had guessed rightly; Mary pointed dumbly to the door of the adjoining room.

"But, in Heaven's name, child," Orion went on, in an undertone, "what does she want here?"

"She came by stealth, in the boat," whispered the child. "She sent Anubis from the treasurer's office to ask me if she might not come, she could not do without me any longer, and she never did me any harm and so I said yes—and then, when I knew it was your knock, whisk—off she went into the bedroom."

"And if your grandmother were to come across her?"

"Then—well, then I do not know what would become of me! But oh! Orion, if you only knew how—how..." Two big tears rolled down her cheeks and Orion understood her; he stroked her hair lovingly and said in a whisper, glancing now and again at the door of the next room.

"But I came up on purpose to tell you something more about Paula. She sends you her love, and she invites you to go to her and stay with her, always. But you must keep it quite a secret and tell no one, not even Eudoxia and Katharina; for I do not know myself how we can contrive to get your grandmother's consent. At any rate we must set to work very prudently and cautiously, do you understand? I have only taken you into our confidence that you may look forward to it and have something to be glad of at night, when you are such a silly little thing as to keep your eyes open like the hares, instead of sleeping like a good child. If things go well, you may be with Paula to-morrow perhaps—think of that! I had quite given up all hope of managing it at all; but now, just now— is it not odd—just within these two minutes I suddenly said to myself: 'It will come all right!'—So it must be done somehow."

A flood of tears streamed down Mary's burning cheeks but, freely as they flowed, she did not sob and her bosom did not heave. Nor did she speak, but such pure and fervent gratitude and joy shone from her glistening eyes that Orion felt his own grow moist. He was glad to find some way of concealing his emotion when Mary seized his hand and, pressing a long kiss on it, wetted it with her tears.

"See!" he exclaimed. "All wet! as if I had just taken it out of the fountain."

But he said no more, for the bedroom door was suddenly thrown open and Eudoxia's high, thin voice was heard saying:

"But why make any fuss? Mary will be enchanted! Here, Child, here is your long-lost friend! Such a surprise!" And the water-wagtail, pushed forward by no gentle hand, appeared within the doorway. Eudoxia was as radiant as though she had achieved some heroic deed; but she drew back a little when she found that Orion was still in the room. The divided couple stood face to face. What was done could not be undone; but, though he greeted her with only a calm bow, and she fluttered her fan with abrupt little jerks to conceal her embarrassment, nothing took place which could surprise the bystander; indeed, Katharina's pretty features assumed a defiant expression when he enquired how the little white dog was, and she coldly replied that she had had him chained up in the poultry-yard, for that the patriarch, who was their guest, could not endure dogs.

"He honors a good many men with the same sentiments," replied Orion, but Katharina retorted, readily enough.

"When they deserve it."

The dialogue went on in this key for some few minutes; but the young man was not in the humor either to take the young girl's pert stings or to repay her in the same coin; he rose to go but, before he could take leave, Katharina, observing from the window how low the sun was, cried: "Mercy on me! how late it is—I must be off; I must not be absent at supper time. My boat is lying close to yours in the fishing-cove. I only hope the gate of the treasurer's house is still open."

Orion, too, looked at the sun and then remarked: "To-day is Sanutius."

"I know," said Katharina. "That is why Anubis was free at noon."

"And for the same reason," added Orion, "there is not a soul at work now in the office."

This was awkward. Not for worlds would she have been seen in the house; and knowing, as she did from her games with Mary, every nook and corner of it, she began to consider her position. Her delicate features assumed a sinister expression quite new to Orion, which both displeased him and roused his anxiety—not for himself but for Mary, who could certainly get no good from such a companion as this. These visits must not be repeated very often; he would not allude to the subject in the child's presence, but Katharina should at once have a hint. She could not get out of the place without his assistance; so he intruded on her meditations to inform her that he had the key of the office

about him. Then he went to see if the hall were empty, and led her at once to the treasurer's office through the various passages which connected it with the main buildings. The office at this hour was as lonely as the grave, and when Orion found himself standing with her, close to the door which opened on the road to the harbor, and had already raised the key to unlock it, he paused and for the first time broke the silence they had both preserved during their unpleasant walk, saying:

"What brought you to see Mary, Katharina? Tell me honestly." Her heart, which had been beating high since she had found herself alone with him in the silent and deserted house, began to throb wildly; a great terror, she knew not of what, came over her.

"She had come to the house for several reasons, but one had outweighed all the rest: Mary must be told that her young uncle and Paula were betrothed; for she knew by experience that the child could keep nothing of importance from her grandmother, and that Neforis had no love for Paula was an open secret. As yet she certainly could know nothing of her son's formal suit, but if once she were informed of it she would do everything in her power—of this Katharina had not a doubt—to keep Orion and Paula apart. So the girl had told Mary that it was already reported that they were a betrothed and happy pair, and that she herself had watched them making love in her neighbor's garden. To her great annoyance, however, Mary took this all very coolly and without any special excitement.

"So, when Orion enquired of his companion what had brought her to the governor's house, she could only reply that she longed so desperately to see little Mary.

"Of course," said Orion. "But I must beg of you not to yield again to your affectionate impulse. Your mother makes a public display of her grudge against mine, and her ill-feeling will only be increased if she is told that we are encouraging you to disregard her wishes. Perhaps you may, ere long, have opportunities of seeing Mary more frequently; but, if that should be the case, I must especially request you not to talk of things that may agitate her. You have seen for yourself how excitable she is and how fragile she looks. Her little heart, her too precocious brain and feelings must have rest, must not be stirred and goaded by fresh incitements such as you are in a position to apply. The patriarch is my enemy, the enemy of our house, and you—I do not say it to offend you—you overheard what he was saying last night, and probably gathered much important information, some of which may concern me and my family."

Katharina stood looking at her companion, as pale as death. He knew that she had played the listener, and when, and where! The shock it gave her, and the almost unendurable pang of feeling herself lowered in his eyes, quite dazed her. She felt bewildered, offended, menaced; however, she retained enough presence of mind to reply in a moment to her antagonist:

"Do not be alarmed! I will come no more. I should not have come at all, if I could have foreseen. . ."

"That you would meet me?"

"Perhaps.—But do not flatter yourself too much on that account!—As to my listening... Well, yes; I was standing at the window. Inside the room I could only half hear, and who does not want to hear what great men have to say to each other? And, excepting your father, I have met none such in Memphis since Memnon left the city. We women have inherited some curiosity from our mother Eve; but we rarely indulge it so far as to hunt for a necklace in our neighbor's trunk! I have no luck as a criminal, my dear Orion. Twice have I deserved the name. Thanks to the generous and liberal use you made of my inexperience I sinned—sinned so deeply that it has ruined my whole life; and now, again, in a more venial way; but I was caught out, you see, in both cases."

"Your taunts are merited," said Orion sadly. "And yet, Child, we may both thank Providence, which did not leave us to wander long on the wrong road. Once already I have besought your forgiveness, and I do so now again. That does not satisfy you I see—and I can hardly blame you. Perhaps you will be better pleased, when I assure you once more that no sin was ever more bitterly or cruelly punished than mine has been."

"Indeed!" said Katharina with a drawl; then, with a flutter of her fan, she went on airily: "And yet you look anything rather than crushed; and have even succeeded in winning 'the other'—Paula, if I am not mistaken."

"That will do!" said Orion decisively, and he raised the key to the lock. Katharina, however, placed herself in his way, raised a threatening finger, and exclaimed:

"So I should think!—Now I am certain. However, you are right with your insolent 'That will do!' I do not care a rush for your love affairs; still, there is one thing I should like to know, which concerns myself alone; how could you see over our garden hedge? Anubis is scarcely a head shorter than you are. . . ."

"And you made him try?" interrupted Orion, who could not forbear smiling, perceiving that his honestly meant gravity was thrown away on Katharina. "Notwithstanding such a praiseworthy experiment, I may beg you to note for future cases that what is true of him is not true of every one, and that, besides foot-passengers, a tall man sometimes mounts a tall horse?"

"It was you, then, who rode by last night?"

"And who could not resist glancing up at your window."

At these words she drew back in surprise, and her eyes lighted up, but only for an instant; then, clenching the feathers of her fan in both hands, she sharply asked:

"Is that in mockery?"

"Certainly not," said Orion coolly; "for though you have reason enough to be angry with me....."

"I, at any rate, have, so far given you none," she petulantly broke in. "No, I have not. It is I, and I alone, who have been insulted and ill-used; you must confess that you owe me some amends, and that I have a right to ask them."

"Do so," replied he. "I am yours to command." She looked him straight in the face.

"First of all," she began, "have you told any one else that I was. . ."

"That you were listening? No—not a living soul."

"And will you promise never to betray me?"

"Willingly. Now, what is the 'secondly' to this 'first of all?'"

But there was no immediate answer; the water-wagtail evidently found it difficult. However, she presently said, with downcast eyes:

"I want.... You will think me a greater fool than I am.... nevertheless, yes, I will ask you, though it will involve me in fresh humiliation.—I want to know the truth; and if there is anything you hold sacred, before I ask, you must swear by what is holiest to answer me, not as if I were a silly girl, but as if I were the Supreme judge at the last day.—Do you hear?"

"This is very solemn," said Orion. "And you must allow me to observe that there are some questions which do not concern us alone, and if yours is such....."

"No, no," replied Katharina, "what I mean concerns you and me alone."

"Then I see no reason for refusing," he said. "Still, I may ask you a favor in return. It seems to me no less important than it did to you, to know what a great man like the patriarch finds to talk about, and since I place myself at your commands...."

"I thought," said the girl with a smile, "that your first object would be to discharge some small portion of your debt to me; however, I expect no excessive magnanimity, and the little I heard is soon told. It cannot matter much to you either—so I will agree to your wishes, and you, in return, must promise. . . ."

"To speak the whole truth."

"As truly as you hope for forgiveness of your sins?"

"As truly as that."

"That is well."

"And what is it that you want to know?"

At this she shook her head, exclaiming uneasily:

"Nay, nay, not yet. It cannot be done so lightly. First let me speak; and then open the door, and if I want to fly let me go without saying or asking me another word.—Give me that chair; I must sit down." And in fact she seemed to need it; for some minutes she had looked very pale and exhausted, and her hands trembled as she drew her handkerchief across her face.

When she was seated she began her story; and while her words flowed on quickly but without expression, as though she spoke mechanically, Orion listened with eager interest, for what she had to tell struck him as highly significant and important.

He had been watched by the patriarch's orders. By midnight Benjamin had already been informed of Orion's visit to Fostat, and to the Arab general. Nothing, however, had been said about it beyond a fear lest he had gone thither with a view to abjuring the faith of his fathers and going over to the Infidels. Far more important were the facts Orion gathered as to the prelate's negotiations with the Khaliff's representative. Amru had urged a reduction of the number of convents and of the monks and nuns who lived on the bequests and gifts of the pious, busied in all kinds of handiwork according to the rule of Pachomius, and enabled, by the fact of their living at free quarters, to produce almost all the necessaries of life, from the mats on the floors to the shoes worn by the citizens, at a much lower price than the independent artisans, whether in town or country. The great majority of these poor creatures were already ruined by such competition, and Amru, seeing the Arab leather-workers, weavers, ropemakers, and the rest, threatened with the same fate, had determined to set himself firmly to restrict all this monastic work. The patriarch had resisted stoutly and held out long, but at last he had been forced to sacrifice almost half the convents for monks and nuns.

But nothing had been conceded without an equivalent; for Benjamin was well aware of the immense difficulties which he, as chief of the Church, could put in the way of the new government of the country. So it was left to him to designate which convents should be suppressed, and he had, of course, begun by laying hands on the few remaining Melchite retreats, among them the Convent of St. Cecilia, next to the house of Rufinus. This establishment was now to be closed within three days and to become the property of the Jacobite Church; but it was to be done quite quietly, for there was no small fear that now, when the delayed rising of the river was causing a fever of anxiety in all minds, the impoverished populace of the town might rise in defence of the wealthy sisterhood to whom they were beholden for much benevolence and kind care.

Opposition from the town-senate was also to be looked for, since the deceased Mukaukas had pronounced this measure unjust and detrimental to the common welfare. The evicted orthodox nuns were to be taken into various Jacobite convents as lay sisters similar cases had already been known; but the abbess, whose superior intellect, high rank, and far-reaching influence might, if she were left free to act, easily rouse the prelates of the East to oppose Benjamin, was to be conveyed to a remote convent in Ethiopia, whence no flight or return was possible.

Katharina's report took but few minutes, and she gave it with apparent indifference; what could the suppression of an orthodox cloister, and the dispersion of its heretic sisterhood, matter to her, or to Orion, whose brothers had fallen victims to Melchite fanaticism? Orion did not betray his deep interest in all he heard, and when at length Katharina rose and pointed feebly to the door, all she said, as though she were vexed at having wasted so much time, was: "That, on the whole, is all."

"All?" asked Orion unlocking the door.

"Certainly, all," she repeated uneasily. "What I meant to ask—whether I ever know it or not—it does not matter.—It would be better perhaps—yes, that is all.—Let me go."

But he did not obey her.

"Ask," he said kindly. "I will answer you gladly."

"Gladly?" she retorted, with an incredulous shrug. "In point of fact you ought to feel uncomfortable whenever you see me; but things do not always turn out as they ought, in Memphis or in the world; for what do you men care what becomes of a poor girl like me? Do not imagine that I mean to reproach you; God forbid! I do not even owe you a grudge. If anyone can live such a thing down I can. Do not you think so? Everything is admirably arranged for me; I cannot fail to do well. I am very rich, and not ugly, and I shall have a hundred suitors yet. Oh, I am a most enviable creature! I have had one lover already, and the next will be more faithful, at any rate, and not throw me over so ruthlessly as the first.—Do not you think so?"

"I hope so," said Oriole gravely. "Bitter as the cup is that you offer me to drink. . ."

"Well?"

"I can only repeat that I must even drink it, since the fault was mine. Nothing would so truly gladden me as to be able to atone in some degree for my sin against you."

"Oh dear no!" she scornfully threw in. "Our hopes shall not be fixed so high as that! All is at an end between us, and if you ever were anything to me, you are nothing to me now—absolutely nothing. One hour in the past we had in common; it was short indeed, but to me—would you believe it?—a very great matter. It aged the young creature, whom you, but yesterday, still regarded as a mere child—that much I know—with amazing rapidity; aye, and made a worse woman of her than you can fancy."

"That indeed would grieve me to the bottom of my soul," replied Orion. "There is, I know, no excuse for my conduct. Still, as you yourself know, our mothers' wish in the first instance. . ."

"Destined us for each other, you would say. Quite true!—And it was all to please Dame Neforis that you put your arms round me, under the acacias, and called me your own, your all, your darling, your rose-bud? Was that—and this is exactly what I want to ask you, what I insist on knowing—was that all a lie—or did you, at any rate, in that brief moment, under the trees, love me with all your heart—love me as now you love—I cannot name her—that other?—The truth, Orion, the whole truth, on your oath!"

She had raised her voice and her eyes glowed with the excitement of passion; and now, when she ceased speaking, their sparkling, glistening enquiry plainly and unreservedly confessed that her heart still was his, that she counted on his high-mindedness and expected him to say "yes." Her round arm lay closely pressed to her bosom, as though to keep its wild heaving within bounds. Her delicate face had lost its pallor and seemed bathed in a glow, now tender and now crimson. Her little mouth, which but now had uttered such bitter words, was parted in a smile as if ready to bestow a sweet reward for the consoling, saving answer, for which her whole being yearned, and her eager eyes, shining through tears, did not cease to entreat him so pathetically, so passionately! How bewitching an image of helpless, love-sick, beseeching youth and grace.

"As you love that other,—on your oath."—The words still rang in the young man's ear. All that was soft in his soul urged him to make good the evil he had brought upon this fair, hapless young creature; but those very words gave him strength to remain steadfast; and though he felt himself appealed to for comfort and compassion, he could only stretch out imploring hands, as though praying for help, and say:

"Ah Katharina, and you are as lovely, as charming now, as you were then; but—much as you attracted me, the great love that fills a life can come but once... Forget what happened afterwards... Put your question in another form, alter it a little, and ask me again—or let me assure you."

But he had no time to say more; for, before he could atone to her, she had slipped past him and flown away like some swift wild thing into the road and down to the fishing cove.

CHAPTER IV.

Orion stood alone gazing sadly after her. Was this his father's curse— that all who loved him must reap pain and grief in return?

He shivered; still, his youthful energy and powers of resistance were strong enough to give him speedy mastery over these torturing reflections. What opportunities lay before him of proving his prowess! Even while Katharina was telling her story, the brave and strenuous youth had set himself the problem of rescuing the cloistered sisters. The greater the danger its solution might involve him in, the more impossible it seemed at first sight, the more gladly, in his present mood, would he undertake it. He stepped out into the road and closed the door behind him with a feeling of combative energy.

It was growing dusk. Philippus must now be with Mary and, with the leech's aid, he was resolved to get the child away from his mother's house. Not till he felt that she was safe with Paula in Rufinus' house, could he be free to attempt the enterprise which floated before his eyes. On the stairs he shouted to a slave:

"My chariot with the Persian trotting horse!" and a few minutes after he entered the little girl's room at the same time with a slave girl who carried in a lamp. Neither Mary nor the physician observed him at first, and he heard her say to Philippus, who sat holding her wrist between his fingers.

"What is the matter with you this evening? Good heavens, how pale and melancholy you look!" The lamplight fell full on his face. "Look here, I have just made such a smart little man out of wax. . ."

She hoped to amuse the friend who was always so kind to her with this comical work of art; but, as she leaned forward to reach it, she caught sight of her uncle and exclaimed: "Philippus comes here to cure me, but he looks as if he wanted a draught himself. Take care, or you will have to drink that bitter brown stuff you sent yesterday; then you will know for once how nasty it can be." Though the child's exclamation was well-meant, neither of the men took any notice of it. They stood face to face in utter silence and with only a formal greeting; for Orion, without Mary's remark, had been struck by the

change that had come over the physician since yesterday. Ignoring Orion's presence, he asked the child a few brief questions, begged Eudoxia to persevere in the same course of treatment, and then hastily bid a general farewell to all present; Orion, however, did not respond, but said, with an affectionate glance at the little patient: "One word with you presently."

This made Philippus turn to look at Mary and, as the eyes of the rivals met, they knew that on one subject at any rate they thought and felt alike. The leech already knew how tenderly the young man had taken to Mary, and he followed him into the room which Orion now occupied, and which, as Philippus was aware, had formerly been Paula's.

"In the cause of duty," he said to himself again and again, to keep himself calm and enable him to gather at least the general sense of what the handsome young fellow opposite to him was saying in his rich, pleasant voice, and urging as a request with more warmth than the leech had given him credit for. Philippus, of course, had heard of the grandmother's lamentable revulsion of feeling against her grandchild, and he thought Orion's wish to remove the little girl fully justified. But, on learning that she was to be placed under Paula's care, he seemed startled, and gazed at the floor in such sullen gloom that the other easily guessed what was going on in his mind. In fact, the physician suspected that the child was to serve merely as an excuse for the more frequent meetings of the lovers. Unable to bury this apprehension in his own breast he started to his feet, and was about to put it into words, when Orion took the words out of his mouth, saying modestly but frankly, with downcast eyes:

"I speak only for the child's—for Mary's sake. By my father's soul..."

But Philippus shook his head dismally, went up to his rival, and murmured dully:

"For the sake of that child I am capable of doing or enduring a great deal. She could not be better cared for than with Rufinus and Paula; but if I could suppose," and he raised his voice, while his eyes took a sinister and threatening expression, "if I could suppose that her sacred and suffering innocence were merely an excuse. . . ."

"No, no," said Orion urgently. "Again, on my sacred word, I assure you that I have no aim in view but the child's safety; and, as we have said so much, I will not stick at a word more or less! "Rufinus' house is open to you day and night, and I, if all turns out as I expect, shall ere long be far from hence—from Memphis—from Paula. There is mischief brewing—I dare say no more—an act of treachery; and I will try to prevent it at the risk of my life. You, every one, shall no longer have a right to think me capable of things which are as repulsive to my nature as to yours. You and I, if I mistake not, strive for the same prize, and so far are rivals; but why should the child therefor suffer? Forget it in her presence, and that forgetting will, as you well know, enhance your merit in her—her eyes."

"My merit?" retorted the other scornfully. "Merit is not in the balance; nothing but the gifts of blind Fortune—a nose, a chin, an eye, anything in short—a crime as much as a deed of heroism—that happens to make a deep impression on the wax of a girl's soft heart. But curse me," and he shouted the words at Orion as if he were beside himself, "if I know how we came to talk of such things! Has my folly gone running through the streets, bare-bosomed, to display itself to the world at large? How do you know what my feelings are? She, perhaps, has laughed with you at her ridiculous lover?—Well, no matter. You know already, or will know by to-morrow, which of us has won the cock-fight. You have only to look at me! What woman ever broke her heart for such a Thersites-face. Good-luck to the winner, and the other one—well, since it must be so, farewell till to-morrow."

He hastily made his way towards the door; Orion, however, detained him, imploring him to set aside his ill-feeling—at any rate for the present; assured him that Paula had not betrayed what his feelings were; that, on the contrary, he himself, seeing him with her so late on the previous night, had been consumed by jealousy, and entreated him to vent his wrath on him in abusive words, if that could ease his heart, only, by all that was good, not to withdraw his succor from that poor, innocent child.

The physician's humane heart was not proof against his prayer; and when at length he prepared to depart, in the joyful and yet painful conviction that his happier rival had become more worthy of the prize, he had agreed that he would impress on Neforis, whose mind he suspected to be slightly affected, that the air of the governor's residence did not suit Mary, and that she should place her in the care of a physician outside the town.

As soon as Philippus had quitted the house, Orion went to see Rufinus, who, on his briefly assuring him that he had come on grave and important business, begged him to accompany him to his private room. The young man, however, detained him till he had made all clear with the women as to the reception of little Mary.

"By degrees all the inhabitants of the residence will be transplanted into our garden!" exclaimed

Rufinus. "Well, I have no objection; and you, old woman, what do you say to it?"

"I have none certainly," replied his wife. "Besides, neither you nor I have to decide in this case: the child is to be Paula's guest."

"I only wish she were here already," said Paula, "for who can say whether your mother, Orion—the air here is perilously Melchite."

"Leave Philippus and me to settle that.—You should have seen how pleased Mary was."

Then, drawing Paula aside, he hastily added:

"Have I not hoped too much? Is your heart mine? Come what may, can I count on you—on your lov-?"

"Yes, Yes!" The words rushed up from the very bottom of her heart, and Orion, with a sigh of relief, followed the old man, glad and comforted.

The study was lighted up, and there, without mentioning Katharina, he told Rufinus of the patriarch's scheme for dispersing the nuns of St. Cecilia. What could he care for these Melchite sisters? But, since that consoling hour in the church, he felt as though it were his duty to stand forth for all that was right, and to do battle against everything that was base. Besides, he knew how warmly and steadfastly his father had taken the part of this very convent against the patriarch. Finally, he had heard how strongly his beloved was attached to this retreat and its superior, so he prepared himself gleefully to come forth a new man of deeds, and show his prowess.

The old man listened with growing surprise and horror, and when Orion had finished his story he rose, helplessly wringing his hands. Orion spoke to him encouragingly, and told him that he had come, not merely to give the terrible news, but to hold council with him as to how the innocent victims might be rescued. At this the grey-headed philanthropist and wanderer pricked up his ears; and as an old war horse, though harnessed to the plough, when he hears the trumpet sound lifts his head and arches his neck as proudly and nobly as of yore under his glittering trappings, so Rufinus drew himself up, his old eyes sparkled, and he exclaimed with all the enthusiasm and eagerness of youth:

"Very good, very good; I am with you; not merely as an adviser; no, no. Head, and hand, and foot, from crown to heel! And as for you, young man—as for you! I always saw the stuff that was in you in spite—in spite.—But, as surely as man is the standard of all things, those who reach the stronghold of virtue by a winding road are often better citizens than those who are born in it.—It is growing late, but evensong will not yet have begun and I shall still be able to see the abbess. Have you any plan to propose?"

"Yes; the day after to-morrow at this hour. . . ."

"And why not to-morrow?" interrupted the ardent old man.

"Because I have preparations to make which cannot be done in twelve hours of daylight."

"Good! Good!"

"The day after to-morrow at dusk, a large barge—not one of ours—will be lying by the bank at the foot of the convent garden. I will escort the sisters as far as Doomi at on the Lake. I will send on a mounted messenger to-night, and I will charter a ship for the fugitives by the help of my cousin Columella, the greatest ship-owner of that town. That will take them over seas wherever the abbess may command."

"Capital, splendid!" cried Rufinus enthusiastically. He took up his hat and stick, and the radiant expression of his face changed to a very grave one. He went up to the young man with solemn dignity, looked at him with fatherly kindness, and said:

"I know what woes befell your house through those of our confession, the fellow-believers of these whom you propose to protect with so much prudence and courage; and that, young man, is noble, nay, is truly great. I find in you—you who were described to me as a man of the world and not over-precise—for the first time that which I have sought in vain for many years and in many lands, among the pious and virtuous: the spirit of willing self-sacrifice to save an enemy of a different creed from pressing peril.—But you are young, Orion, and I am old. You triumph in the action only, I foresee the consequences. Do you know what lies before you, if it should be discovered that you have covered the escape of the prey whom the patriarch already sees in his net? Have you considered that Benjamin, the most implacable and most powerful hater among the Jacobites, will pursue you as his mortal foe with all the fearful means at his command?"

"I have considered it," replied Orion.

Rufinus laid his left hand on the young man's shoulder, and his right hand on his head, saying, "Then take with you, to begin with, an old man's—a father's blessing."

"Yes, a father's," repeated Orion softly. A happy thrill ran through his body and soul, and he fell on the old man's neck deeply moved.

For a minute they stood clasped in each other's arms; then Rufinus freed himself, and set out to seek the abbess. Orion returned to the women, whose curiosity had been roused to a high pitch by seeing Rufinus disappear through the gate leading to the convent-garden. Dame Joanna could not sit still for excitement, and Pulcheria answered at random when Orion and Paula, who had an infinity of things to say or whisper to each other, now and then tried to draw her into the conversation. Once she sighed deeply, and when her friend asked her: "What ails you, Child?" she answered anxiously:

"Something serious must be going forward, I feel it. If only Philippus were here!"

"But we are all safe and well, thank God!" observed Orion, and she quickly replied:

"Yes indeed, the Lord be praised!" But she thought to herself:

"You think he is of no use but to heal the sick; but it is only when he is here that everything goes right and happens for the best!"

Still, all felt that there was something unusual and ominous in the air, and when the old man presently returned his face confirmed their suspicions. He laid aside his hat and staff in speechless gravity; then he put his arm affectionately round his wife and said:

"You will need all your courage and self-command once more, as you have often done before, good wife; I have taken upon myself a serious duty."

Joanna had turned very pale, and while she clung to her husband and begged him to speak and not to torture her with suspense, her frail figure was trembling, and bitter tears ran down her cheeks. She could guess that her husband was once more going away from her and their child, in the service and for the benefit of others, and she knew full well that she could not prevent it. If she could, she never would have had the heart to interfere: for she always understood him, and felt with him that something to take him out of the narrow circle of home-life was indispensable to his happiness.

He read her thoughts, and they gave him pain; but he was not to be diverted from his purpose. The man who would try to heal every suffering brute was accustomed to see those whom he loved best grieve on his account. Marriage, he would say, ought not to hinder a man in following his soul's vocation; and he was fond of using this high-sounding name to justify himself in his own and his wife's eyes, in doing things to which he was prompted only by restlessness and unsatisfied energy. Without this he would, no doubt, have done his best for the imperilled sisterhood, but it added to his enjoyment of the grand and dangerous rescue.

The wretched fate of the hapless nuns, and the thought of losing them as near neighbors, grieved the women deeply, and the men saw many tears flow; at the same time they had the satisfaction of finding them all three firmly and equally determined to venture all, and to bid these whom they loved venture all, to hinder the success of a deed which filled them with horror and disgust.

Joanna spoke not a word of demur when Rufinus said that he intended to accompany the fugitives; and when, with beaming looks, he went on to praise Orion's foresight and keen decisiveness, Paula flew to him proudly and gladly, holding out both her hands. As for the young man, he felt as though wings were growing from his shoulders, and this fateful evening was one of the happiest of his life.

The superior had agreed to his scheme, and in some details had improved upon it. Two lay sisters and one nun should remain behind. The two former were to attend to the sick in the infirmary, to ring the bell and chant the services as usual, that the escape of the rest might not be suspected; and Joanna, Paula, and Pulcheria, were to assist them.

When, at a late hour, Orion was about to leave, Rufinus asked whether, under these circumstances, it would be well to bring Mary to his house; he himself doubted it. Joanna was of his opinion; Paula, on the contrary, said that she believed it would be better to let the child run the risk of a remote danger—hardly to be called danger, than to leave her to pine away body and soul in her old home. Pulcheria supported her, but the two girls were forced to yield to the decision of the elders.

ETEXT EDITOR'S BOOKMARKS:

An old war horse, though harnessed to the plough
As soon as a white thread could be distinguished from a black one

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