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THE BRIDE OF THE NILE

By Georg Ebers

Volume 8.

CHAPTER V.

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

Tormented by such bitter thoughts as these, he went into a neat little house by the harbor where a

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Will you try, at any rate?"

"Yes, for your sake."

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

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

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

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

.....

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Neforis, who for some time had been casting longing eyes at a small box by her side, did not contradict him; and in the course of the afternoon Orion conducted little Mary and her governess to the

house of Rufinus, who, notwithstanding the doubts he had expressed the day before, made them heartily welcome.

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER VI.

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

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

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

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

The blood tingled in the young man's veins. His father's successor! He, the new Mukaukas! How it flattered his ambition, what a way to all activity it opened out to him! It dazzled his vision, and moved him strongly to grasp the right hand which his generous patron still held out to him. But suddenly his excited fancy showed him the image of the Redeemer with whom he had entered into a silent covenant

in the church, sadly averting his gentle face. At this he remembered what he had vowed; at this he forgot all his grievance against Paula; he took the general's hand, indeed, but only to raise it to his lips as he thanked him with all his heart. But then he implored him, with earnest, pleading urgency, not to be wroth with him if he remained firm and clung to the faith of his father and his ancestors. And Amru was not wroth, though it was with none of the hearty interest with which he had at first welcomed him, that he hastily warned Orion to be on his guard against the prelate, since, so long as he remained a Christian, he had no power to protect him against Benjamin.

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

"And in casting my eye on you," he went on, "in spite of your youth, to fill your father's place, I took care to find a task for you which would enable you to prove that I had not put too great confidence in you. But, if you persist in your own opinions, I cannot possibly entrust so important a post as the governorship of Memphis to a Christian so young as you are; with the youthful Moslem I might have ventured on it.— However, I will not deprive you of the enterprise which I had intended for you. If you succeed in it, it will be a good thing for yourself, and I can, I believe, turn it to the benefit of the whole province—for what could take me from hence at this time, when my presence is so needful for a hundred incomplete projects, but my anxiety for the good of this country—in which I am but an alien, while you must love it as your native soil, the home of your race?—I am going to Medina because the Khaliff, in this letter, complains that I send too small a revenue into the treasury from so rich a land as Egypt. And yet not a single dinar of your taxes finds its way into my own coffers. I keep a hundred and fifty thousand laborers at work to restore the canals and waterworks which my predecessors, the blood-sucking Byzantines, neglected so disgracefully and left to fall to ruin—I build, and plan, and sow seed for posterity to reap. All this costs money. It swallows up the lion's share of the revenue. And I am making the journey, not merely to purge myself from reproach, but to obtain Omar's permission for the future to exact no extortionate payments, but to consider only the true weal of the province. I am most unwilling to go, for a thousand reasons; and you, young man, if you care for your native land, ought Do you really love it and wish it well?"

"With all my soul!" cried Orion.

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

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

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

When Orion had recrossed the bridge on his way home, he saw a gaily-dressed Nile-boat, such as now but rarely stopped at Memphis, lying at anchor in the dock, and on the road he met two litters followed by beasts of burden and a train of servants. The whole party had a brilliant and wealthy appearance, and at any other time would have roused his curiosity; but to-day he merely wondered for

a moment when these newcomers might be, and then continued to meditate on the task proposed to him by Amru. From the bottom of his heart he cursed the hour in which he had pledged himself to take the part of these strangers; for after such long idleness he longed to be able to prove his powers. Suddenly, and as if by a miracle, he saw the way opened before him which he had himself hoped to tread, and now he was fettered and held back from an enterprise which he felt he could carry out with success and benefit to his country, while it attracted him as with a hundred lode-stones.

Next morning, when his will had been duly signed and witnessed, he called the treasurer for an interview alone with him. He had made up his mind that one person, at least, must be informed of the enterprise he had planned, and that one could be no other than Nilus. So he begged him to accompany him to the impluvium of his private residence; and several office scribes who were present heard the invitation given. They did not, however, allow themselves to be disturbed in their work; the youngest only—a handsome lad of sixteen, an olive-complexioned Egyptian, with keen, eager black eyes, who had listened sharply to every word spoken by the treasurer and his master, quietly rose from his squatting posture as soon as they had quitted the office, and, stole, unobserved into the anteroom. From thence he flew up the ladder-like steps which led to the dovecote of which he had the care, sprang on to the roof of the lower story, and crept flat on his face till he was close to the edge of the large square opening which gave light and air to the impluvium below. With a swift movement of the hand he pushed back the awning which shaded it at midday, and listened intently to the dialogue that went on below.

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

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

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

The two men in the impluvium were not informed of the accident till some time later, for strict orders had been given that they were not to be disturbed.

Nilus had received his young master's communication with growing amazement, indignation, and horror. When Orion ended, the treasurer put forth all the eloquence of a faithful heart, anxious for the safety of the body and soul of the youth he loved, to dissuade him from a deed of daring which could bring him nothing but misapprehension, disaster, and persecution. Nilus was with all his soul a Jacobite; and the idea that his young master was about to risk everything for a party of Melchite nuns, and draw down upon himself the wrath and maledictions of the patriarch, was more than he could bear.

His faithful friend's warnings and entreaties did not leave Orion unmoved; but he clung to his determination, representing to Nilus that he had pledged his word to Rufinus, and could not now draw back, though he had already lost all his pleasure in the enterprise. But it went against him to leave the brave old man to face the danger alone—indeed, it was out of the question.

Genuine anxiety is fertile in expedient; Orion had scarcely done speaking, when Nilus had a proposal to make which seemed well calculated to dispel the youth's last objections. Melampus, the chief shipbuilder, was a Greek and a zealous Melchite, though he no longer dared to confess his creed openly. He and his sons, two bold and sturdy ships carpenters, had often given proof of their daring, and Nilus had no doubt that they would be more than willing to share in an expedition which had for its object the rescue of so many pious fellow-believers. They might take Orion's place, and would be far more helpful to the old man than Orion himself.

Orion so far approved of this suggestion as to promise himself good aid from the brave artisans, who were well known to him; and he was willing to take them with him, though he would not give up his own share in the business.

Nilus, though he adhered firmly to his objections, was at last reduced to silence. However, Orion went with his anxious friend to the ship-yard; the old ship-builder, a kind-hearted giant, was as ready and glad to undertake the rescue of the Sisters as if each one was his own mother. It would be a real treat to the youngsters to have a hand in such a job, —and he was right, for when they were taken into confidence one flourished his hatchet with enthusiasm, and the tether struck his horny fist against his left palm as gleefully as though he were bidden to a dance.

Orion took boat at once with the three men, and was rowed to the house of Rufinus, to whom he introduced them; the old man was entirely satisfied.

Orion remained with him after dismissing them. He had promised last evening to breakfast with him, and the meal was waiting. Paula had gone, about an hour since, to the convent, and Joanna expected her to return at any moment. They began without her, however; the various dishes were carried away, the meal was nearly ended—still she had not returned. Orion, who had at first been able to conceal his disappointment, was now so uneasy that his host could with difficulty extract brief and inadvertent replies to his repeated questions. Rufinus himself was anxious; but just as he rose to go in search of her, Pulcheria, who was at the window, saw her coming, and joyfully exclaiming: "There she is!" ran out.

But now again minute after minute passed, a quarter of an hour grew to half an hour, and still Orion was waiting in vain. Glad expectation had long since turned to impatience, impatience to a feeling of injured dignity, and this to annoyance and bitter vexation, when at last Pulcheria came back instead of Paula, and begged him from Paula to join her in the garden.

She had been detained too long at the convent. The terrible rumor had scared the pious sisters out of their wonted peace and put them all into confusion, like smoke blown into a bee-hive. The first thing was to pack their most valuable possessions; and although Orion had expressly said only a small number of cases and bags could be taken on board, one was for dragging her prayer-desk, another a large picture of some saint, a third a copper fish-kettle, and the fourth, fifth, and sixth the great reliquary with the bones of Ammonius the Martyr, to which the chapel owed its reputation for peculiar sanctity. To reduce this excess of baggage, the abbess had been obliged to exert all her energy and authority, and many a sister retired weeping over some dear but too bulky treasure.

The superior had therefore been unable to devote herself to Paula till this portable property had been under review. Then the damsel had been admitted to her parlor, a room furnished with rich and elegant simplicity, and there she had been allowed to pour out her whole heart to warm and sympathetic ears.

Any one who could have seen these two together might have thought that this was a daughter in grief seeking counsel on her mother's breast. In her youth the grey-haired abbess must have been very like Thomas' daughter; but the lofty and yet graceful mien of the younger woman had changed in the matron to majestic and condescending dignity, and it was impossible to guess from her defiantly set mouth that it had once been the chief charm of her face.

As she listened to the girl's outpourings the expression of her calm eyes changed frequently; when her soul was fired by fanatical zeal they could gleam brightly; but now she was listening to a variety of experiences, for Paula regarded this interview as a solemn confession, and concealed nothing from the friend who was both mother and priest—neither of what had happened to her in external circumstances, nor of what had moved her heart and mind ever since she had first entered the house of the Mtikaukas. Not a corner of her soul did she leave unsearched; she neither concealed nor palliated anything; and when she described her lover's strenuous efforts to apprehend the whole seriousness of life, her love and enthusiasm fairly carried her away, making his image shine all the more brightly by comparison with the brief, but dark shadow, that had fallen upon it. When Paula had at last ended her confession, the superior had remained silent for some time; then drawing the girl to her, she had affectionately asked her:

"And now? Now, tell me truly, does not the passion that has such wonderful power over you prompt and urge your inmost soul to yield—to fly to the embrace of the man you love—to give all up for him and say: 'Here I am—I am yours! Call a priest to bless our union!—Is it not so—am I not right?'"

Paula, deeply blushing, bowed assent; but the old woman drew her head on to her motherly bosom, and went on thoughtfully:

"I saw him drive past in his quadriga, and was reminded of many a noble statue of the heathen

Greeks. Beauty, rank, wealth, aye—and talents and intellect—all that could ruin the heart of a Paula are his, and she—I see it plainly—will give it to him gladly."

And again the maiden bowed her head. The abbess sighed, and went on as though she had with difficulty succeeded in submitting to the inevitable "Then all warning would be in vain.—Still, he is not of our confession, he...."

"But how highly he esteems it!" cried Paula. "That he proves by risking his freedom and life for you and your household."

"Say rather for you whom he loves," replied the other. "But putting that out of the question, it pains me deeply to think of Thomas' daughter as the wife of a Jacobite. You will not, I know, give him up; and the Father of Love often leads true love to good ends by wonderful ways, even though they are ways of error, passing through pitfalls and abysses."

Paula fell on her neck to kiss her gratefully: but the abbess could only allow the girl a few minutes to enjoy her happiness. She desired her to sit down by her side, and holding Paula's hand in both her own, she spoke to her in a tone of calm deliberation. She and her sisterhood, she began by saying, were deeply indebted to Orion. She had no dearer wish than that Paula should find the greatest earthly happiness in her marriage; still, it was her part to tender advice, and she dared not blind herself to the dangers which threatened this happiness. She herself had a long life behind her of varied experience, in which she had seen hundreds of young men who had been given up as lost sinners by father and mother—lost to the Church and to all goodness—and among these many a one, like Saul, had had his journey to Damascus. A turning point had come to them, and the outcast sons had become excellent and pious men.

Paula, as she listened, had drawn closer to the speaker, and her eyes beamed with joy; but the elder woman shook her head, and her gaze grew more devout and rapt, as she went on with deep solemnity:

"But then, my child, in all of these Grace had done its perfect work; the miracle was accomplished which we term regeneration. They were still the same men in the flesh and in the elements of their sensible nature, but their relation to the world and to life was altogether new. All that they had formerly thought desirable they could now hate; what they had deemed important was now worthless, and the worthless precious in their eyes; whereas they once referred everything to their own desires, they now referred all to God and His will. Their impulses were the same as of old, but they kept them within bounds by a never-sleeping consciousness that they led, not to joys, but to everlasting punishment. These regenerate souls learned to condemn the world, and instead of gazing down at the dust their eyes were fixed upwards on Heaven. If either of them tottered, his whole 'new man' prompted him to recover his balance before he fell to the ground.—But Orion! Your lover? His guilt seems to have passed over him; he hopes for reunion with God from a more meritorious life in the world. Not only is his nature unaltered, but his attitude with regard to life and to the joys it offers to the children of this world. Earthly love is spurring him on to strive for what is noble and great and he earnestly seeks to attain it; but he will fall over every stone that the devil casts in his path, and find it hard to pick himself up again, for misfortune has not led him to the new birth or the new life in God. Just such men have I seen, numbers of times, relapsing into the sins they had escaped from. Before we can entirely trust a man who has once—though but once—wandered so far from God's ways, while Grace has not yet worked effectually in him, we shall do well to watch his dealings and course for more than a few short days. If you still feel that you must follow the dictates of your heart, at any rate do not fly into your lover's open arms, do not abandon to him the pure sanctuary of your body and soul, do not be wholly his till he has been fully put to the proof."

"But I believe in him entirely!" cried Paula, with a flood of tears.

"You believe because you love him," replied the abbess.

"And because he deserves it."

"And how long has he deserved it?"

"Was he not a splendid man before his fall?"

"And so was many a murderer. Most criminals become outcasts from society in a single moment."

"But society still accepts Orion."

"Because he is the son of the Mukaukas."

"And because he wins all hearts !"

"Even that of the Almighty?"

"Oh! Mother, Mother! why do you measure him by the standard of your own sanctified soul? How few are the elect who find a share of the grace of which you speak!"

"But those who have sinned like him must strive for it."

"And he does so, Mother, in his way."

"It is the wrong way; wrong for those who have sinned as he has. All he strives for is worldly happiness."

"No, no. He is firm in his faith in God and the Saviour. He is not a liar."

"And yet he thinks he may escape the penalty?"

"And does not the Lord pardon true repentance?—He has repented; and how bitterly, how fearfully he has suffered!"

"Say rather that he has felt the stripes that his own sin brought upon him.—There are more to come; and how will he take them? Temptation lurks in every path, and how will he avoid it? As your mother, indeed it is my duty to warn you: Keep your passion and yourself still under control; continue to watch him, and grant him nothing—not the smallest favor, as you are a maiden, before he. . ."

"Till when; how long am I to be so basely on my guard?" sobbed Paula. "Is that love which trusts not and is not ready to share the lot even of the backslider?"

"Yes, child, yes," interrupted the old woman. "To suffer all things, to endure all things, is the duty of true love, and therefore of yours; but you must not allow the most indissoluble of all bonds to unite you to him till the back-slider has learnt to walk firmly. Follow him step by step, hold him up with faithful care, never despair of him if he seems other than what you had hoped. Make it your duty, pious soul, to render him worthy of grace—but do not be in a hurry to speak the final yes—do not say it yet."

Paula yielded, though unwillingly, to this last word of counsel; but, in fact, Orion's fault had filled the abbess with deep distrust. So great a sinner, under the blight, too, of a father's curse, ought, in her opinion, to have retired from the world and besieged Heaven for grace and a new birth, instead of seeking joys, such as she thought none but the most blameless—and, those of her own confession—could deserve, in union with so exceptional a creature as her beloved Paula. Indeed, having herself found peace for her soul only in the cloister, after a stormy and worldly youth, she would gladly have received the noble daughter of her old friend as the Bride of Christ within those walls, to be, perhaps, her successor as Mother Superior. She longed that her darling should be spared the sufferings she had known through the ruthlessness of faithless men; so she would not abate a jot of the tenor of her advice, or cease to impress on Paula, firmly though lovingly, the necessity of following it. At last Paula took leave of her, bound by a promise not to pledge herself irrevocably to Orion till his return from Doomiati, and till the abbess had informed her by letter what opinion she had formed of him in the course of their flight.

The high-spirited girl had not shed so many tears, as in the course of this interview, since the fatal affair at Abyla where she had lost her father and brother; it was with a tear-stained face and aching head that she had made her way back, under the scorching mid-day sun, to Rufinus' house, where she sought her old nurse. Betta had earnestly entreated her to lie down, and when Paula refused to hear of it she persuaded her at any rate to bathe her head with water as cold as was procurable in this terrific heat, and to have her hair carefully rearranged by her skilful hand; for this had been her mother's favorite remedy against headache. When, at length, Paula and her lover stood face to face, in a shady spot in the garden, they both looked embarrassed and estranged. He was pale, and gazed at her with some annoyance; and her red eyes and knit brows, for her brain was throbbing with piercing pain, did not tend to improve his mood. It was her part to explain and excuse herself; and as he did not at once address her after they had exchanged greetings, she said in a low tone of urgent entreaty:

"Forgive me for coming so late. How long you must have been waiting! But parting from my best friend, my second mother, agitated me so painfully—it was so unspeakably sad.—I did not know how to hold up my head, it ached so when I came home, and now—oh, I had hoped that we might meet to-day so differently!"

"But even yesterday you had no time to spare for me," he retorted sullenly, "and this morning—you were present when Rufinus invited me— this morning!—I am not exacting, and to you, good God! How could I be? —But have we not to part, to bid each other farewell—perhaps for ever? Why should you have given up so much time and strength to your friend, that so scanty a remnant is left for the lover?"

That is an unfair division."

"How could I deny it?" she said with melancholy entreaty. "You are indeed very right; but I could not leave the child last evening, as soon as she came, and while she was weeping out all her sorrows; and if you only knew how surprised and grieved I was—how my heart ached when, instead of finding you, your note....."

"I was obliged to go to Amru," interrupted Orion. "This undertaking compels me to leave much behind, and I am no longer the freest of the free, as I used to be. During this dreadful breakfast I have been sitting on thorns. But let all that pass. I came hither with a heart high with hope—and now?—You see, Paula, this enterprise tears me in two in more ways than you can imagine, puts me into a more critical position, and weighs more on my mind than you can think or know—I will explain it all to you at another time—and to bear it all, to keep up the spirit and happy energy that I need, I must be secure of the one thing for which I could take far greater toil and danger as mere child's play; I must know....."

"You must know," she interposed, "whether my heart is fully and wholly open to your love. . . ."

"And whether," he added, with growing ardor, "in spite of the bitter suffering that weighs on my wretched soul, I may hope to be happier than the saints in bliss. O Paula, adored and only woman, may I. . . ."

"You may," she said clearly and fervently. "I love you, Orion, and shall never, never cease to love you with my whole soul."

He flew to her side, clasped both her hands as if beside himself, snatched them to his lips regardless of the nearness of the house, whence ten pairs of eyes might have seen him, and covered them with burning kisses, till she drew them from him with the entreaty: "No, no; forbear, I entreat you. No—not now."

"Yes, now, at this very moment—or, if not, when?" he asked vehemently. "But here, in this garden—you are right, this is no place for two human beings so happy as we are. Come with me; come into the house and lead the way to a spot where we may be unseen and unheard, alone with each other and our happiness."

"No, no, no!" she hastily put in, pressing her hand to her aching brow. "Come with me to the bench under the sycamore; it is shady there, and you can tell me everything, and hear once more how entirely love has taken possession of me."

He looked in her face, surprised and disappointed; but she turned towards the sycamore and sat down beneath it. He slowly followed her. She signed to him to take a seat by her side, but he stood up in front of her, saying sadly and despondently.

"Always the same—always calm and cold. Is this fair, Paula? Is this the overwhelming love of which you spoke? Is this your response to the yearning cry of a passionately ardent heart? Is this all that love can grant to love—that a betrothed owes to her lover on the very eve of parting?"

At this she looked up at him, deeply distressed, and said in pathetically urgent entreaty: "O Orion, Orion! Have I not told you, can you not see and feel how much I love you? You must know and feel it; and if you do, be content, I entreat. You, whom alone I love, be satisfied to know that this heart is yours, that your Paula—your own Paula, for that indeed I am—will think of nothing, care for nothing, pray and entreat Heaven for nothing but you, yes you, my own, my all."

"Then come, come with me," he insisted, "and grant your betrothed the rights that are his due."

"Nay, not my betrothed—not yet," she besought him, with all the fervor of her tortured soul. "In my veins too the blood flows warm with yearning. Gladly would I fly to your arms and lay my head against yours, but not to-day can I become your betrothed, not yet; I cannot, I dare not!"

"And why not? Tell me, at any rate, why not," he cried indignantly, clenching his fist to his breast. "Why will you not be my bride, if indeed it is true that you love me? Why have you invented this new and intolerable torment?"

"Because prudence tells me," she replied in a low, hurried voice, while her bosom heaved painfully, as though she were afraid to hear her own words; "because I see that the time is not yet come. Ah, Orion! you have not yet learnt to bridle the desires and cravings that burn within you; you have forgotten all too quickly what is past—what a mountain we had to cross before we succeeded in finding each other, before I—for I must say it, my dear one—before I could look you in the face without anger and aversion. A strange and mysterious ordering has brought it about; and you, too, have honestly done your best

that everything should be changed, that what was white should now be black, that the chill north wind should turn to a hot southerly one. Thus poison turns to healing, and a curse to a blessing. In this foolish heart of mine passionate hatred has given way to no less fervent love. Still, I cannot yet be your bride, your wife. Call it cowardice, call it selfish caution, what you will. I call it prudence, and applaud it; though it cost my poor eyes a thousand bitter tears before my heart and brain could consent to be guided by the warning voice. Of one thing you may be fully assured: my heart will never be another's, come what may—it is yours with my whole soul!—But I will not be your bride till I can say to you with glad confidence, as well as with passionate love: 'You have conquered—take me, I am yours!' Then you shall feel and confess that Paula's love is not less vehement, less ardent.... O God! Orion, learn to know and understand me. You must—for my sake and your own, you must!—My head, merciful Heaven, my head!"

She bowed her face and clasped her hands to her burning brow; Orion, pale and shivering, laid his hand on her shoulder, and said in a harsh, forced voice that had lost all its music: "The Esoterics impose severe trials on their disciples before they admit them into the mysteries. And we are in Egypt—but the difference is a wide one when the rule is applied to love. However, all this is not from yourself. What you call prudence is the voice of that nun!"

"It is the voice of reason," replied Paula softly. "The yearning of my heart had overpowered it, and I owe to my friend. . . ."

"What do you owe her?" cried the young man furiously indignant. "You should curse her, rather, for doing you so ill a turn, as I do at this moment. What does she know of me? Has she ever heard a word from my lips? If that despotic and casuistic recluse could have known what my heart and soul are like, she would have advised you differently. Even as a child's confidence and love alone could influence me. Whatever my faults might be, I never was false to kindness and trust.—And, so far as you are concerned—you who are prudence and reason in person—blest in your love, I should have cared only for your approbation. If I could have overcome the last of your scruples, I should indeed have been proud and happy!—I would have brought the sun and stars down from the sky for you, and have laughed temptation to scorn!—But as it is—instead of being raised I am lowered, a laughing-stock even in my own eyes. One with you, I could have led the way on wings to the realms of light where Perfection holds sway!—But as it is? What a task lies before me!—To heat your frigid love to flaming point by good deeds, as though they were olive-logs. A pretty task for a man—to put himself to the proof before the woman he loves! It is a hideous and insulting torture which I will not submit to, against which my whole inner man revolts, and which you will and must forego—if indeed it is true that you love me!"

"I love you, oh! I love you," she cried, beside herself, and seizing his hands. "Perhaps you are right. I—my God what shall I do? Only do not ask me yet, to speak the final yes or no. I cannot control myself to the feeblest thought. You see, you see, how I am suffering!"

"Yes, I see it," he replied, looking compassionately at her pale face and drawn brow. "And if it must be so, I say: till this evening then. Try to rest now, and take care of yourself.—But then. . . ."

"Then, during the voyage, the flight, repeat to the abbess all you have just said to me. She is a noble woman, and she, too, will learn to understand and to love you, I am sure. She will retract the word I know. . . ."

"What word?"

"My word, given to her, that I would not be yours. . . ."

"Till I had gone through the Esoteric tests?" exclaimed Orion with an angry shrug. "Now go,—go and lie down. This hour, which should have been the sweetest of our lives, a stranger has embittered and darkened. You are not sure of yourself—nor I of myself. Anything more that we could say now and here would lead to no good issue for either you or me. Go and rest; sleep off your pain, and I—I will try to forget.—If you could but see the turmoil in my soul!—But farewell till our next, more friendly—I hardly dare trust myself to say our happier meeting."

He hastily turned away, but she called after him in sad lament: "Orion do not forget—Orion, you know that I love you."

But he did not hear; he hurried on with his head bowed over his breast, down to the road, without reentering Rufinus' house.

CHAPTER VII.

When Orion reached home, wounded to the quick, he flung himself on a divan. Paula had said that her heart was his indeed, but what a cool and grudging love was this that would give nothing till it had insured its future. And how could Paula have allowed a third person to come between them, and rule her feelings and actions? She must have revealed to that third person all that had previously passed between them—and it was for this Melchite nun, his personal foe, that he was about to—it was enough to drive him mad!—But he could not withdraw; he had pledged himself to the brave old man to carry out this crazy enterprise. And in the place of the lofty, noble mistress of his whole being, his fancy pictured Paula as a tearful, vacillating, and cold-hearted woman.

There lay the maps and plans which he had desired Nilus to send in from his room for his study of the task set him by Amru; as his eye fell upon them, he struck his fist against the wall, started up, and ran like a madman up and down the room which had been sacred to her peaceful life.

There stood her lute; he had freshly strung and tuned it. To calm himself he drew it to him, took up the plectrum, and began to play. But it was a poor instrument; she had been content with this wretched thing! He flung it on the couch and took up his own, the gift of Heliodora. How sweetly, how delightfully she had been wont to play it! Even now its strings gave forth a glorious tone; by degrees he began to rejoice in his own playing, and music soothed his excitement, as it had often done before. It was grand and touching, though he several times struck the strings so violently that their loud clanging and sighing and throbbing answered each other like the wild wailing of a soul in torment.

Under this vehement usage the bridge of the lute suddenly snapped off with a dull report; and at the same instant his secretary, who had been with him at Constantinople, threw open the door in glad excitement, and began, even before he had crossed the threshold:

"Only think, my lord! Here is a messenger come from the inn kept by Sostratus with this tablet for you.—It is open, so I read it. Only think! it is hardly credible! The Senator Justinus is here with his wife, the noble Martina—here in Memphis, and they beg you to visit them at once to speak of matters of importance. They came last night, the messenger tells me, and now—what joy! Think of all the hospitality you enjoyed in their house. Can we leave them in an inn? So long as hospitality endures, it would be a crime!"

"Impossible, quite impossible!" cried Orion, who had cast aside the lute, and was now reading the letter himself. "It is true indeed! his own handwriting. And that immovable pair are in Egypt—in Memphis! By Zeus!"—for this was still the favorite oath of the golden youth of Alexandria and Constantinople, even in these Christian times.—"By Zeus, I ought to receive them here like princes!—Wait!—of course you must tell the messenger that I am coming at once—have the four new Pannonians harnessed to the silver-plated chariot. I must go to my mother; but there is time enough for that. Desire Sebek to have the guest-chambers prepared for distinguished guests—those sick people are out of them, thank God! Take my present room for them too; I will go back to the old one. Of course they have a numerous suite. Set twenty or thirty slaves to work. Everything must be ready in two hours at furthest. The two sitting-rooms are particularly handsome, but where anything is lacking, place everything in the house at Sebek's command.—Justinus in Egypt!— But make haste, man! Nay, stay! One thing more. Carry these maps and scrolls—no; they are too heavy for you. Desire a slave to fetch them, and take them to Rufinus; he must keep them till I come. Tell him I meant to use them on the way—he knows."

The secretary rushed off; Orion performed a rapid toilet and had his mourning dress rearranged in fresh folds; then he went to his mother. She had often heard of the cordial reception that her son, and her husband, too, in former days, had met with in the senator's house, and she took it quite as a matter of course that the strangers' rooms, and among them that which had been Paula's, should be prepared for the travellers; all she asked was that it should be explained that she was suffering, so that she might not have to trouble herself to entertain them.

She advised Orion to put off his journey and to devote himself to his friends; but he explained that even their arrival must not delay him. He had entire confidence in Sebek and the upper housekeeper, and the emperor himself would remit the duties of hostess to a sick woman. Once, at any rate, she would surely allow the illustrious guests to pay their respects to her,—but even this Neforis refused. It would be quite enough if her visitors received messages and greetings daily in her name, with offerings of choice fruit and flowers, and on the last day some costly gift. Orion thought this proposal quite worthy of them both, and presently drove off behind his Pannonians to the hostelry.

By the harbor he met the captain of the boat he had hired; to him he held up two fingers, and the

boatman signified by repeated nodding that he had understood the meaning of this signal: "Be ready at two hours before midnight."

The sight of this weather-beaten pilot, and the prospect of making some return to his noble friends for all their kindness, cheered Orion greatly; and though he regretted being obliged to leave these guests of all others, the perils that lay before him reasserted their charm. He could surely win over the abbess in the course of the voyage, and Paula might be brought to reason, perhaps, this very evening. Justinus and his wife were Melchites, and he knew that both these friends—for whom he had a particular regard—would be enchanted with his scheme if he took them into his confidence.

The inn kept by Sostratus, a large, square building surrounding a spacious court-yard, was the best and most frequented in the town. The eastern side faced the road and the river, and contained the best rooms, in which, on the previous night, the senator had established himself with his wife and servants. The clatter of the quadriga drew Justinus to the window; as soon as he recognized Orion he waved a table-napkin to him, shouting a hearty "Welcome!" and then retired into the room again.

"Here he is!" he cried to his wife, who was lying on a couch in the lightest permissible attire, and sipping fruit-syrup from time to time to moisten her dry lips, while a boy fanned her for coolness.

"That is well indeed!" she exclaimed, and desired her maid to be quick, very quick, and fetch her a wrap, but to be sure it was a thin one. Then, turning to a very lovely young woman who had started to her feet at Justinus' first exclamation, she asked:

"Would you rather that he should find you here, my darling, or shall we see him first, and tell him that we have brought you with us?"

"That will be best," answered the other in a sweet voice, and she sighed softly before she added: "What will he not think of me? We may grow older, but folly—folly. . ."

"Grows with years?" laughed the matron. "Or do you think it decreases?—But here he is."

The younger woman hurried away by a side door, behind which she disappeared. Martina looked after her, and pointing that way to direct her husband's glance, she observed: "She has left herself a chink. Good God! Fancy being in love in such heat as this; what a hideous thought!"

At this moment the door was opened, and the heartiest greetings ensued. It was evident that the meeting was as great a pleasure to the elderly pair as to the young man. Justinus embraced him warmly, while the matron cried out: "And a kiss for me too!" And when the youth immediately and heartily gave it, she exclaimed with a groan:

"O man, and child of man, great Sesostris! How did your famous ancestor ever achieve heroic deeds under such a sun as this? For my part I am fast disappearing, melting away like butter; but what will a man not do for love's sake?—Syra, Syra; for God's sake bring me something, however small, that looks like a garment! How rational is the fashion of the people of Africa whom we met with on our journey. If they have three fingers' breadth of cloth about them, they consider themselves elegantly dressed.—But come, sit down—there, at my feet. A seat, Argos, and some wine, and water in a damp clay pitcher, and cool like the last. Husband, the boy seems to me handsomer than ever. But dear God! he is in mourning, and how becoming it is! Poor boy, poor boy! Yes, we heard in Alexandria."

She wiped first her eyes and then her damp brow, and her husband added his expressions of sympathy at the death of the Mukaukas.

They were a genial and comfortable couple, Justinus and his wife Martina. Two beings who felt perfectly secure in their vast inherited wealth, and who, both being of noble birth, never need make any display of dignity, because they were sure of it in the eyes of high and low alike. They had asserted their right to remain natural and human under the formalities of the most elaborately ceremonious society; those who did not like the easy tone adopted by them in their house might stay away. He, devoid of ambition, a senator in virtue of his possessions and his name, never caring to make any use of his adventitious dignity but that of procuring good appointments for his favorite clients, or good places for his family on any festive occasion, was a hospitable soul; the good friend of all his friends, whose motto was "live and let live." Martina, with a heart as good as gold, had never made any pretensions to beauty, but had nevertheless been much courted. This worthy couple had for many years thought that nothing could be more delightful than a residence in the capital, or at their beautiful villa on the Bosphorus, scorning to follow the example of other rich and fashionable folks, and go to take baths or make journeys. It was enough for them to be able to make others happy under their roof; and there was never any lack of visitors, just because those who were weary of bending their backs at the Byzantine Court, found this unceremonious circle particularly restful.

Martina was especially fond of having young people about her, and Heliodora, the widow of her nephew, had found comfort with her in her trouble; it was in her house that Orion and Heliodora had met. The young widow was a great favorite with the old couple, but higher in their esteem even than she, had been the younger brother of her deceased husband. He was to have been their heir; but they had mourned his death now two years; for news had reached them that Narses, who had served in the Imperial army as tribune of cavalry, had fallen in battle against the infidels. No one, however, had ever brought a more exact report of his death; and at last their indefatigable enquiries had resulted in their learning that he had been taken prisoner by the Saracens and carried into slavery in Arabia. This report received confirmation through the efforts of Orion and his deceased father. Within a few hours of the young Egyptian's departure, they received a letter from the youth they had given up for lost, written in trembling characters, in which he implored them to effect his deliverance through Amru, the Arab governor of Egypt. The old people had set forth at once on their pilgrimage, and Heliodora had done her part in urging them to this step. Her passion for Orion, to whom, for more than a year, her gentle heart had been wholly devoted, had increased every hour since his departure. She had not concealed it from Martina, who thought it no less than her duty to stand by the poor lovesick child; for Heliodora had nursed her husband, the senator's nephew, to the end, with touching fidelity and care; and besides, Martina had given the young Egyptian—with whom she was "quite in love herself"—every opportunity of paying his addresses to the young widow.

They were a pair that seemed made for each other, and Martina delighted in match-making. But in this case, though hearts had met, hands had not, and finally it had been a real grief to Martina to hear Orion and Heliodora called—and with good reason—a pair of lovers.

Once she had appealed in her genial way to the young man's conscience, and he had replied that his father, who was a Jacobite, would never consent to his union with a woman of any other confession. At that time she had found little to answer; but she had often thought if only she could make the Mukaukas acquainted with Heliodora, he, whom she had known in the capital as a young and handsome admirer of every charming woman, would certainly capitulate.

Her favorite niece had indeed every grace that a father's heart could desire to attract the son. She was of good family, the widow of a man of rank, rich, but just two and twenty, and beautiful enough to bewitch old or young. A sweeter and gentler soul Martina had never known. Those large dewy eyes—imploring eyes, she called them—might soften a stone, and her fair waving hair was as soft as her nature. Add to this her full, supple figure—and how perfectly she dressed, how exquisitely she sang and struck the lute! It was not for nothing that she was courted by every youth of rank in Constantinople—and if the old Mukaukas could but hear her laugh! There was not a sound on earth more clear, more glad than Heliodora's laugh. She was not indeed remarkable for intellect, but no one could call her a simpleton, and your very clever women were not to every man's taste.

So, when they were to travel to Egypt, Martina took it for granted that Heliodora must go with them, and that the flirtation which had made her favorite the talk of the town must, in Memphis, become courtship in earnest. Then, when she heard at Alexandria that the Mukaukas was lately dead, she regarded the game as won. Now they were in Memphis, Orion was sitting before her, and the young man had invited her and her following of above twenty persons to stay in his house. It was a foregone conclusion that the travellers were to accept this bidding as prescribed by the laws of hospitality, and preparations for the move were immediately set on foot.

Justinus meanwhile explained what had brought them to Egypt, and begged Orion's assistance. The young man had known the senator's nephew well as one of the most brilliant and amiable youths of the capital, and he was sincerely distressed to be forced to inform his friends that Amru, who could easily have procured the release of Narses, was to start within two days for Medina, while he himself was compelled to set out on a journey that very evening, at an hour he could not name.

He saw how greatly this firmly-expressed determination agitated and disturbed the old couple, and the senator's urgency led him to tell them, under the pledge of strict secrecy, what business it was that took him away and what a perilous enterprise he had before him.

He began his story confident of his orthodox guests' sympathy; but to his amazement they both disapproved of the undertaking, and not, as they declared, on his account only or for the sake of the help they had counted on.

The senator reminded him that he was the natural chief of the Egyptian population in Memphis, and that, by such a scheme, he was undermining his influence with those whose leader he was by right and duty as his father's son. His ambition ought to make him aim at this leadership; and instead of offering such a rebuff to the patriarch, it was his part to work with him—whose power he greatly underrated—so as to make life tolerable to their fellow-Christians in a land ruled by Moslems.

Paula's name was not once mentioned; but Orion thought of her and remained firm, though not without an inward struggle.

At the same time, to prove to his friends how sincerely he desired to please them, he proposed that he and Justinus should immediately cross the Nile to lay his application before the Khaliff's vicar. A glance at the sky showed him that it wanted still an hour and a half of sunset. His swift horses would not need more than that time for the journey, and during their absence the rest of the party could move from the inn. Carts for the baggage were already in waiting below, and chariots had been ordered to follow and convey his beloved guests to their new quarters.

The senator agreed to this proposal, and as the two men went off Martina called after Orion.

"My senator must talk to you on the road, and if you can be brought to reason you will find your reward waiting for you! Do not be saving of your talents of gold, old man, till the general has promised to procure the lad's release.—And listen to me, Orion; give up your mad scheme."

The sun had not wholly disappeared behind the Libyan range when the snorting Pannonians, all flecked with foam, drove back into the courtyard of the governor's residence. The two men had unfortunately gained nothing; for Amru was absent, reviewing the troops between Heliopolis and Onix, and was not expected home till night or even next morning. The party had removed from the inn and the senator's white slaves were already mixing with the black and brown ones of the establishment.

Martina was delighted with her new quarters, and with the beautiful flowers—most of them new to her—with which the invalid mistress of the house had had the two great reception-rooms garnished in token of welcome; but the failure of Justinus' visit to Fostat fell like hoar-frost on her happy mood.

Orion, she asserted, ought to regard this stroke of ill-luck as a judgment from God. It was the will of Heaven that he should give up his enterprise and be content to make due preparations for a noble work which could be carried through without him, in order to accomplish another, out of friendship, which urgently needed his help. However, he again expressed his regret that in spite of everything he must adhere to his purpose; and when Martina asked him: "What, even if my reward is one that would especially delight you?" he nodded regretfully. "Yes, even then."

So she merely added, "Well, we shall see," and went on impressively: "Every one has some peculiarity which stamps his individuality and becomes him well: in you it is amiability, my son. Such obstinacy does not suit you; it is quite foreign to you, and is the very opposite to what I call amiability. Be yourself, even in this instance."

"That is to say weak and yielding, especially when a kind woman. . . ."

"When old friends ask it," she hastily put in; but almost before she had finished she turned to her husband, exclaiming: "Good Heavens! come to the window. Did you ever see such a glorious mingling of purple and gold in the sky? It is as though the old pyramids and the whole land of Egypt were in flames. But now, great Sesostris,"—the name she gave to Orion when she was in a good humor with him, "it is time that you should see what I have brought you. In the first place this trinket," and she gave him a costly bracelet of old Greek workmanship set with precious stones, "and then—nay, no Thanks—and then—Well the object is rather large, and besides—come with me."

As she spoke she went from the reception-room into the anteroom, led the way to the door of the room which had once been Paula's, and then his own, opened it a little way, peeped in, and then pushed Orion forward, saying hastily: "There—do you see—there it is!"

By the window stood Heliodora. The bright radiance of the sinking sun bathed her slender but round and graceful form, her "imploring" eyes looked up at him with rapturous delight, and her white arms folded across her bosom gave her the aspect of a saint, waiting with humble longing for some miracle, in expectation of unutterable joys.

Martina's eyes, too, were fixed on Orion; she saw how pale he turned at seeing the young widow, she saw him start as though suddenly overcome by some emotion—what, she could not guess—and shrink back from the sunlit vision in the window. These were effects which the worthy matron had not anticipated.

Never off the stage, thought she, had she seen a man so stricken by love; for she could not suspect that to him it was as though a gulf had suddenly yawned at his feet.

With a swiftness which no one could have looked for from her heavy and bulky figure, Martina hastily returned to her husband, and even at the door exclaimed: "It is all right, all has gone well! At the sight of her he seemed thunderstruck! Mark my words: we shall have a wedding here by the Nile."

"My blessing on it," replied Justinus. "But, wedding or no wedding, all I care is that she should persuade that fine young fellow to give up his crazy scheme. I saw how even the brown rascals in the Arab's service bowed down before him; and he will persuade the general, if any one can, to do all in his power for Narses. He must not and shall not go! You impressed it strongly on Heliodora. . . ."

"That she should keep him?" laughed the matron. "I tell you, she will nail him down if need be."

"So much the better," replied her husband. "But, wife, folks might say that it was not quite seemly in you to force them together. Properly speaking, you are as it were her female mentor, the motherly patroness."

"Good Heavens!" exclaimed Martina. "At home they invited no witnesses to look on at their meetings. The poor love-lorn souls must at any rate have a chance of speaking to each other and rejoicing that they have met once more. I will step in presently, and be the anxious, motherly friend. Tine, Tine! And if it does not end in a wedding, I will make a pilgrimage to St. Agatha, barefoot."

"And I with only one shoe!" the senator declared, "for, everything in reason—but the talk about Dora was at last beyond all bounds. It was no longer possible to have them both together under the same roof. And you yourself—no, seriously; go in to them."

"Directly, directly.—But first look out of this window once more. Oh, what a sun!—there, now it is too late. Only two minutes ago the whole heaven was of the hue of my red Syrian cloak; and now it is all dark!—The house and garden are beautiful, and everything is old and handsome; just what I should have expected in the home of the rich Mukaukas."

"And I too," replied Justinus. "But now, go. If they have come to an understanding, Dora may certainly congratulate herself."

"I should think so! But she need not be ashamed even of her villa, and they must spend every summer there, I will manage that. If that poor, dear fellow Narses does not escape with his life—for two years of slavery are a serious matter—then I should be able. . . ."

"To alter your will? Not a bad idea; but there is no hurry for that; and now, you really must go."

"Yes, yes, in a minute. Surely I may have time to speak.—I, for my part, know of no one whom I would sooner put in the place of Narses....."

"Than Orion and Heliodora? Certainly, I have no objection; but now...."

"Well, perhaps it is wicked to think of a man who may still be alive as numbered with the dead.—At any rate the poor boy cannot go back to his legion. . . ."

"On no consideration. But, Martina. . . ."

"To-morrow morning Orion must urge our case on the Arab"

"If he does not go away."

"Will you bet that she fails to keep him."

"I should be a fool for my pains," laughed Justinus. "Do you ever pay me when I win?—But now, joking apart, you must go and see what they are about."

And this time she obeyed. She would have won her bet; for Orion, who had remained unmoved by his sister-in-law's letter, by the warning voice of the faith of his childhood, by the faithful council of his honest servant Nilus, or by the senator's convincing arguments—had yielded to Heliodora's sweet blandishments.

How ardently had her loving heart flamed up, when she saw him so deeply agitated at the sight of her! With what touching devotion had she sunk into his arms; how humbly-half faint with sweet sorrow and sweeter ecstasy—had she fallen at his feet, and clasped his knees, and entreated him, with eyes full of tears of adoring rapture, not to leave to-day, to wait only till tomorrow, and then, if he would, to tread her in the dust. Now—now when she had just found him again after being worn out with pining and longing-to part now, to see him rush on an uncertain fate—it would kill her, it would certainly be her death! And when he still had tried to resist she had rushed into his arms, had stopped his lips with burning kisses, and whispered in his ear all the flattering words of love he once had held so dear.

Why had he never seriously tried to win her, why had he so soon forgotten her? Because she, who could assert her dignity firmly enough with others, had abandoned herself to him unresistingly after a few meetings, as if befooled by some magician's spell. The precious spoil so easily won had soon lost its

value in his eyes. But to-day the fire which had died out blazed up again. Yes, this was the love he craved, he must have! To be loved with entire and utter devotion, with a heart that thought only of him and not of itself, that asked only for love in return for love, that did not fence itself round with caution and invoke the aid of others for protection against him. This lovely creature, all passion, who had taken upon herself to endure the contumely of society, and pain and grief for his sake, knowing too that he had abandoned her, and would never make her his wife before God and men—she indeed knew what it was to love; and he who was so often inclined to despair of himself felt his heart uplifted at the thought that he was so precious in her eyes, nay—he would own it—so idolized.

And how sweet, how purely womanly she was! Those imploring eyes—which he had grown quite sick of in Constantinople, for they were as full of pathetic entreaty when she merely begged him to hold her cloak for her as when she appealed to his heart of hearts not to leave her—that entrancing play of glances which had first bewitched him, came to him to-day as something new and worked the old spell.

In this moment of tender reunion he had promised her at any rate to consider whether he could not release himself from the pledge by which he was bound; but hardly had he spoken the words when the memory of Paula revived in his mind, and an inward voice cried out to him that she was a being of nobler mould than this yielding, weak woman, abject before him—that she symbolized his upward struggle, Heliadora his perdition.

At length he was able to tear himself from her embrace; and at the first step out of this intoxication into real life again he looked about like one roused from sleep, feeling as though it were by some mocking sport of the devil himself that Paula's room should have been the scene of this meeting and of his weakness.

An enquiry from Heliadora, as to the fate of the little white dog that she had given him as a remembrance, recalled to his mind that luckless emerald which was to have been his return offering or antidoron. He evasively replied that, remembering her love of rare gems, he had sent her a remarkably fine stone about which he had a good deal to say; and she gave such childlike and charming expression to her delight and gratitude, and took such skilful advantage of his pleasure in her clinging tenderness, to convince him of the necessity for remaining at home, that he himself began to believe in it, and gave way. The more this conclusion suited his own wishes the easier it became to find reasons for it: old Rufinus really did not need him; and if he—Orion—had cause to be ashamed of his vacillation, on the other hand he could comfort himself by reflecting that it would be unkind and ungrateful to his good friends to leave them in the lurch just when he could be of use to them. One pair of protecting arms more or less could not matter to the nuns, while the captive Narses might very probably perish before he could be rescued without his interest with the Arab general.

It was high time to decide one way or the other.—Well, no; he ought not to go away to-day!

That was settled!

Rufinus must at once be informed of his change of purpose. To sit down and write at such a moment he felt was impossible: Nilus should go and speak in his name; and he knew how gladly and zealously he would perform such an errand.

Heliadora clapped her hands, and just as Martina knocked at the door the pair came out into the anteroom: She, radiant with happiness, and so graceful in her fashionable, costly, and well-chosen garb, so royal-looking in spite of her no more than middle height, that even in the capital she would have excited the admiration of the men and the envy of the women: He, content, but with a thoughtful smile on his lips.

He had not yet closed the door when in the anteroom he perceived two female figures, who had come in while Martina was knocking at her niece's door. These were Katharina and her waiting-maid.

Anubis had been brought to these rooms after his fall from the roof, and notwithstanding the preparations that had been made for illustrious guests Philippus could not be persuaded to allow his patient, for whom perfect quiet was indispensable, to be moved to the lower floor.

The listener who had been so severely punished had with him his mother, Katharina's old nurse; the water-wagtail, with her maid, had accompanied her to see the lad, for she was very anxious to assure herself whether her foster-brother, before his tumble, had succeeded in hearing anything; but the poor fellow was so weak and his pain so severe that she had not the heart to torment him with questions. However, her Samaritan's visit brought her some reward, for to meet Orion coming out of Paula's room with so beautiful and elegant a woman was a thing worth opening her eyes. to see. She would have walked from home hither twice over only to see the clothes and jewels of this heaven sent stranger. Such a being rarely strayed to Memphis,—and might not this radiant and beautiful creature be "the

other" after all, and not Paula? Might not Orion have been trifling with her rival as he had already trifled with her? They must have had a rapturous meeting in that room; every feature of the fair beauty's saint-like face betrayed the fact. Oh, that Orion! She would have liked to throttle him; and yet she was glad to think that there was another besides herself—and she so elegant and lovely—whom he had betrayed.

"He will stay!" Heliodora exclaimed as she came out of the room; and Martina held out her hand to the young man, with a fervent: "God bless you for that!"

She was delighted to see how happy her niece looked but the lively old woman's eyes were everywhere at once, and when she caught sight of Katharina who had stood still with curiosity, she turned to her with a friendly nod and said to Orion:

"Your sister? Or the little niece of whom you used to speak?"

Orion called Katharina and introduced her to his guests, and the girl explained what had brought her hither; in such a sweet and pathetic manner—for she was sincerely fond of her foster-brother and play-fellow—that she quite charmed Martina and Heliodora, and the younger woman expressed a hope that they might see her often. Indeed, when she was gone, Martina exclaimed: "A charming little thing! As fresh and bright as a newly-fledged bird, so brisk and pretty too—and how nicely she prattles!"

"And the richest heiress in Memphis into the bargain," added Orion. But, noticing that on this Heliodora cast down her eyes with a troubled expression, he went on with a laugh: "Our mothers destined us to marry each other, but we are too ill-matched in size, and not exactly made for a pair in other ways."

Then, taking leave of them, he went to Nilus and informed him of his decision. His request that the treasurer would make his excuses to Rufinus, carry his greetings to Thomas' daughter, and make the most of his reasons for remaining behind, sent the good man almost beside himself for joy; and he so far forgot his modest reserve as to embrace Orion as a son.

The young host sat with his visitors till nearly midnight: and when, on the following morning, Martina first greeted her niece—who looked peacefully happy though somewhat tired—she was able to tell her that the two men had already gone across the Nile, and, she hoped, settled everything with the Arab governor. Great was her disappointment when presently Justinus and Orion came back to say that Amru, instead of returning to Fostat from the review at Heliopolis, had gone straight to Alexandria. He had engagements there for a few days, and would then start for Medina.

The senator saw nothing for it but to follow him up, and Orion volunteered to accompany him.

A faint attempt on Heliodora's part to detain him met with a decisive, nay, stern refusal. This journey was indeed sheer flight from his own weakness and from the beautiful creature who could never be anything to him.

Early in the day he had found time to write to Paula; but he had cast aside more than one unfinished letter before he could find the right words. He told her that he loved her and her alone; and as his stylus marked the wax he felt, with horror of himself, that in fact his heart was Paula's, and his determination ripened to put an end once for all to his connection with Heliodora, and not allow himself to see Paula again till he had forever cut the tie that bound him to the young widow.

The two women went out to see the travellers start, and as they returned to the house, hanging their heads like defeated warriors, in the vestibule they met Katharina and her maid. Martina wanted to detain the little girl, and to persuade her to go up to their rooms with them; but Katharina refused, and appeared to be in a great hurry. She had just come from seeing Anubis, who was in less pain to-day, and who had done his best to tell her what he had overheard. That the flight was to be northwards he was certain; but he had either misunderstood or forgotten the name of the place whither the sisters were bound.

His mother and the nurse were dismissed from the room, and then the water-wagtail in her gratitude had bent over him, had raised his pretty face a little, and had given him two such sweet kisses that the poor boy had been quite uneasy. But, when he was alone with his mother once more, he had felt happier and happier, and the remembrance of the transient rapture he had known had alleviated the pain he was suffering on Katharina's account.

Katharina, meanwhile, did not go home at once to her mother; on the contrary, she went straight off to the Bishop of Memphis, to whom she divulged all she had learnt with regard to the inhabitants of the convent and the intended rescue. The gentle Plotinus even had been roused to great wrath, and no sooner had she left him than he set out for Fostat to invoke the help of Amru, and—finding him absent

—of his Vekeel to enable him to pursue the fugitive Melchite sisters.

When the water-wagtail was at home again and alone in her room, she said to herself, with calm satisfaction, that she had now contrived something which would spoil several days for Orion and for Paula, and that might prove even fatal, so far as she was concerned.

CHAPTER VIII.

Nilus had performed his errand well, and Rufinus was forced to admit that Orion had done his part and had planned the enterprise with so much care and unselfishness that his personal assistance could be dispensed with. Under these circumstances he scarcely owed the young man a grudge for placing himself at the service of his Byzantine friends; still, his not coming to the house disturbed and vexed him, less on his own account, or that of the good cause, than for Paula's sake, for her feelings towards Orion had remained no secret to him or his wife.

Dame Joanna, indeed, felt the young man's conduct more keenly than Rufinus; she would have been glad to withhold her husband from the enterprise, whose dangers now appeared to her frightened soul tenfold greater than they were. But she knew that the Nile would flow backwards before she could dissuade him from keeping his promise to the abbess, so she forced herself to preserve at any rate outward composure.

Before Paula, Rufinus declared that Orion was fully justified and he loudly praised the young man's liberality in providing the Nile-boat and the vessel for the sea-voyage, and such admirable substitutes for himself. Pulcheria was delighted with her father's undertaking; she only longed to go with him and help him to save her dear nuns. The ship-builder had brought with him, besides his sons, three other Greeks of the orthodox confession, shipwrights like himself, who were out of work in consequence of the low ebb of the Nile, which had greatly restricted the navigation. Hence they were glad to put a hand to such a good work, especially as it would be profitable, too, for Orion had provided the old man with ample funds.

As the evening grew cooler after sundown Paula had got better. She did not, indeed, know what to think of Orion's refusal to start. First she was grieved, then she rejoiced; for it certainly preserved him from great perils. In the early days after his return from Constantinople she had heard his praise of the senator's kindness and hospitality, in which the Mukaukas, who had pleasant memories of the capital, heartily joined. He must, of course, be glad to be able to assist those friends, of all others; and Nilus, who was respectfully devoted to her, had greeted her from Orion with peculiar warmth. He would come to-morrow, no doubt; and the oftener she repeated to herself his assertion that he had never betrayed affectionate trust, the more earnestly she felt prompted, in spite of the abbess' counsel, to abandon all hesitancy, to follow the impulse of her heart, and to be his at once in full and happy confidence.

The waning moon had not yet risen, and the night was very dark when the nuns set forth. The boat was too large to come close to the shore in the present low state of the river, and the sisters, disguised as peasant-women, had to be carried on board one by one from the convent garden. Last of all the abbess was to be lifted over the shallow water, and the old ship-builder held himself in readiness to perform this service. Joanna, Pulcheria, Perpetua, and Eudoxia, who was also zealously orthodox, were standing round as she gave Paula a parting kiss and whispered: "God bless thee, child!—All now depends on you, and you must be doubly careful to abide by your promise."

"I owe him, in the first place, friendly trust," was Paula's whispered reply, and the abbess answered: "But you owe yourself firmness and caution." Rufinus was the last; his wife and daughter clung around him still.

"Take example from that poor girl," cried the old man, clasping his wife in his arms. "As sure as man is the standard of all things, all must go well with me this time if everlasting Love is not napping. Till we meet again, best of good women!—And, if ill befalls your stupid old husband, always remember that he brought it upon himself in trying to save a quarter of a hundred innocent women from the worst misfortunes. At any rate I shall fall on the road I myself have chosen.—But why has Philippus not come to take leave of me?"

Dame Joanna burst into tears: "That-that is so hard too! What has come over him that he has deserted us, and just now of all times? Ah, husband! If you love me, take Gibbus with you on the voyage."

"Yes, master, take me," the hunchbacked gardener interposed. "The Nile will be rising again by the time we come back, and till then the flowers can die without my help. I dreamt last night that you picked a rose from the middle of my Bump. It stuck up there like the knob on the lid of a pot. There is some meaning in it and, if you leave me at home, what is the good of the rose—that is to say what good will you get out of me?"

"Well then, carry your strange flower-bed on board," said the old man laughing. "Now, are you satisfied Joanna?"

Once more he embraced her and Pulcheria and, as a tear from his wife's eyes dropped on his hand, he whispered in her ear: "You have been the rose of my life; and without you Eden—Paradise itself can have no joys."

The boat pushed out into the middle of the stream and was soon hidden by the darkness from the eyes of the women on the bank.

The convent bells were soon heard tolling after the fugitives: Paula and Pulcheria were pulling them. There was not a breath of air; not enough even to fill the small sail of the seaward-bound boat; but the rowers pulled with all their might and the vessel glided northward. The captain stood at the prow with his pole; sounding the current: his brother, no less skilled, took the helm.—The shallowness of the water made navigation very difficult, and those who knew the river best might easily run aground on unexpected shoals or newly-formed mud-drifts. The moon had scarcely risen when the boat was stranded at a short distance below Fostat, and the men had to go overboard to push it off to an accompaniment of loud singing which, as it were, welded their individual wills and efforts into one. Thus it was floated off again; but such delays were not unfrequent till they reached Letopolis, where the Nile forks, and where they hoped to steal past the toll-takers unobserved. Almost against their expectation, the large boat slipped through under the heavy mist which rises from the waters before sunrise, and the captain and crew, steering down the Phatmetic branch of the river with renewed spirit, ascribed their success to the intercession of the pious sisters.

By daylight it was easier to avoid the sand-banks; but how narrow was the water-way-at this season usually overflowing! The beds of papyrus on the banks now grew partly on dry land, and their rank green had faded to straw-color. The shifting ooze of the shore had hardened to stone, and the light west wind, which now rose and allowed of their hoisting the sail, swept clouds of white dust before it. In many cases the soil was deeply fissured and wide cracks ran across the black surface, yawning to heaven for water like thirsty throats. The water-wheels stood idle, far away from the stream, and the fields they were wont to irrigate looked like the threshing floors on which the crops they bore should be threshed out. The villages and palm-groves were shrouded in shimmering mist, quivering heat, and dazzling yellow light; and the passer-by on the raised dykes of the shore bent his head as he dragged his weary feet through the deep dust.

The sun blazed pitilessly in the cloudless sky, down on land and river, and on the fugitive nuns who had spread their white head-cloths above them for an awning and sat in dull lethargy, awaiting what might be before them.

The water-jar passed from hand to hand; but the more they drank the more acute was their discomfort, and their longing for some other refreshment. At meal time the dishes were returned to the tiny cabin almost untouched. The abbess and Rufinus tried to speak comfort to them; but in the afternoon the superior herself was overpowered by the heat, and the air in the little cabin, to which she retired, was even less tolerable stuffy than on deck.

Thus passed a long day of torment, the hottest that even the men could remember; and they on the whole suffered least from it, though they toiled at the oar without ceasing and with wonderful endurance.

At length evening fell after those fearful midday hours; and as a cool breeze rose shortly before sunset to fan their moist brows, the hapless victims awoke to new energies. Their immediate torment had so crushed them that, incapable of anticipating the future, they had ceased either to fear or to hope; but now they could rejoice in thinking of the start they had gained over their pursuers. They were hungry and enjoyed their evening meal; the abbess made friends with the worthy ship-wright, and began an eager conversation with Rufinus as to Paula and Orion: Her wish that the young man should spend a time of probation did not at all please Rufinus; with such a wife as Paula, he could not fail to be at all times the noble fellow which his old friend held him to be in spite of his having remained at home.

The hump-backed gardener made the younger nuns merry with his jests, and after supper they all united in prayer.

Even the oarsmen had found new vigor and new life; and it was well that few of the Greek sisters understood Egyptian, for the more jovial of them started a song in praise of the charms of the maids they loved, which was not composed for women's ears.

The nuns chatted of those they had left behind, and many a one spoke of a happy meeting at home once more; but an elderly nun put a stop to this, saying that it was a sin to anticipate the ways of God's mercy, or, when His help was still so sorely needed, to speak as though He had already bestowed it. They could only tremble and pray, for they knew from experience that a threatening disaster never turned to a good end unless it had been expected with real dread.

Another one then began to speculate as to whether their pursuers could overtake them on foot or on horseback, and as it seemed only too probable that they could, their hearts sank again with anxiety. Ere long, however, the moon rose; the objects that loomed on the banks and were mirrored in the stream, were again clearly visible and lost their terrors.

The lower down they sailed, the denser were the thickets of papyrus on the shore. Thousands of birds were roosting there, but they were all asleep; a "dark ness that might be felt" brooded over the silent landscape. The image of the moon floated on the dark water, like a gigantic lotos-flower below the smaller, fragrant lotos-blossoms that it out-did in sheeny whiteness; the boat left a bright wake in its track, and every stroke of the oar broke the blackness of the water, which reflected the light in every drop. The moonlight played on the delicate tufts that crowned the slender papyrus-stems, filmy mist, like diaphanous brocade of violet and silver, veiled the trees; and owls that shun the day, flew from one branch to another on noiseless, rhythmic wings.

The magic of the night fell on the souls of the nuns; they ceased prattling; but when Sister Martha, the nightingale of the sisterhood, began to sing a hymn the others followed her example. The sailors' songs were hushed, and the psalms of the virgin sisters, imploring the protection of the Almighty, seemed to float round the gliding boat as softly as the light of the circling moon. For hours—and with increased zeal as the comet rose in the sky—they gave themselves up to the soothing and encouraging pleasure of singing; but one by one the voices died away and their peaceful hymn was borne down the river to the sea, by degrees more low, more weary, more dreamlike.

They sat looking in their laps, gazing in rapture up to heaven, or at the dazzling ripples and the lotos flowers on the surface. No one thought of the shore, not even the men, who had been lulled to sleep or daydreams by the nuns' singing. The pilot's eyes were riveted on the channel—and yet, as morning drew near, from time to time there was a twinkle, a flash behind the reed-beds on the eastern bank, and now and then there was a rustling and clatter there. Was it a jackal that had plunged into the dense growth to surprise a brood of water-fowl; was it a hyena trampling through the thicket?

The flashing, the rustling, the dull footfall on parched earth followed the barge all through the night like a sinister, lurid, and muttering shadow.

Suddenly the captain started and gazed eastwards.—What was that?

There was a herd of cattle feeding in a field beyond the reeds—two bulls perhaps were sharpening their horns. The river was so low, and the banks rose so high, that it was impossible to see over them. But at this moment a shrill voice spoke his name, and then the hunchback whispered in his ear:

"There—over there—it is glittering again.—I will bite off my own nose if that is not—there, again. Merciful God! I am not mistaken. Harness—and there, that is the neighing of a horse; I know the sound. The east is growing grey. By all the saints, we are pursued!"

The captain looked eastwards with every sense alert, and after a few minutes silence he said decidedly "Yes."

"Like a flight of quail for whom the fowler spreads his net," sighed the gardener; but the boatman impatiently signed to him to be quiet, and gazed cautiously on every side. Then he desired Gibbus to wake Rufinus and the shipwrights, and to hide all the nuns in the cabin.

"They will be packed as close as the dates sent to Rome in boxes," muttered the gardener, as he went to call Rufinus. "Poor souls, their saints may save them from suffocation; and as for me, on my faith, if it were not that Dame Joanna was the very best creature on two legs, and if I had not promised her to stick to the master, I would jump into the water and try the hospitality of the flamingoes and storks in the reeds! We must learn to condescend!"

While he was fulfilling his errand, the captain was exchanging a few words with his brother at the helm. There was no bridge near, and that was well. If the horsemen were indeed in pursuit of them,

they must ride through the water to reach them; and scarcely three stadia lower down, the river grew wider and ran through a marshy tract of country; the only channel was near the western bank, and horsemen attempting to get to it ran the risk of foundering in the mud. If the boat could but get as far as that reach, much would be gained.

The captain urged the men to put forth all their strength, and very soon the boat was flying along under the western shore, and divided by an oozy flat from the eastern bank. Day was breaking, and the sky was tinged red as with blood—a sinister omen that this morning was destined to witness bitter strife and gaping wounds.

The seed sown by Katharina was beginning to grow. At the bishop's request the Vekeel had despatched a troop of horse in pursuit of the nuns, with orders to bring the fugitives back to Memphis and take their escort prisoners. As the boat had slipped by the toll watch unperceived, the Arabs had been obliged to divide, so as to follow down each arm of the Nile. Twelve horsemen had been told off to pursue the Phasmetic branch; for by every calculation these must suffice for the capture of a score or so of nuns, and a handful of sailors would scarcely dare to attempt to defend themselves. The Vekeel had heard nothing of the addition to the party of the ship-master and his sons.

The pursuers had set out at noon of the previous day, and had overtaken the vessel about two hours before daylight. But their leader thought it well to postpone the attack till after sunrise, lest any of the fugitives should escape. He and his men were all Arabs, and though well acquainted with the course of that branch of the river which they were to follow, they were not familiar with its peculiarities.

As soon as the morning star was invisible, the Moslems performed their devotions, and then rushed out of the papyrus-beds. Their leader, making a speaking trumpet of his hand, shouted to the boat his orders to stop. He was commissioned by the governor to bring it back to Fostat. And the fugitives seemed disposed to obey, for the boat lay to. The captain had recognized the speaker as the captain of the watch from Fostat, an inexorable man; and now, for the first time, he clearly understood the deadly peril of the enterprise. He was accustomed, no doubt, to evade the commands of his superiors, but would no more have defied them than have confronted Fate; and he at once declared that resistance was madness, and that there was no alternative but to yield. Rufinus, however, vehemently denied this; he pointed out to him that the same punishment awaited him, whether he laid down his arms or defended himself, and the old ship-wright eagerly exclaimed:

"We built this boat, and I know you of old, Setnau; You will not turn Judas—and, if you do, you know that Christian blood will be shed on this deck before we can show our teeth to those Infidels."

The captain, with all the extravagant excitability of his southern blood, beat his forehead and his breast, bemoaned himself as a betrayed and ruined man, and bewailed his wife and children. Rufinus, however, put an end to his ravings. He had consulted with the abbess, and he put it strongly to the unhappy man that he could, in any case, hope for no mercy from the unbelievers; while, on Christian ground, he would easily find a safe and comfortable refuge for himself and his family. The abbess would undertake to give them all a passage on board the ship that was awaiting her, and to set them on shore wherever he might choose.

Setnau thought of a brother living in Cyprus; still, for him it meant sacrificing his house and garden at Doomiat, where, at this very hour, fifty date-palms were ripening their fruit; it meant leaving the fine new Nile-boat by which he and his family got their living; and as he represented this to the old man, bitter tears rolled down his brown cheeks. Rufinus explained to him that, if he should succeed in saving the sisters, he might certainly claim some indemnification. He might even calculate the value of his property, and not only would he have the equivalent paid to him out of the convent treasure, now on board in heavy coffers, but a handsome gift into the bargain.

Setnau exchanged a meaning glance with his brother, who was a single man, and when it was also agreed that he, too, might embark on the sea-voyage he shook hands with Rufinus on the bargain. Then, giving himself a shake, as if he had thrown off something that cramped him, and sticking his leather cap knowingly on one side of his shaven head, he drew himself up to his full height and scornfully shouted back to the Arab—who had before now treated him and other Egyptian natives with insolent haughtiness—that if he wanted anything of him he might come and fetch it.

The Moslem's patience was long since exhausted, and at this challenge he signed to his followers and sprang first into the river; but the foremost horses soon sank so deep in the ooze that further advance was evidently impossible, and the signal to return was perforce given. In this manoeuvre a refractory horse lost his footing, and his rider was choked in the mud.

On this, the men in the boat could see the foe holding council with lively gesticulations, and the captain expressed his fears lest they should give up all hope of capturing the boat, and ride forward to

Doomiat to combine with the Arab garrison to cut off their further flight. But he had not reckoned on the warlike spirit of these men, who had overcome far greater difficulties in twenty fights ere this. They were determined to seize the boat, to take its freight prisoners, and have them duly punished.

Six horsemen, among them the leader of the party, were now seen to dismount; they tied their horses up, and then proceeded to fell three tall palms with their battle-axes; the other five went off southwards. These, no doubt, were to ride round the morass, and ford the river at a favorable spot so as to attack the vessel from the west, while the others tried to reach it from the east with the aid of the palm-trunks.

On the right, or eastern shore, where the Arabs were constructing the raft, spread solid ground-fields through which lay the road to Doomiat; on the other shore, near which the boat was lying, the bog extended for a long way. An interminable jungle of papyrus, sedge, and reeds, burnt yellow by the heat of the sun and the extraordinary drought, covered almost the whole of this parched and baked wilderness; and, when a stiff morning breeze rose from the northeast, the captain was inspired with a happy thought. The five men who had ridden forward would have to force their way through the mass of scorched and dried up vegetation. If the Christians could but set fire to it, on the further side of a canal which must hinder their making a wide sweep to the north, the wind would carry it towards the enemy; and, they would be fortunate if it did not stifle them or compel them to jump into the river, where, when the flames reached the morass, they must inevitably perish.

As soon as the helmsman's keen eyes had made sure, from the mast-head, that the Arabs had forded the river at a point to the south, they set fire to several places and it roared and flared up immediately. The wind swept it southwards, and with it clouds of pale grey smoke through which the rising sun shot shafts of light. The flames writhed and darted over the baked earth like gigantic yellow and orange lizards, here shooting upwards, there creeping low. Almost colorless in the ardent daylight, they greedily consumed everything they approached, and white ashes marked their track. Their breath added to the heat of the advancing day; and though the smoke was borne southwards by the wind, a few cloudlets came over to the boat, choking the sisters and their deliverers.

A large vessel now came towards them from Doomiat and found the narrow channel barred by the other one. The captain was related to Setnau, and when Setnau shouted to him that they were engaged in a struggle with Arab robbers, his friend followed his advice, turned the boat's head with considerable difficulty, and cast anchor at the nearest village to warn other vessels southward bound not to get themselves involved in so perilous an adventure. Any that were coming north would be checked by the fire and smoke.

The six horsemen left on the eastern shore beheld the spreading blaze with rage and dismay; however, they had by this time bound the palm-trunks together, and were preparing by their aid to inflict condign punishment on the refractory Christians. These, meanwhile, had not been idle. Every man on board was armed, and one of the ship-wrights was sent on shore with a sailor, to steal through the reeds, ford the river at a point lower down and, as soon as the Arabs put out to the attack, to slaughter their horses, or—if one of them should be left to go forward on the road to Doomiat—to drag him from his steed.

The six men now laid hold of the slightly-constructed float, on which they placed their bows and quivers; they pushed it before them, and it supported them above the shallow water, while their feet only just touched the oozy bottom. They were all thorough soldiers, true sons of the desert and of their race—men whom nature seemed to have conceived as a counterpart to the eagle, the master-piece of the winged creation. Keen-eyed, strongly-knit though small-boned, bereft of every fibre of superfluous flesh on their sinewy limbs, with bold brown faces and sharply-cut features, suggesting the king of birds not merely by the aquiline nose, they had also the eagle's courage, thirst for blood, and greed of victory.

Each held on to the raft by one lean, wiry arm, carrying on the other the round bucklers on which the arrows that came whistling from the boat, fell and stuck as soon as they were within shot. They ground their white teeth with fury and nothing within ken escaped their bright hawk's eyes. They had come to fight, even if the boat had been defended by fifty Egyptian soldiers instead of carrying a score or so of sailors and artisans. Their brave hearts felt safe under their shirts of mail, and their ready, fertile brains under their brazen helmets; and they marked the dull rattle of the arrows against their metal shields with elation and contempt. To deal death was the wish of their souls; to meet it caused them no dread; for their glowing fancy painted an open Paradise where beautiful women awaited them open-armed, and brimming goblets promised to satisfy every desire.

Their keen ears heard their captain's whispered commands; when they reached the ship's side, one caught hold of the sill of the cabin window, their leader, as quick as thought, sprang on to his shoulders, and from thence on to the deck, thrusting his lance through the body of a sailor who tried to

stop him with his axe. A second Arab was close at his heels; two gleaming scimitars flashed in the sun, the shrill, guttural, savage war-cry of the Moslems rent the air, and the captain fell, the first victim to their blood-thirsty fury, with a deep cut across the face and forehead; in a moment, however, a heavy spar sang through the air down on the head of the Moslem leader and laid him low. The helmsman, the brother of the fallen pilot, had wielded it with the might of the avenger.

A fearful din, increased by the shrieks and wailing of the nuns, now filled the vessel. The second Arab dealt death on all sides with the courage and strength of desperation, and three of his fellows managed to climb up the boat's side; but the last man was pushed back into the water. By this time two of the shipwrights and five sailors had fallen. Rufinus was kneeling by the captain, who was crying feebly for help, bleeding profusely, though not mortally wounded. Setnau had spoken with much anxiety of his wife and children, and Rufinus, hoping to save his life for their sakes, was binding up the wounds, which were wide and deep, when suddenly a sabre stroke came down on the back of his head and neck, and a dark stream of blood rushed forth. But he, too, was soon avenged: the old shipwright hewed down his foe with his heavy axe. On the eastern shore, meanwhile, the men charged to kill the Arabs' horses were doing their work, so as to prevent any who might escape from returning to Fostat, or riding forward to Doormat and reporting what had occurred.

On board silence now prevailed. All five Arabs were stretched on the deck, and the insatiate boatmen were dealing a finishing stroke to those who were only wounded. A sailor, who had taken refuge up a mast, could see how the other five horsemen had plunged into the bog to avoid the fire and had disappeared beneath the waters; so that none of the Moslems had escaped alive—not even that one which Fate and romance love to save as a bearer of the disastrous tidings.

By degrees the nuns ventured out on deck again.

Those who were skilled in tending the wounded gathered round them, and opened their medicine cases; as they proceeded on their voyage, under the guidance of the steersman, they had their hands full of work and the zeal they gave to it mitigated the torment of the heat.

The bodies of the five Moslems and eight Christians—among these, two of the Greek shipwrights—were laid on the shore in groups apart, in the neighborhood of a village; in the hand of one of them the abbess placed a tablet with this inscription:

"These eight Christians met their death bravely fighting to defend a party of pious and persecuted believers. Pray for them and bury them as well as those who, in obedience to their duty and their commander, took their lives."

Rufinus, lying with his head on the gardener's knee, and sheltered from the sun under the abbess' umbrella, presently recovered his senses; looking about him he said to himself in a low voice, as he saw the captain lying by his side:

"I, too, had a wife and a dear child at home, and yet—Ah! how this aches! We may well do all we can to soothe such pain. The only reality here below is not pleasure, it is pain, vulgar, physical pain; and though my head burns and aches more than enough.—Water, a drink of water.—How comfortable I could be at this moment with my Joanna, in our shady house. —But yet, but yet—we must heal or save, it is all the same, any who need it.—A drink—wine and water, if it is to be had, worthy Mother!"

The abbess had it at hand; as she put the cup to his lips she spoke her warm and effusive thanks, and many words of comfort; then she asked him what she could do for him and his, when they should be in safety.

"Love them truly," he said gently. "Pul will certainly never be quite happy till she is in a convent. But she must not leave her mother—she must stay with her; Joanna-Joanna. . . ."

He repeated the name several times as if the sound pleased his ear and heart. Then he shuddered again and again, and muttered to himself: "Brrr!—a cold shiver runs all over me—it is of no use!—The cut in my shoulder.—It is my head that hurts worst, but the other—it is bad luck that it should have fallen on the left side. And yet, no; it is best so; for if he—if it had damaged my right shoulder I could not write, and I must—I must—before it is too late. A tablet and stylus; quick, quick! And when I have written, good mother, close the tablet and seal it—close and tight. Promise! Only one person may read it, he to whom it must go. —Gibbus, do you hear, Gibbus?—It is for Philippus the leech. Take it to him.—Your dream about a rose on your hump, if I read rightly, means that peace and joy in Heaven blossom from our misery on earth.—Yes, to Philippus. And listen my old school friend Christodorus, a leech too, lives at Doormat. Take my body to him—mind me now? He is to pack it with sand which will preserve it, and have it buried by the side of my mother at Alexandria. Joanna and the child—they can come and visit me there. I have not much to leave; whatever that may cost. . . ."

"That is my affair, or the convent's," cried the abbess.

"Matters are not so bad as that," said the old man smiling. "I can pay for my own share of the business; your revenue belongs to the poor, noble Mother.—You will find more than enough in this wallet, good Gibbus. But now, quick, make haste—the tablets."

When he had one in his hand, and a stylus for writing with, he thought for some time, and then wrote with trembling fingers, though exerting all his strength. How acutely he was suffering could be seen in his drawn mouth and sad eyes, but he would not allow himself to be interrupted, often as the abbess and the gardener entreated him to lay aside the stylus. At last, with a deep sigh of relief, he closed the tablets, handed them to the abbess, and said:

"There! Close it fast.—To Philippus the physician; into his own hand: You hear, Gibbus?"

Here he fainted; but after they had bathed his forehead and wounds he came to himself, and softly murmured: "I was dreaming of Joanna and the poor child. They brought me a comic mask. What can that mean? That I have been a fool all my life for thinking of other folks' troubles and forgetting myself and my own family? No, no, no! As surely as man is the standard of all things—if it were so, then, then folly would be truth and right.—I, I—my desire—the aim to which my life was devoted....."

He paused; then he suddenly raised himself, looked up with a bright light in his eyes, and cried aloud with joy: "O Thou, most merciful Saviour! Yes, yes—I see it all now. I thank thee—All that I strove for and lived for, Thou, my Redeemer who art Love itself—Ah how good, how comforting to think of that!—It is for this that Thou grantest me to die!"

Again he lost consciousness; his head grew very hot, his breath came hoarsely and his parched lips, though frequently moistened by careful hands, could only murmur the names of those he loved best, and among them that of Paula.

At about five hours after noon he fell back on the hunchback's knees; he had ceased to suffer. A happy smile lighted up his features, and in death the old man's calm face looked like that of a child.

The gardener felt as though he had lost his own father, and his lively tongue remained speechless till he entered Doormat with the rescued sisters, and proceeded to carry out his master's last orders. The abbess' ship took the wounded captain Setnau on board, with his wife, his children, his brother the steersman, and the surviving ship-wrights.

At the very hour when Rufinus closed his eyes, the town-watch of Memphis, led by Bishop Plotinus, appeared to claim the Melchite convent of St. Cecilia, and all the possessions of the sisterhood, in the name of the patriarch and the Jacobite church. Next morning the bishop set out for Upper Egypt to make his report to the prelate.

ETEXT EDITOR'S BOOKMARKS:

He was made to be plundered

Old age no longer forgets; it is youth that has a short memory

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE BRIDE OF THE NILE — VOLUME 08 ***

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