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Title: The Bride of the Nile — Volume 10

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Translator: Clara Bell

Release date: April 1, 2004 [EBook #5526]
Most recently updated: December 28, 2020

Language: English

*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE BRIDE OF THE NILE — VOLUME 10 ***

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THE BRIDE OF THE NILE

By Georg Ebers

Volume 10.

CHAPTER XIII.

The Vekeel, like the Persian lovers, did not allow the heat of the day to interfere with his plans. He regarded the governor's house as his own; all he found there aroused, not merely his avarice, but his interest. His first object was to find some document which might justify his proceedings against Orion and the sequestration of his estates, in the eyes of the authorities at Medina.

Great schemes were brewing there; if the conspiracy against the Khaliff Omar should succeed, he had little to fear; and the greater the sum he could ere long forward to the new sovereign, the more surely he could count on his patronage—a sum exceeding, if possible, the largest which his predecessor had ever cast into the Khaliff's treasury.

He went from room to room with the curiosity and avidity of a child, touching everything, testing the softness of the pillows, peeping into scrolls which he did not understand, tossing them aside, smelling at the perfumes in the dead woman's rooms, and the medicines she had used. He showed his teeth with delight when he found in her trunks some costly jewels and gold coins, stuck the finest of her diamond rings on his finger, already covered with gems, and then eagerly searched every corner of the rooms which Orion had occupied.

His interpreter, who could read Greek, had to translate every document he found that did not contain verses. While he listened, he clawed and strummed on the young man's lyre and poured out the scented oil which Orion had been wont to use to smear it over his beard. In front of the bright silver mirror he could not cease from making faces.

To his great disgust he could find nothing among the hundred objects and trifles that lay about to justify suspicion, till, just as he was leaving the room, he noticed in a basket near the writing-table some discarded tablets. He at once pointed them out to the interpreter and, though there was but little to read on the Diptychon,—[Double writing-tablets, which folded together]—it seemed important to the negro for it ran as follows:

"Orion, the son of George, to Paula the daughter of Thomas!

"You have heard already that it is now impossible for me to assist in the rescue of the nuns. But do not misunderstand me. Your noble, and only too well-founded desire to lend succor to your fellow-believers would have sufficed. . ."

From this point the words written on the wax were carefully effaced, and hardly a letter was decipherable; indeed, there were so few lines that it seemed as though the letter had never been ended—which was the fact.

Though it gave the Vekeel no inculcating evidence against Orion it pointed to his connection with the guilty parties: Paula, doubtless, had been concerned in the scheme which had cost the lives of so many brave Moslems. The negro had learnt, through the money-changer at Fostat, that she was on terms of close intimacy with the Mukaukas' son and had entrusted her property to his stewardship. They must both be accused as accomplices in the deed, and the document proved Orion's knowledge of it, at any rate.

Plotinus, the bishop, at whose instigation the fugitives had been chased, could fill up what the damsel might choose to conceal.

He had started to follow the patriarch immediately after the pursuers had set out, and had only returned from Upper Egypt early on the previous day. On his arrival he had forwarded to the Vekeel two indictments brought against Orion by the prelate: the first relating to the evasion of the nuns; the other to the embezzlement of a costly emerald; the rightful property of the church. These accusations were what had encouraged the Negro to confiscate the young man's estate, particularly as the bitter tone of the patriarch's document sufficiently proved that in him he had found an ally.

Paula must next be placed in safe custody, and he had no doubt whatever that her statement would incriminate Orion in some degree. He would gladly have cross-examined her at once, but he had other matters in hand to-day.

The longest part of his task was ransacking the treasurer's office; Nilus himself had to conduct the search. Everything which he pointed out as a legal document, title-deed, contract for purchase or sale, revenue account or the like, was at once placed in oxcarts or on camels, with the large sums of gold and silver coin, and carried across the river under a strong escort. All the more antique deeds and the family archives, the Vekeel left untouched. He was indeed an indefatigable man, for although these details kept him busy the whole day, he allowed himself no rest nor did he once ask for the refreshment of food or a cooling draught. As the day went on he enquired again and again for the bishop, with increasing impatience and irritation. It would have been his part to wait on the patriarch, but who was Plotinus? Thin-skinned, like all up-starts in authority, he took the bishop's delay as an act of personal contumely. But the shepherd of the flock at Memphis was not a haughty prelate, but a very humble and pious minister. His superior, the patriarch, had entrusted him with an important mission to Amru or his lieutenant, and yet he could let the Vekeel wait in vain, and not even send him a message of explanation; in the afternoon, however, his old housekeeper dispatched the acolyte who was attached to his person to seek Philippus. Her master, a hale and vigorous man, had gone to bed by broad daylight a few hours after his return home, and had not again left it. He was hot and thirsty, and did not seem fully conscious of where he was or of what was happening.

Plotinus had always maintained that prayer was the Christian's best medicine; still, as his poor body had become alarmingly heated the old woman ventured to send for the physician; but the messenger came back saying that Philippus was absent on a journey. This was in fact the case: He had quitted Memphis in obedience to a letter from Haschim. The merchant's unfortunate son was not getting better. There seemed to be an injury to some internal organ, which threatened his life. The anxious father besought the leech, in whom he had the greatest confidence, to hasten to Djidda, there to examine the sufferer and undertake the case. At the same time he desired that Rustem should join him as soon as his health would permit.

This letter—which ended with greetings to Paula, for whose father he was making diligent search—agitated Philippus greatly. How could he leave Memphis at a time of such famine and sickness?—And Dame Joanna and her daughter!

On the other hand he was much drawn to get away on Paula's account—away, far away; and then how gladly would he do his best to save that fine old man's son. In spite of all this he would have remained, but that his old friend, quite unexpectedly, took Haschim's side of the question and implored him to make the journey. He would make it his business and his pleasure to take charge of the women in Rufinus' house; Philip's assistant could fill his place at the bedside of many of the sick, and the rest could die without him. Had not he himself said that there was no remedy for the disease? Again, Philip had said not long since that there could be no peace for him within reach of Paula: here was a favorable opportunity for escape without attracting remark, and at the same time for doing a work of the truest charity.

So Philippus had yielded, and had started on his journey with very mixed feelings.

Horapollo did not devote any particular attention to his personal comfort; but in one respect he took especial care of himself. He had great difficulty in walking and, as he loved to breathe the fresh air at sundown, and sometimes to study the stars at a late hour, he kept an ass of the best and finest breed. He did not hesitate to pay a high price for such a beast if it really answered his requirements; that is to say if it were strong, surefooted, gentle, and light-colored. His father and grandfather, priests of Isis, had always ridden white asses, and so he would do the same.

During the last few sultry weeks he had rarely gone out of doors, and to-day he waited till the hour before sunset before starting to keep his promise.

Robed in snowy-white linen, with new sandals on his feet, freshly shaven, and protected from the sun's rays by a crisply curled, flowing wig, after the manner of his fathers, as well as by an umbrella, he mounted his beautiful white ass in the conviction that he had done his best for his outer man, and set forth, followed by his black slave trotting on foot.

It was not yet dark when he stopped at the house of Rufinus. His heart had not beat so high for many a day.

"I feel as if I had come courting," said he, laughing at himself. "Well, and I really am come to propose an alliance for the rest of my life! Still, curiosity, one would think, might be shed with the hair and the teeth!" However, it still clung to him, and he could not deny to himself that he was very curious as to the person whom he hated, though he had never seen her, simply because she was the daughter of a patrician and a prefect, and had made his Philippus miserable. As he was dismounting, a graceful young girl and an older woman, in very costly though simple dresses, came through the garden. These must be the waterwagtail, and Orion's Byzantine guest.—How annoying! So many women at once!

Their presence here could only embarrass and disturb him—a lonely student unused to the society of women. However, there was no help for it; and the new-comers were not so bad after all.

Katharina was a very attractive, pretty little mouse, and even without her millions much too good for the libertine Orion. The matron, who had a kind, pleasant face, was exactly what Philippus had described her. But then—and this spoilt all—in their presence he must not allude to the death of Rufinus, so that he could not mention his proposed arrangement. He had swallowed all that dust, and borne that heat for nothing, and to-morrow he must ignominiously go through it all again!

The first people he met were a handsome young couple: Rustem and Mandane. There could be no doubt as to their identity; so he went up to them and gave Rustem the merchant's message, offering in Philip's name to advance the money for the journey. But the Masdakite patted his sleeve, in which he carried a good round sum in gold pieces, and exclaimed cheerily:

"It is all here, and enough for two travellers to the East.—My little wife, by your leave; the time has come, little pigeon! Off we go, homeward bound!"

The huge fellow shouted it out in his deep voice with such effervescent contentment, and the pretty girl, as she looked up at him, was so glad, so much in love, and so grateful, that it quite cheered the old man; and he, who read an omen in every incident, accepted this meeting as of good augury at his first entering the house which was probably to be his home.

His visit went on as well as it had begun, for he was welcomed very warmly both by the widow and daughter of Rufinus. Pulcheria at once pushed forward her father's arm-chair and placed a pillow behind his back, and she did it so quietly, so simply, and so amiably that it warmed his old heart, and he said to himself that it would be almost too much of a good thing to have such care given him every day

and every hour.

He could not forbear from a kindly jest with the young girl over her attentions, and Martina at once entered into the joke. She had seen him coming on his fine ass; she praised the steed, and then refused to believe that the rider was past eighty. His news of Philip's departure was regretted by all, and he was delighted to perceive that Pulcheria seemed startled and presently shrank into the background. What a sweet, pure, kind face the child had—and pretty withal; she must and should be his little daughter; and all the while he was talking, or listening to Katharina's small jokes and a friendly catechism from Martina and Dame Joanna, in his mind's eye he saw Philippus and that dear little creature as man and wife, surrounded by pretty children playing all about him.

He had come to comfort and to condole, and lo! he was having as pleasant an hour as he had known in a long time.

He and the other visitors had been received in the vindarium, which was now brightly lighted up, and now and then he glanced at the doors which opened on this, the centre of the house, trying to imagine what the different rooms should by-and-by be used for.

But he heard a light step behind him; Martina rose, the water-wagtail hurried to meet the new-comer, and there appeared on the scene the tall figure of a girl dressed in mourning-ropes. She greeted the matron with distinguished dignity, cast a cordial glance of sympathetic intelligence to Joanna and Pulcheria, and when the mistress of the house told her who the old man was, she went up to him and held out her hand—a cool, slender hand, as white as marble; the true patrician hand.

Yes, she was beautiful, wonderfully beautiful! He could hardly remember ever to have seen her equal. A spotless masterpiece of the Creator's hand, made like some unapproachable goddess, to command the worship of subject adorers; however, she must renounce all hope of his, for those marble features, all the whiter by contrast with her black dress, had no attraction for him. No warming glow shone in those proud eyes; and under that lordly bosom beat no loving or lovable heart; he shivered at the touch of her fingers, and her presence, he thought, had a chilling and paralyzing influence on all the party.

This was, in fact, the case.

Paula had been sent for to see the senator's wife and Katharina. Martina, thought she, had come out of mere curiosity, and she had a preconceived dislike to any one connected with Heliodora. She had lost her confidence in the water-wagtail, for only two days ago the acolyte in personal attendance on the bishop—and whose child Rufinus had cured of a lame foot—had been to the house to warn Joanna against the girl. Katharina, he told her, had a short while since betrayed to Plotinus some important secret relating to her husband, and the bishop had immediately gone over to Fostat. It was hard to believe such a thing of any friend, still, the girl who, by her own confession, had been so ready to play the part of spy in the neighboring garden, was the only person who would have told the prelate what plan was in hand for the rescue of the sisters. The acolyte's positive statement, indeed, left no room for doubt.

It was not in Paula's nature to think ill of others; but in this case her candid spirit, incapable of falsehood, would not suffer her to be anything but cool to the child; the more effusively Katharina clung to her, the more icily Paula repelled her.

The old man saw this, and he concluded that this mien and demeanor were natural to Paula at all times patrician haughtiness, cold-hearted selfishness, the insolent and boundless pride of the race he loathed— noble by birth alone—stood before him incarnate. He hated the whole class, and he hated this specimen of the class; and his aversion increased tenfold as he remembered what woe this cold siren had wrought for the son of his affections and might bring on him if she should thwart his favorite project. Sooner would he end his days in loneliness, parted even from Philippus, than share his home, his table, and his daily life with this woman, who could repel the sincerely-meant caresses of that pretty, childlike, simple little Katharina with such frigid and supercilious haughtiness. The mere sight of her at meals would embitter every mouthful; only to hear her domineering tones in the next room would spoil his pleasure in working; the touch of her cold hand as she bid him good-night would destroy his night's rest!

Here and now her presence was more than he could bear. It was an offense to him, a challenge; and if ever he had wished to clear her out of his path and the physician's—by force, if need should be—the idea wholly possessed him now.

Irritated and provoked, he took leave of all the others, carefully avoiding a glance even at Paula, though, after he rose, she went up to him on purpose to say a few pleasant words, and to assure him how highly she esteemed his adopted son.

Pulcheria escorted him through the garden and he promised her to return on the morrow, or the day after, and then she must take care that he found her and her mother alone, for he had no fancy to allow Paula to thrust her pride and airs under his nose a second time.

He angrily rejected Pulcheria's attempts to take her friend's part, and he trotted home again, mumbling curses between his old lips.

Martina, meanwhile, had made friends with Paula in her genial, frank way. She had met her parents in time past in Constantinople and spoke of them with heart-felt warmth. This broke the ice between them, and when Martina spoke of Orion—her 'great Sesostris'—of the regard and popularity he had enjoyed in Constantinople, and then, with due recognition and sympathy, of his misfortune, Paula felt drawn towards her indeed. Her reserve vanished entirely, and the conversation between the new acquaintances became more and more eager, intimate, and delightful.

When they parted both felt that they could only gain by further intercourse. Paula was called away at the very moment of leave-taking, and left the room with warm expressions intended only for the matron: "Not good-bye—we must meet again. But of course it is my part, as the younger, to go to you!" And she was no sooner gone than Martina exclaimed:

"What a lovely creature! The worthy daughter of a noble father! And her mother! O dame Joanna! A sweeter being has rarely graced this miserable world; she was born to die young, she was only made to bloom and fade!" Then, turning to Katharina, she went on: with kindly reproof. "Evil tongues gave me a very false idea of this girl. 'A silver kernel in a golden shell,' says the proverb, but in this case both alike are of gold.—Between you two—good God!—But I know what has blinded your clear eyes, poor little kitten. After all, we all see things as we wish to see them. I would lay a wager, dame Joanna, that you are of my opinion in thinking the fair Paula a perfectly noble creature. Aye, a noble creature; it is an expressive word and God knows! How seldom is it a true one? It is one I am little apt to use, but I know no other for such as she is, and on her it is not ill-bestowed."

"Indeed it is not!" answered Joanna with warm assent; but Martina sighed, for she was thinking to herself! "Poor Heliodora! I cannot but confess that Paula is the only match for my 'great Sesostris.' But what in Heaven's name will become of that poor, unfortunate, love-sick little woman?"

All this flashed through her quick brain while Katharina was trying to justify herself, and asserting that she fully recognised Paula's great qualities, but that she was proud, fearfully proud—she had given Martina herself some evidence of that.

At this Pulcheria interposed in zealous defense of her friend. She, however, had hardly begun to speak when she, too, was interrupted, for men's voices were heard in loud discussion in the vestibule, and Perpetua suddenly rushed in with a terrified face, exclaiming, heedless of the strangers: "Oh Dame Joanna! Here is another, dreadful misfortune! Those Arab devils have come again, with an interpreter and a writer. And they have been sent—Merciful Saviour, is it possible?—they have brought a warrant to take away my poor dear child, to take her to prison—to drag her all through the city on foot and throw her into prison."

The faithful soul sobbed aloud and covered her face with her hands. Terror fell upon them all; Joanna left the viridarium in speechless dismay, and Martina exclaimed:

"What a horrible, vile country! Good God, they are even falling on us women. Children, children—give me a seat, I feel quite ill.—In prison! that beautiful, matchless creature dragged through the streets to prison. If the warrant is all right she must go—she must! Not an angel from heaven could save her. But that she should be marched through the town, that noble and splendid creature, as if she were a common thief—it is not to be borne. So much as one woman can do for another at any rate shall be done, so long as I am here to stand on two feet!—Katharina, child, do not you understand? Why do you stand gaping at me as if I were a feathered ape? What do your fat horses eat oats for? What, you do not understand me yet? Be off at once, this minute, and have the horses put in the large closed chariot in which I came here, and bring it to the door.—Ah! At last you see daylight; now, take to your heels and fly!"

And she clapped her hands as if she were driving hens off a garden-bed; Katharina had no alternative but to obey.

Martina then felt for her purse, and when she had found it she added confidently:

"Thank God! I can talk to these villains! This is a language," and she clinked the gold pieces, intelligible to all. "Come, where are the rascals?"

The universal tongue had the desired effect. The chief of the guard allowed it to persuade him to

convey Paula to prison in the chariot, and to promise that she should find decent accommodation there, while he also granted old Betta the leave she insisted on with floods of tears, to share the girl's captivity.

Paula maintained her dignity and composure under this unexpected shock. Only when it came to taking leave of Pulcheria and Mary, who clung to her in frantic grief and begged to go with her and Betta to prison, she could not restrain her tears.

The scribe had informed her that she was charged by Bishop Plotinus with having plotted the escape and flight of the nuns, and Joanna's knees trembled under her when Paula whispered in her ear:

"Beware of Katharina! No one else could have betrayed us; if she has also revealed what Rufinus did for the sisters we must deny it, positively and unflinchingly. Fear nothing: they will get not a word out of me." Then she added aloud: "I need not beg you to remember me lovingly; thanks to you both—the warmest, deepest thanks for all.... You, Pul. . . ." And she clasped the mother and daughter to her bosom, while Mary, clinging to her, hid her little face in her skirts, weeping bitterly. . . . "You, Dame Joanna, took me in, a forlorn creature, and made me happy till Fate fell on us all—you know, ah! you know too well. —The kindness you have shown to me show now to my little Mary. And there is one thing more—here comes the interpreter again!—A moment yet, I beg!—If the messenger should return and bring news of my father or, my God! my God!—my father himself, let me know, or bring him to me! —Or, if I am dead by the time he comes, tell him that to find him, to see him once more, was my heart's dearest wish. And beg my father," she breathed the words into Joanna's ear, "to love Orion as a son. And tell them both that I loved them to the last, deeply, perfectly, beyond words!" Then she added aloud as: she kissed each on her eyes and lips: "I love you and shall always love you—you, Joanna, and you, my Pulcheria, and you, Mary, my sweet, precious darling."

At this the water-wagtail humed forward with outstretched arms, but Dame Joanna put out a significantly warning hand; and they who were one in heart clasped each other in a last embrace as though they were indeed but one and no stranger could have any part in it.

Once more Katharina tried to approach Paula; but Martina, whose eyes filled with tears as she looked on the parting, held her back by the shoulder and whispered:

"Do not disturb them, child. Such hearts spontaneously attract those for whom they yearn. I, old as I am, would gladly be worthy to be called."

The interpreter now sternly insisted on starting. The three women parted; but still the little girl held tightly to Paula, even when she went up to the matron and kissed her with a natural impulse. Martina took her head between her hands, kissed her fondly, and said in a voice she could scarcely control: "God protect and keep you, child! I thank Him for having brought us together. A soul so pure and clear as yours is not to be found in the capital, but we still know how to be friends to our friends—at any rate I and my husband do—and if Heaven but grants me the opportunity you shall prove it. You never need feel alone in the world; never, so long as Justinus and his wife are still in it. Remember that, child; I mean it in solemn earnest."

With this, she again embraced Paula, who as she went out to enter the chariot also bestowed a farewell kiss on Eudoxia and Mandane, for they, too, stood modestly weeping in the background; then she gave her hand to the hump-backed gardener, and to the Masdakite, down whose cheeks tears were rolling. At this moment Katharina stood in her path, seized her arm in mortified excitement, and said insistently:

"And have you not a word for me?"

Paula freed herself from her clutch and said in a low voice: "I thank you for lending me the chariot. As you know, it is taking me to prison, and I fear it is your perfidy that has brought me to this. If I am wrong, forgive me—if I am right, your punishment will hardly be lighter than my fate. You are still young, Katharina; try to grow better."

And with this she stepped into the chariot with old Betta, and the last she saw was little Mary who threw herself sobbing into Joanna's arms.

CHAPTER XIV.

Susannah had never particularly cared for Paula, but her fate shocked her and moved her to pity. She must at once enquire whether it was not possible to send her some better food than the ordinary prison-fare. That was but Christian charity, and her daughter seemed to take her friend's misfortune much to heart. When she and Martina returned home she looked so cast down and distracted that no stranger now would ever have dreamed of comparing her with a brisk little bird.

Once more a poisoned arrow had struck her. Till now she had been wicked only in her own eyes; now she was wicked in the eyes of another. Paula knew it was she who had betrayed her. The traitress had been met by treachery. The woman she hated had a right to regard her as spiteful and malignant, and for this she hated her more than ever.

Till now she had nowhere failed to find an affectionate greeting and welcome; and to-day how coldly she had been repulsed—and not by Paula alone, but also by Martina, who no doubt had noticed something, and whose dry reserve had been quite intolerable to the girl.

It was all the old bishop's fault; he had not kept his promise that her tale-bearing should remain as secret as a confession. Indeed, he must have deliberately revealed it, for no one but herself knew of the facts. Perhaps he had even mentioned her name to the Arabs; in that case she would have to bear witness before the judges, and then in what light would she appear to Orion, to her mother, to Joanna and Martina?

She had not failed to understand that old Rufinus must have perished in the expedition, and she was truly grieved. His wife and daughter had always been kind neighbors to her; and she would not have willingly brought sorrow on them. If she were called up to give evidence it might go hard with them, and she wished no harm to any one but those who had cheated her out of Orion's love. This idea of standing before a court of justice was the worst of all; this must be warded off at any cost.

Where could Bishop Plotinus be? He had returned to Memphis the day before, and yet he had not been to see her mother, to whom he usually paid a daily visit. This absence seemed to her ominous. Everything depended on her reminding the old man of his promise as soon as possible; for if at the trial next morning—which of course, he must attend—he should happen to mention her name, the guards, the interpreter, and the scribe would invade her home too and then—horror! She had given evidence once already, and could never again go through all that had ensued.

But how was she to get at the bishop in the course of the night or early to-morrow at latest?

The chariot had not yet returned, and if—it still wanted two hours of midnight; yes—it must be done.

She began talking to her mother of the prelate's absence; Susannah, too, was uneasy about it, particularly since she had heard that the old man had come home ill and that his servant had been out and about in search of a physician. Katharina promptly proposed to go and see him: the horses were still in harness, her nurse could accompany her. She really must go and learn how her venerable friend was going on.

Susannah thought this very sweet; still, she said it was very late for such a visit; however, her spoilt child had said that she "must" and the answer was a foregone conclusion. Dame Susannah gave way; the nurse was sent for, and as soon as the chariot came round Katharina flung her arms round her mother's neck, promising her not to stay long, and in a few minutes the chariot stopped at the door of the bishop's palace. She bid the nurse wait for her and went alone into the vast, rambling house.

The spacious hall, lighted feebly by a single lamp, was silent and deserted, even the door-keeper had left his post; however, she was familiar with every step and turning, and went on through the impluvium into the library where, at this hour, the bishop was wont to be found. But it was dark, and her gentle call met with no reply. In the next room, to which she timidly felt her way, a slave lay snoring; beside him were a wine jar and a hand-lamp. The sight somewhat reassured her. Beyond was the bishop's bedroom, which she had never been into. A dim light gleamed through the open door and she heard a low moaning and gasping. She called the house-keeper by name once, twice; no answer. The sleeping slave did not stir; but a familiar voice addressed her from the bedroom, groaning rather than saying:

"Who is there? Is he come? Have you found him at last?"

The whole household had fled in fear of the pestilence; even the acolyte, who had indeed a wife and children. The housekeeper had been forced to leave the master to seek the physician, who had already been there once, and the last remaining slave, a faithful, goodhearted, heedless sot, had been left in charge; but he had brought a jar of wine up from the unguarded cellar, had soon emptied it, and then, overcome by drink and the heat of the night, he had fallen asleep.

Katharina at once spoke her name and the old man answered her, saying kindly, but with difficulty: "Ah, it is you, you, my child!"

She took up the lamp and went close to the sick man. He put out his lean arm to welcome her; but, as her approach brought the light near to him he covered his eyes, crying out distressfully: "No, no; that hurts. Take away the lamp."

Katharina set it down on a low chest behind the head of the bed; then she went up to the sufferer, gave him her mother's message, and asked him how he was and why he was left alone. He could only give incoherent answers which he gasped out with great difficulty, bidding her go close to him for he could not hear her distinctly. He was very ill, he told her— dying. It was good of her to have come for she had always been his pet, his dear, good little girl.

"And it was a happy impulse that brought you," he added, "to receive an old man's blessing. I give it you with my whole heart."

As he spoke he put forth his hand and she, following an instinctive prompting, fell on her knees by the side of the couch.

He laid his burning right hand on her head and murmured some words of blessing; she, however, scarcely heeded them, for his hand felt like lead and its heat oppressed and distressed her dreadfully. It was a sincere grief to her to see this true old friend of her childhood suffering thus —perhaps indeed dying; at the same time she did not forget what had brought her here—still, she dared not disturb him in this act of love. He gave her his blessing—that was kind; but his mutterings did not come to an end, the weight of the hot hand on her head grew heavier and heavier, and at last became intolerable. She felt quite dazed, but with an effort she collected her senses and then perceived that the old man had wandered off from the usual formulas of blessing and was murmuring disconnected and inarticulate words.

At this she raised the terrible, fevered hand, laid it on the bed, and was about to ask him whether he had betrayed her to Benjamin, and if he had mentioned her name, when—Merciful God! there on his cheeks were the same livid spots that she had noticed on those of the plague stricken man in Medea's house. With a cry of horror she sprang up, snatched at the lamp, held it over the sufferer, heedless of his cries of anguish, looked into his face, and pulled away the weary hands with which he tried to screen his eyes from the light. Then, having convinced herself that she was not mistaken, she fled from room to room out into the hall.

Here she was met by the housekeeper, who took the lamp out of her hand and was about to question her; but Katharina only screamed:

"The plague is in the house! Lock the doors!" and then rushed away, past the leech who was coming in. With one bound she was in the chariot, and as the horses started she wailed out to the nurse:

"The plague—they have the plague. Plotinus has taken the plague!"

The terrified woman tried to soothe her, assuring her that she must be mistaken for such hellish fiends did not dare come near so holy a man. But the girl vouchsafed no reply, merely desiring her to have a bath made ready for her as soon as they should reach home.

She felt utterly shattered; on the spot where the old man's plague-stricken hand had rested she was conscious of a heavy, hateful pressure, and when the chariot at length drove into their own garden something warm and heavy—something she could not shake off, still seemed to weigh on her brain.

The windows were all dark excepting one on the ground-floor, where a light was still visible in the room inhabited by Heliadora. A diabolical thought flashed through her over-excited and restless mind; without looking to the right hand or the left she obeyed the impulse and went forward, just as she was, into her friend's sitting-room and then, lifting a curtain, on into the bedroom. Heliadora was lying on her couch, still suffering from a headache which had prevented her going to visit their neighbors; at first she did not notice the late visitor who stood by her side and bid her good evening.

A single lamp shed a dim light in the spacious room, and the young girl had never thought their guest so lovely as she looked in that twilight. A night wrapper of the thinnest material only half hid her beautiful limbs. Round her flowing, fair hair, floated the subtle, hardly perceptible perfume which always pervaded this favorite of fortune. Two heavy plaits lay like sheeny snakes over her bosom and the white sheet. Her face was turned upwards and was exquisitely calm and sweet; and as she lay motionless and smiled up at Katharina, she looked like an angel wearied in well-doing.

No man could resist the charms of this woman, and Orion had succumbed. By her side was a lute,

from which she brought the softest and most soothing tones, and thus added to the witchery of her appearance.

Katharina's whole being was in wild revolt; she did not know how she was able to return Heliodora's greeting, and to ask her how she could possibly play the lute with a headache.

"Just gliding my fingers over the strings calms and refreshes my blood," she replied pleasantly. "But you, child, look as if you were suffering far worse than I.—Did you come home in the chariot that drove up just now?"

"Yes," replied Katharina. "I have been to see our dear old bishop. He is very ill, dying; he will soon be taken from us. Oh, what a fearful day! First Orion's mother, then Paula, and now this to crown all! Oh, Heliodora, Heliodora!"

She fell on her knees by the bed and pressed her face against her pitying friend's bosom. Heliodora saw the tears which had risen with unaffected feeling to the girl's eyes; her tender soul was full of sympathy with the sorrow of such a gladsome young creature, who had already had so much to suffer, and she leaned over the child, kissing her affectionately on the brow, and murmuring words of consolation. Katharina clung to her closely, and pointing to the top of her head where that burning hand had pressed it, she said: "There, kiss there: there is where the pain is worst!—Ah, that is nice, that does me good."

And, as the tender-hearted Heliodora's fresh lips rested on the plague-tainted hair, Katharina closed her eyes and felt as a gladiator might who hitherto has only tried his weapons on the practising ground, and now for the first time uses them in the arena to pierce his opponent's heart. She had a vision of herself as some one else, taller and stronger than she was; aye, as Death itself, the destroyer, breathing herself into her victim's breast.

These feelings entirely possessed her as she knelt on the soft carpet, and she did not notice that another woman was crossing it noiselessly to her comforter's bed-side, with a glance of intelligence at Heliodora. Just as she exclaimed: "Another kiss there—it burns so dreadfully," she felt two hands on her temples and two lips, not Heliodora's, were pressed on her head.

She looked up in astonishment and saw the smiling face of her mother, who had come after her to ask how the bishop was, and who wished to take her share in soothing the pain of her darling.

How well her little surprise had succeeded!

But what came over the child? She started to her feet as if lightning had struck her, as if an asp had stung her, looked horror-stricken into her mother's eyes, and then, as Susannah was on the point of clasping the little head to her bosom once more to kiss the aching, the cursed spot, Katharina pushed her away, flew, distracted, through the sitting-room into the vestibule, and down the narrow steps leading to the bathroom.

Her mother looked after her, shaking her head in bewilderment. Then she turned to Heliodora with a shrug, and said, as the tears filled her eyes:

"Poor, poor little thing! Too many troubles have come upon her at once. Her life till lately was like a long, sunny day, and now the hail is pelting her from all sides at once. She has bad news of the bishop, I fear."

"He is dying, she said," replied the young widow with feeling.

"Our best and truest friend," sobbed Susannah. "It is, it really is too much. I often think that I must myself succumb, and as for her—hardly more than a child!—And with what resignation she bears the heaviest sorrows!—You, Heliodora, are far from knowing what she has gone through; but you have no doubt seen how her only thought is to seem bright, so as to cheer my heart. Not a sigh, not a complaint has passed her lips. She submits like a saint to everything, without a murmur. But, now that her clear old friend is stricken, she has lost her self-control for the first time. She knows all that Plotinus has been to me." And she broke down into fresh sobbing. When she was a little calmer, she apologised for her weakness and bid her fair guest good night.

Katharina, meanwhile, was taking a bath.

A bathroom was an indispensable adjunct to every wealthy Graeco-Egyptian house, and her father had taken particular pains with its construction. It consisted of two chambers, one for men and one for women; both fitted with equal splendor.

White marble, yellow alabaster, purple porphyry on all sides; while the pavement was of fine

Byzantine mosaic on a gold ground. There were no statues, as in the baths of the heathen; the walls were decorated with bible texts in gold letters, and above the divan, which was covered with a giraffe skin, there was a crucifix. On the middle panel of the coffered ceiling was inscribed defiantly, in the Coptic language the first axiom of the Jacobite creed: "We believe in the single, indivisible nature of Christ Jesus." And below this hung silver lamps.

The large bath had been filled immediately for Katharina, as the furnace was heated every evening for the ladies of the house. As she was undressing, her maid showed her a diseased date. The head gardener, had brought it to her, for he had that afternoon, discovered that his palms, too, had been attacked. But the woman soon regretted her loquacity, for when she went on to say that Anchor, the worthy shoemaker who, only the day before yesterday, had brought home her pretty new sandals, had died of the plague, Katharina scolded her sharply and bid her be silent. But as the maid knelt before her to unfasten her sandals, Katharina herself took up the story again, asking her whether the shoemaker's pretty young wife had also been attacked. The girl said that she was still alive, but that the old mother-in-law and all the children had been shut into the house, and even the shutters barred as soon as the corpse had been brought out. The authorities had ordered that this should be done in every case, so that the pestilence might not pervade the streets or be disseminated among the healthy. Food and drink were handed to the captives through a wicket in the door. Such regulations, she added, seemed particularly well-considered and wise. But she would have done better to keep her opinions to herself, for before she had done speaking Katharina gave her an angry push with her foot. Then she desired her not to be sparing with the 'smegma',—[A material like soap, but used in a soft state.]—and to wash her hair as thoroughly as possible.

This was done; and Katharina herself rubbed her hands and arms with passionate diligence. Then she had water poured over her head again and again, till, when she desired the maid to desist, she had to lean breathless and almost exhausted against the marble.

But in spite of smegma and water she still felt the pressure of the burning hand on top of her head, and her heart seemed oppressed by some invisible load of lead.

Her mother! oh, her mother! She had kissed her there, where the plague had actually touched her, and in fancy she could hear her gasping and begging for a drink of water like the dying wretches to whom her fate had led her. And then—then came the servants of the senate and shut her into the pestilential house with the sick; she saw the pest in mortal form, a cruel and malignant witch; behind her, tall and threatening, stood her inexorable companion Death, reaching out a bony hand and clutching her mother, and then all who were in the house with her, and last of all, herself.

Her arms dropped by her side: powerful and terrible as she had felt herself this morning, she was now crushed by a sense of miserable and impotent weakness. Her defiance had been addressed to a mortal, a frail, tender woman; and God and Fate had put her in the front of the battle instead of Heliadora. She shuddered at the thought.

As she went up from the bath-room, her mother met her in the hall and said:

"What, still here, Child? How you startled me! And is it true? Is Plotinus really ill of a complaint akin to the plague?"

"Worse than that, mother," she replied sadly. "He has the plague; and I remembered that a bath is the right thing when one has been in a plague-stricken house; you, too, have kissed and touched me. Pray have the fire lighted again, late as it is, and take a bath too."

"But, Child," Susannah began with a laugh; but Katharina gave her no peace till she yielded, and promised to bathe in the men's room, which had not been used at all since the appearance of the epidemic. When Dame Susannah found herself alone she smiled to herself in silent thankfulness, and in the bath again she lifted up her heart and hands in prayer for her only child, the loving daughter who cared for her so tenderly.

Katharina went to her own room, after ascertaining that the clothes she had worn this evening had been sacrificed in the bath-furnace.

It was past midnight, but still she bid the maid sit up, and she did not go to bed. She could not have found rest there. She was tempted to go out on the balcony, and she sat down there on a rocking chair. The night was sultry and still. Every house, every tree, every wall seemed to radiate the heat it had absorbed during the day. Along the quay came a long procession of pilgrims; this was followed by a funeral train and soon after came another—both so shrouded in clouds of dust that the torches of the followers looked like coals glimmering under ashes. Several who had died of the pestilence, and whom it had been impossible to bury by day, were being borne to the grave together. One of these funerals,

so she vaguely fancied, was Heliadora's; the other her own perhaps—or her mother's—and she shivered at the thought. The long train wandered on under its shroud of dust, and stood still when it reached the Necropolis; then the sledge with the bier came back empty on red hot runners—but she was not one of the mourners—she was imprisoned in the pestiferous house. Then, when she was freed again—she saw it all quite clearly—two heads had been cut off in the courtyard of the Hall of justice: Orion's and Paula's—and she was left alone, quite alone and forlorn. Her mother was lying by her father's side under the sand in the cemetery, and who was there to care for her, to be troubled about her, to protect her? She was alone in the world like a tree without roots, like a leaf blown out to sea, like an unfledged bird that has fallen out of the nest.

Then, for the first time since that evening when she had borne false witness, her memory reverted to all she had been taught at school and in the church of the torments of hell, and she pictured the abode of the damned, and the scorching, seething Lake of fire in which murderers, heretics, false witnesses....

What was that?

Had hell indeed yawned, and were the flames soaring up to the sky through the riven shell of the earth? Had the firmament opened to pour living fire and black fumes on the northern part of the city?

She started up in dismay, her eyes fixed on the terrible sight. The whole sky seemed to be in flames; a fiery furnace, with dense smoke and myriads of shooting sparks, filled the whole space between earth and heaven. A devouring conflagration was apparently about to annihilate the town, the river, the starry vault itself; the metal heralds which usually called the faithful to church lifted up their voices; the quiet road at her feet suddenly swarmed with thousands of people; shrieks, yells and frantic commands came up from below, and in the confusion of tongues she could distinguish the words "Governor's Palace"—"Arabs"—"Mukaukas"—"Orion"—"fire"—"Put it out"—"Save it."

At this moment the old head-gardener called up to her from the lotos- tank: "The palace is in flames! And in this drought—God All-merciful save the town!"

Her knees gave way; she put out her hands with a faint cry to feel for some support, and two arms were thrown about her—the arms which she so lately had pushed away: her mother's: that mother who had bent over her only child and inhaled death in a kiss on her plague-tainted hair.

CHAPTER XV.

The governor's palace, the pride and glory of Memphis, the magnificent home of the oldest and noblest family of the land—the last house that had given birth to a race of native Egyptians held worthy, even by the Greeks, to represent the emperor and uphold the highest dignity in the world—the very citadel of native life, lay in ashes; and just as a giant of the woods crushes and destroys in its fall many plants of humbler growth, so the burning of the great house destroyed hundreds of smaller dwellings.

This night's work had torn the mast and rudder, and many a plank besides, from that foundering vessel, the town of Memphis. It seemed indeed a miracle that had saved the whole from being reduced to cinders; and for this, next to God's providence, they might thank the black incendiary himself and his Arabs. The crime was committed with cool and shrewd foresight, and carried through to the end. During his visitation throughout the rambling buildings Obada had looked out for spots that might suit his purpose, and two hours after sunset he had lighted fire after fire with his own hand, in secret and undetected. The troops he intended to employ later were waiting under arms at Fostat, and when the fire broke out, first in the treasury and afterwards in three other places in the palace, they were immediately marched across and very judiciously employed.

All that was precious in this ancient home of a wealthy race, was conveyed to a place of safety, even the numerous fine horses in the stables; and the title-deeds of the estate, slaves, and so forth were already secured at Fostat; still, the flames consumed vast quantities of treasures that could never be replaced. Beautiful works of art, manuscripts and books such as were only preserved here, old and splendid plants from every zone, vessels and woven stuffs that had been the delight of connoisseurs—all perished in heaps. But the incendiary regretted none of them, for all possibility of proving how much that was precious had fallen into his hands was buried under their ashes.

The worst that could happen to him now was to be deposed from office for his too audacious proceedings. Of all the towns he had seen in the course of the triumphant incursions of Islam none had

attracted him so greatly as Damascus, and he now had the means of spending the latter half of his life there in luxurious enjoyment.

At the same time it was desirable to rescue as much as possible from the flames; for it would have given his enemies a fatal hold upon him, if the famous old city of Memphis should perish by his neglect. And he was a man to give battle to the awful element.

Not another building fell a prey to it on the Nile quay; but a light southerly breeze carried burning fragments to the northwest, and several houses in the poorer quarter on the edge of the desert caught fire. Thither the larger portion of those who could combat the flames and rescue the inhabitants were at once directed; and here, as at the palace, he acted on the principle of sacrificing whatever could not be saved entire. Thus a whole quarter of the town was destroyed, hundreds of beggared families lost all they possessed; and yet he, whose ruthless avarice had cast so many into misery, was admired and lauded; for he was everywhere at once: now by the river and now by the desert, always where the danger was greatest, and where the presence of the leader was most needed. Here he was seen in the very midst of the fire, there he swung the axe with his own hand; now, mounted on horseback, he rode down the line where the dry grass was to be torn up by the roots and soaked with water; now, on foot, he directed the scanty jet from the pipes or, with Herculean strength, flung back into the flames a beam which had fallen beyond the limits he had set. His shrill voice sounded, as his huge height towered, above all others; every eye was fixed on his black face and flashing eyes and teeth, while his example carried away all his followers to imitate it. His shouts of command made the scene of the fire like a battle-field; the Moslems, so ably led, regardless of life as they were and ready to strain and exert their strength to the utmost, wrought wonders in the name of their God and His Prophet.

The Egyptians, too, did their best; but they felt themselves impotent by comparison with what these Arabs did, and they hardly felt anything but the disgrace of being over-mastered by them.

The light shone far across the country; even he whose splendid inheritance was feeding the flames perceived, between midnight and dawn, a glow on the distant western horizon which he was unable to account for.

He had been riding towards it for about half an hour when the caravan halted at the last station but one, on the high road between Kolzum and Babylon.

[Suez, and the Greek citadel near which Amru founded Fostat and Cairo subsequently grew up.]

A considerable troop of horse soldiers dismounted at the same time, but Orion had not summoned these to protect him; on the contrary, he was in their charge and they were taking him, a prisoner, to Fostat. He had quitted the chariot in which he had set out and had been made to mount a dromedary; two horsemen armed to the teeth rode constantly at his side. His fellow-travellers were allowed to remain in their chariot.

At the inn which they had now reached Justinus got out and desired his companion, a pale-faced man who sat sunk into a heap, to do the same; but with a weary shake of the head he declined to move.

"Are you in pain, Narses?" asked Justinus affectionately, and Narses briefly replied in a husky voice: "All over," and settled himself against the cushion at the back of the chariot. He even refused the refreshments brought out to him by the Senator's servant and interpreter. He seemed sunk in apathy and to crave nothing but peace.

This was the senator's nephew.

With Orion's help, and armed with letters of protection and recommendation from Amru, the senator had gained his purpose. He had ransomed Narses, but not before the wretched man had toiled for some time as a prisoner, first at the canal on the line of the old one constructed by the Pharaohs, which was being restored under the Khaliff Omar, to secure the speediest way of transporting grain from Egypt to Arabia and afterwards in the rock-bound harbor of Aila. On the burning shores of the Red Sea, under the fearful sun of those latitudes, Narses was condemned to drag blocks of stone; many days had elapsed before his uncle could trace him—and in what a state did Justinus find him at last!

A week before he could reach him, the ex-officer of cavalry had laid himself down in the wretched sheds for the sick provided for the laborers; his back still bore the scars of the blows by which the overseer had spurred the waning strength of his exhausted and suffering victim. The fine young soldier was a wreck, broken alike in heart and body and sunk in melancholy. Justinus had hoped to take him home jubilant to Martina, and he had only this ruin to show her, doomed to the grave.

The senator was glad, nevertheless, to have saved this much at any rate. The sight of the sufferer

touched him deeply, and the less Narses would take or give, the more thankful was Justinus when he gave the faintest sign of reviving interest.

In the course of this journey by land and water—and latterly as sharing the senator's care of his nephew—Orion had become very dear to his old friend; and at the risk of incurring his displeasure he had even confessed the reasons that had prompted him to leave Memphis.

He never could cease to feel that everything good or lofty in himself was Paula's alone; that her love ennobled and strengthened him; that to desert her was to abandon himself. His trifling with Heliodora could but divert him from the high aim he had set before himself. This aim he kept constantly in view; his spirit hungered for peaceful days in which he might act on the resolution he had formed in church and fulfil the task set before him by the Arab governor.

The knowledge that he had inherited an enormous fortune now afforded him no joy, for he was forced to confess to himself that but for this superabundant wealth he might have been a very different man; and more than once a vehement wish came over him to fling away all his possessions and wrestle for peace of mind and the esteem of the best men by his own unaided powers.

The senator had taken his confession as it was meant: if Thomas' daughter was indeed what Orion described her there could be but small hope for his beautiful favorite. He and Martina must e'en make their way home again with two adopted dear ones, and it must be the care of the old folks to comfort the young ones instead of the young succoring the old as was natural. And in spite of everything Orion had won on his affections, for every day, every hour he was struck by some new quality, some greater trait than he had looked for in the young man.

Torches were flaring in the inn-yard where, under a palm-thatched roof supported on poles and covering a square space in the middle, benches stood for the guests to rest. Here Justinus and Orion again met for a few minutes' conversation.

His warders were also seated near them; they did not let Orion out of their sight even while they ate their meal of mutton, bread, onions, and dates. The senator's servants brought some food from the chariot, and just as Justinus and Orion had begun their attack on it, a tall man came into the yard and made his way to the benches. This was Philippus, pausing on his road to Djidda. He had learnt, even before coming in, whom he would find here, a prisoner; and the Arabs, to whom the leech was known, allowed him to join the pair, though at the same time they came a little nearer, and their leader understood Greek.

Philippus was anything rather than cordially disposed towards Orion; still, he knew what peril hung over the youth, and how sad a loss he had suffered. His conscience bid him do all he could to prove helpful in the trial that awaited him in the matter of the expedition in which Rufinus had perished. He was the bearer, too, of sad news which the Arabs must necessarily hear. Orion was indeed furious when he heard of the seizure and occupation of the governor's residence; still, he believed that Amru would insist on restitution; but on hearing of his mother's death he broke down completely. Even the Arabs, seeing the strong man shaken with sobs and learning the cause of his grief, respectfully withdrew; for the anguish of a son at the loss of his mother was sacred in their eyes. They regard the man who mourns for one he loves as stricken by the hand of the Almighty and hallowed by his touch and treat him with the reverence of pious awe.

Orion had not observed their absence, but Philippus at once took advantage of it to tell him, as briefly as possible, all that related to the escape of the nuns. He himself knew not yet of the burning of the palace, or of Paula's imprisonment; but he could tell the senator where he would find his wife and niece. So by the time he was bidden to mount and start once more Orion was informed of all that had happened.

It was with a drooping head, and sunk in melancholy thought that he rode on his way.

As for the residence!—whether the Arabs gave it back to him or not, what did he care?—but his mother, his mother! All she had been to him from his earliest years rose before his mind; in the deep woe of this parting he forgot the imminent danger and the dungeon that awaited him, and the intolerable insult to his rights; nay, even the image of the woman he loved paled by the side of that of the beloved dead. Perhaps he might not even gain permission to bury her!

The way lay through a parched tract of rocky desert, and the further they went the more intense was that wonderful flush in the west, till day broke behind the travellers and the glory of the sunrise quenched the vividness of its glow.

Another scorching day! The rocks by the wayside still threw long shadows on the sandy desert-road, when a party of Arab horsemen came from Fostat to meet the travellers, shouting the latest news to the

prisoner's escort. It was evidently important; but Orion did not understand a word of what they said. Evil tidings fly fast, however; while the men were talking together, the dragoman rode up to him and told him that his home was burnt to the ground and half Memphis still in flames. Then came other newsbearers, on horseback and on dromedaries; and they met chariots and files of camels loaded with corn and Egyptian merchandise; and each and all shouted to the Arab escort reports of what was going on in Memphis, hoping to be the first to tell the homeward bound party.

How many times did Orion hear the story—and each time that a traveller began with: "Have you heard?" pointing westward, the wounds the first news had inflicted bled anew.

What lay beneath that mass of ashes? How much had the flames consumed that never could be replaced! Much that he had silently wished were possible had in fact been fulfilled—and so soon! Where now was the burthen of great wealth which had hung about his heels and hindered his running freely? And yet he did not, even now, feel free; the way was not yet open before him; he secretly mourned over the ruined house of his fathers and the wrecked home; a miserable sense of insecurity weighed him down. No father—no mother—no parental roof! For years he had been, in fact, perfectly independent, and yet he felt now like a pilot whose boat had lost its rudder.

Before him lay a prison, and the closing act of the great tragedy of which he himself had been the hero. Fate had fallen on his house, had marked it for destruction as erewhile that of Tantalus. It lay in ashes, and the victims were already many: two brothers, father, mother—and, far away from home, Rufinus too.

But whose was the guilt?

It was not his ancestors who had sinned; it could only be his own that had called down this ruin. But was there then such a power as the Destiny of the ancients—inexorable, iron Fate? Had he not repented and suffered, been reconciled to his Redeemer, and prepared himself to fight the hard fight? Perhaps he was indeed to be the hero of a tragedy; then he would show that it was not the blind Inevitable, but what a man can make of himself, and what he can do by the aid of the God of might, which determines his fate. If he must still succumb, it should only be after a valiant struggle and defense. He would battle fearlessly against every foe, would press onward in the path he had laid down for himself. His heart beat high once more; he felt as though he could see his father's example as a guiding star in the sky, so that he must be true to that whether to live or to die. And when he turned his eye earthwards again, still, even there, he had that which made it seem worth the cost of enduring the pangs of living and the brunt of the hardest battle: Paula and her love.

The nearer he approached Fostat, the more ardently his heart swelled with longing. Heaven must grant him to see her once more, once more to clasp her in his arms, before—the end!

It seemed to him that what he had gone through in these few hours must have removed and set aside everything that could part them. Now, he felt, he had strength to remain worthy of her; if Heliadora were to come in his way again he would now certainly, positively, regard and treat her only as a sister.

He was conducted at once to the house of the Kadi; but this official was at the Divan—the council, which his arch-foe, that black monster Obada, had called together.

After the labors of the past night the Negro had allowed himself only a few hours rest, and then had met the council, where he had not been slow to discover that he had as many enemies as there were members present.

His most determined opponents were the Kadi Othman, the head of the Courts of justice and administration, and Khalid the governor of the exchequer. Neither of them hesitated to express his opinion; and indeed, no one present at this meeting would have suspected for a moment that most of the members had, in their peaceful youth, guarded flocks as shepherds on the mountains, led caravans across the desert, or managed some small trade. In the contests of tribe against tribe they had found opportunities for practice in the use of weapons, and for steeling their courage; but where had they learnt to choose their words with so much care, and emphasize them with gestures of such natural grace that any Greek orator would have admired them? It was only when the indignant orator "thundered and lightened" and was carried away by the heat of passion that he forgot his dignified moderation, and then how grandly voice, eye, and action helped each other! And never, even under the highest excitement, was purity of language overlooked. These men, of whom very few could read and write, had at their command all the most effective verses of their poets having thousands of lines stored in their minds.

The discussion to-day dealt with the social aspects of an ancient civilization, unknown but a few years since to the warlike children of the desert, and yet how ably had the four overseers of public buildings

the comptrollers of the markets, of the irrigation works, and of the mills, achieved their ends. These bright and untarnished spirits were equal to the hardest task and capable of carrying it through with energy, acumen, and success.

And the sons of these men who had passed through no school were already well-fitted and invited to give new splendor to cities in their decline, and new life to the learning of the countries they had subdued. Everything in this council revealed talent, vitality, and ardor; and Obada, who had been a slave, found it by no means easy to uphold his pre-eminence among these assertive scions of free and respectable families.

The Kadi spoke frankly and fearlessly against his recent proceedings, declaring in the name of every member of the Divan, that they disclaimed all responsibility for what had been done, and that it rested on the Vekeel alone. Obada was very ready to accept it; and he announced with such fiery eloquence his determination to give shelter at Fostat to the natives whom the conflagration had left roofless, he was so fair-spoken, and he had shown his great qualities in so clear a light during the past night, that they agreed to postpone their attainder and await the reply from Medina to the complaints they had forwarded. Discipline, indeed, required that they should submit; and many a man who would have flown to meet death on the field as a bride, quailed before the terrible adventurer who would not shrink from the most hideous deeds.

Obada had won by hard fighting. No one could prove a theft against him of so much as a single drachma; but he nevertheless had to take many a rough word, and with one consent the assembly refused him the deference justly due to the governor's representative.

Bitterly indignant, he remained till the very last in the council-chamber, no one staying with him, not even his own subalterns, to speak a soothing word in praise of the power and eloquence of his address, while the same cursed wretches would, under similar circumstances, have buzzed round Amru like swarming bees, and have escorted him home like curs wagging their tails. He ascribed the contumely and opposition he met with to their prejudice, as haughty, free-born men against his birth, and not to any fault of his own, and yet he looked down on them all, feeling himself the superior of each by himself; if the blow in Medina were successful, he would pick out his victims, and then....

His dreams of vengeance were abruptly broken by a messenger, covered with dust from head to foot; he brought good news: Orion was taken and safely bestowed in the Kadi's house.

"And why not in mine?" asked Obada in peremptory tones. "Who is the governor's representative here. Othman or I? Take the prisoner to my house."

And he forthwith went home. But instead of the prisoner there presently appeared before him an official of the Kadi's household, who informed him, from his master, that as the Khaliff had constituted Othman supreme judge in Egypt this matter was in his hands; if Obada wished to see the prisoner he might go to the Kadi's residence, or visit him later in the town prison of Memphis, whither Orion would presently be transferred.

He rushed off, raging, to his enemy's house, but his stormy fury was met by the placidity of a calm and judicial mind. Othman was a man between forty and fifty years old, but his soft, black beard was already turning grey; his noble dark face bore the stamp of a lofty, high-bred soul, and a keen but temperate spirit shone in his eyes. There was something serene and clear in his whole person; he was a man to bear the burthen of life's vicissitudes with dignity, while he had set himself the task of saving others from them so far as in him lay.

The patriarch's complaints had come also to the Kadi's knowledge, and he, too, was minded to exact retribution for the massacre of the Moslem soldiers; but the punishment should fall on none but the guilty. He would have been sorry to believe that Orion was one of them, for he had esteemed his father as a brave man and a just judge, and had taken many a word of good advice from the experienced Egyptian.

The scene between him and the infuriated Vekeel was a painful one even for the attendants who stood round; and Orion, who heard Obada's raging from the adjoining room, could gather from it some idea of the relentless hatred with which his negro enemy would persecute him.

However, as after the wildest storm the sea ebbs in ripples so even this tempest came to a more peaceful conclusion. The Kadi represented to the Vekeel what an unheard-of thing it would be, and in what a disgraceful light it would set Moslem justice if one of the noblest families in the country—to whose head, too, the cause of Islam owed so much—were robbed of its possessions on mere suspicion. To this the Vekeel replied that there were definite accusations brought by the head of the native Church, and that nothing had been robbed, but merely confiscated and placed in security. As to what

Allah had thought fit to destroy by fire, no one could be held answerable for that. There was no "mere suspicion" in the case, for he himself had in his possession a document which amply proved that Paula, Orion's beloved, had been the instigator of the crime which had cost the lives of twelve of the true believers.—The girl herself had been taken into custody yesterday. He would cross-examine her himself, too, in spite of all the Kadis in the world; for though Othman might choose to let any number of Moslems be murdered by these dogs of Christians he, Obada, would not overlook it; and if he did, by tomorrow morning the thousand Egyptians who were digging the canal would have killed with their shovels the three Moslems who kept guard over them.

At this, Othman assured the Vekeel that he was no less anxious to punish the miscreants, but that he must first make sure of their identity, and that, in accordance with the law, justly and without fear of man or blind hatred, with due caution and justice. He, as judge, was no less averse to letting off the guilty than he was to punishing the innocent; so the enquiry must be allowed to proceed quietly. If Obada wished to examine Paula he, the Kadi, had no objection; to preside over the court and to direct the trial was his business, and that he would not abdicate even for the Khaliff himself so long as Omar thought him worthy to hold his office.

To all this Obada had no choice but to agree, though with an ill-grace; and as the Vekeel wished to see Orion, the young man was called in. The huge negro looked at him from head to foot like a slave he proposed to buy; and, when Othman went to the door and so could not see him, he could not resist the malicious impulse: he glanced significantly at the prisoner, and drew his forefinger sharply and quickly across his black throat as though to divide the head from the trunk. Then he contemptuously turned his back on the youth.

CHAPTER XVI.

In the course of the afternoon the Vekeel rode across to the prison in Memphis. He expected to find the bishop there, but instead he was met with the news that Plotinus was dead of the pestilence.

This was a malignant stroke of fate; for with the bishop perished the witness who could have betrayed to him the scheme plotted for the rescue of the nuns.—But no! The patriarch, too, no doubt, knew all.

Still, of what use was that at this moment? He had no time to lose, and Benjamin could hardly be expected to return within three weeks.

Obada had met Paula's father in the battle-field by Damascus, and it had often roused his ire to know that this hero's name was held famous even among the Moslems. His envious soul grudged even to the greatest that pure honor which friend and foe alike are ready to pay; he did not believe in it, and regarded the man to whom it was given as a time-serving hypocrite.

And as he hated the father so he did the daughter, though he had never seen her. Orion's fate was sealed in his mind; and before his death he should suffer more acutely through the execution of Paula, whether she denied or owned her guilt. He might perhaps succeed in making her confess, so he desired that she should at once be brought into the judge's council-room; but he failed completely in his attempt, though he promised her, through the interpreter, the greatest leniency if she admitted her guilt and threatened her with an agonizing death if she refused to do so. His prisoner, indeed, was not at all what he had expected, and the calm pride with which she denied every accusation greatly impressed the upstart slave. At first he tried to supplement the interpreter by shouting words of broken Greek, or intimidating her by glaring looks whose efficacy he had often proved on his subordinates but without the least success; and then he had her informed that he possessed a document which placed her guilt beyond doubt. Even this did not shake her; she only begged to see it. He replied that she would know all about it soon enough, and he accompanied the interpreter's repetition of the answer with threatening gestures.

He had met with shrewd and influential women among his own people; he had seen brave ones go forth to battle, and share the perils of a religious war, with even wilder and more blood-thirsty defiance of death than the soldiers themselves; but these had all been wives and mothers, and whenever he had seen them break out of the domestic circle, beyond which no maiden could ever venture, it was because they were under the dominion of some passionate impulse and a burning partisanship for husband or son, family or tribe. The women of his nation lived for the most part in modest retirement, and none but

those who were carried away by some violent emotion infringed the custom.

But this girl! There she stood, immovably calm, like a warrior at the head of his tribe. There was something in her mien that quelled him, and at the same time roused to the utmost his desire to make her feel his power and to crush her pride. She was as much taller than the women of his nation as he was taller than any other captain in the Moslem army; prompted by curiosity, he went close up to her to measure her height by his own, and passed his hand through the air from his swarthy throat to touch the crown of her head; and the depth of loathing with which she shrank from him did not escape his notice. The blood mounted to his head; he desired the interpreter to inform her that she was to hope for no mercy, and inwardly devoted her to a cruel death.

Pale, but prepared to meet the worst, Paula returned to the squalid room she occupied with her faithful Betta.

Her arrival at the prison had been terrible. The guards had seemed disposed to place her in a room filled with a number of male and female criminals, whence the rattle of their chains and a frantic uproar of coarse voices met her ear; however, the interpreter and the captain of the town-watch had taken charge of her, prompted by Martina's promise of a handsome reward if they could go to her next morning with a report that Paula had been decently accommodated.

The warder's mother-in-law, too, had taken her under her protection. This woman was the inn-keeper's wife from the riverside inn of Nesptah, and she at once recognized Paula as the handsome damsel who had refreshed herself there after the evening on the river with Orion, and whom she had supposed to be his betrothed. She happened to be visiting her daughter, the keeper's wife, and induced her to do what she could to be agreeable to Paula. So she and Betta were lodged in a separate cell, and her gold coin proved acceptable to the man, who did his utmost to mitigate her lot. Indeed, Pulcheria had even been allowed to visit her and to bring her the last roses that the drought had left in the garden.

Susannah had carried out her purpose of sending her food and fruit; but they remained in the outer room, and the messenger was desired to explain that no more were to be sent, for that she was supplied with all she needed.

Confident in her sense of innocence, she had looked forward calmly to her fate building her hopes on the much lauded justice of the Arab judges. But it was not they, it would seem, who were to decide it, but that black monster Orion's foe; crushed by the sense of impotence against the arbitrary despotism of the ruthless villain, whose victim she must be, she sat sunk in gloomy apathy, and hardly heard the old nurse's words of encouragement.

She did not fear death; but to die without having seen her father once more, without saying and proving to Orion that she was his alone, wholly his and for ever—that was too hard to bear.

While she was wringing her hands, in a state verging on despair, the man who had ruined the happiness, the peace, and the fortunes of so many of his fellow-creatures was cantering through the streets of Memphis, mounted on the finest horse in Orion's stable, and firmly determined to make his defiant prisoner feel his power. When he reached the great market-place in the quarter known as Ta-anah he was forced to bring his steed to a quieter pace, for in front of the Curia—the senatehouse—an immense gathering of people had collected. The Vekeel forced his way through them with cruel indifference. He knew what they wanted and paid no heed to them. The hapless crowd had for some time past met here daily, demanding from the authorities some succor in their fearful need. Processions and pilgrimages had had no result yesterday, so to-day they besieged the Curia. But could the senate make the Nile rise, or stay the pestilence, or prevent the dates dropping from the palm-trees? Could they help, when Heaven denied its aid?

These were the questions which the authorities had already put at least ten times to the shrieking multitude from the balcony of the town hall, and each time the crowd had yelled in reply: "Yes—yes. You must!—it is your duty; you take the taxes, and you are put there to take care of us!"

Even yesterday the distracted creatures had been wholly unmanageable and had thrown stones at the building: to-day, after the fearful conflagration and the death of their bishop, they had assembled in vast numbers, more furious and more desperate than ever. The senators sat trembling on their antique seats of gilt ivory, the relics of departed splendor imitated from those of the Roman senators, looking at each other and shrugging their shoulders while they listened to a letter which had just reached them from the hadi. This document required them, in conformity with Obada's determination, to make known to the populace, by public proclamation and declaration, that any citizen whose house had been destroyed by the fire of the past night would be granted ground and building materials without payment, at Fostat across the Nile, where he might find a new home provided he would settle there

and embrace Islam.

This degrading offer must be announced: no discussion or recalcitrancy could help that.

And what could they, for their part, do for the complaining crowd?

The plague was snatching them away; the vegetables, which constituted half their food at this season, were dried up; the river, their palatable and refreshing drink, was poisoned; the dates, their chief luxury, ripened only to be rejected with loathing. Then there was the comet in the sky, no hope of a harvest—even of a single ear, for months to come. The bishop dead, all confidence lost in the intercessions of the Church, God's mercy extinct as it would seem, withdrawn from the land under infidel rule!

And they on whose help the populace counted,—poor, weak men, councillors of no counsel, liable from hour to hour to be called to follow those who had succumbed to the plague, and who had but just quitted their vacant seats in obedience to the fateful word.

Yesterday each one had felt convinced that their necessity and misery had reached its height, and yet in the course of the night it had redoubled for many. Their self-dependence was exhausted; but there still was one sage in the city who might perhaps find some new way, suggest some new means of saving the people from despair.

Stones were again flying down through the open roof, and the members of the council started up from their ivory seats and sought shelter behind the marble piers and columns. A wild turmoil came up from the market- place to the terror-stricken Fathers of the city, and the mob was hammering with fists and clubs on the heavy doors of the Curia. Happily they were plated with bronze and fastened with strong iron bolts, but they might fly open at any moment and then the furious mob would storm into the hall.

But what was that?

For a moment the roar and yelling ceased, and then began again, but in a much milder form. Instead of frenzied curses and imprecations shouts now rose of "Hail, hail!" mixed with appeals: "Help us, save us, give us council. Long live the sage!" "Help us with your magic, Father!" "You know the secrets and the wisdom of the ancients!" "Save us, Save us! Show those money-bags, those cheats in the Curia the way to help us!"

At this the president of the town-council ventured forth from his refuge behind the statue of Trajan—the only image that the priesthood had spared—and to climb a ladder which was used for lighting the hanging lamps, so as to peep out of the high window.

He saw an old man in shining white linen robes, riding on a fine white ass through the crowd which reverently made way for him. The lictors of the town marched before him with their fasces, on to which they had tied palm branches in token of a friendly embassy. Looking further he could see that behind the old man came a slave, besides the one who drove his ass, carrying a quantity of manuscript scrolls. This raised his hopes, for the scrolls looked very old and yellow, and no doubt contained a store of wisdom; nay, probably magic formulas and effectual charms.

With a loud exclamation of "Here he comes!" the senator descended the ladder; in a few minutes the door was opened with a rattling of iron bolts, and it was with a sigh of relief that they saw the old man come in and none attempt to follow him.

When Horapollo entered the council-chamber he found the senators sitting on their ivory chairs with as much dignified calm as though the meeting had been uninterrupted; but at a sign from the president they all rose to receive the old man, and he returned their greeting with reserve, as homage due to him. He also accepted the raised seat, which the president quitted in his honor while he himself took one of the ordinary chairs at his side.

The negotiation began at once, and was not disturbed by the crowd, though still from the market-place there came a ceaseless roar, like the breaking of distant waves and the buzzing of thousands of swarming bees.

The sage began modestly, saying that he, in his simplicity, could not but despair of finding any help where so many wise men had failed; he was experienced only in the lore and mysteries of the Fathers, and he had come thither merely to tell the council what they had considered advisable in such cases, and to suggest that their example should be followed.

He spoke low but fluently, and a murmur of approval followed; then, when the president went on to

speak of the low state of the Nile as the root of all the evil, the old man interrupted him, begging them to begin by considering the particular difficulties which they might attack by their own efforts.

The pestilence was in possession of the city; he had just come through the quarter that had been destroyed by the fire, and had seen above fifty sick deprived of all care and reduced to destitution. Here something could be done; here was a way of showing the angry populace that their advisers and leaders were not sitting with their hands in their laps.

A councillor then proposed that the convent of St. Cecilia, or the now deserted and dilapidated odeum should be given up to them; but Horapollo objected explaining very clearly that such a crowd of sick in the midst of the city would be highly dangerous to the healthy citizens. This opinion was shared by his friend Philippus, who had indeed commended the plan he had to propose as the only right one. Whither had their forefathers transported, not merely their beneficent institutions, but their vast temples and tomb-buildings which covered so much space? Always to the desert outside the town. Arrianus had even written these verses on the gigantic sphinx near the Pyramids.

"The gods erewhile created these far-shining forms, wisely sparing the fields and fertile corn-bearing plain."

The moderns had forgotten thus to spare the arable land, and they had also neglected to make good use of the desert. The dead and plague-stricken must not be allowed to endanger the living; they must therefore be lodged away from the town, in the Necropolis in the desert.

"But we cannot let them be under the broiling sun," cried the president.

"Still less," added another, "can we build a house for them in a day."

To this Horapollo replied:

"And who would be so foolish as to ask you to do either? But there are linen and posts to be had in Memphis. Have some large tents pitched in the Necropolis, and all who fall sick of the pestilence removed there at the expense of the city and tended under their shade. Appoint three or four of your number to carry this into execution and there will be a shelter for the roofless sick in a few hours. How many boatmen and shipwrights are standing idle on the quays! Call them together and in an hour they will be at work."

This suggestion was approved. A linen-merchant present exclaimed: "I can supply what is needed," and another who dealt in the same wares, and exported this famous Egyptian manufacture to remote places, also put in a word, desiring that his house might have the order as he could sell cheaper. This squabble might have absorbed the attention of the meeting till it rose, and perhaps have been renewed the next day, if Horapollo's proposal that they should divide the commission equally had not been hastily adopted.

The populace hailed the announcement that tents would be erected for the sick in the desert, with applause from a thousand voices. The deputies chosen to superintend the task set to work at once, and by night the most destitute were safe under the first large hospital tent.

The old man settled some other important questions in the same way, always appealing to the lore of the ancients.

At length he spoke of the chief subject, and he did so with great caution and tact.

All the events of the last few weeks, he said, pointed to the conclusion that Heaven was wroth with the hapless land of their fathers. As a sign of their anger the Immortals had sent the comet, that terrible star whose ominous splendor was increasing daily. To make the Nile rise was not in the power of men; but the ancients—and here his audience listened with bated breath—the ancients had been more intimately familiar with the mysterious powers that rule the life of Nature than men in the later times, whether priests or laymen. In those days every servant of the Most High had been a naturalist and a student, and when Egypt had been visited by such a calamity as that of this year, a sacrifice had been offered—a precious victim against which all mankind, nay and all his own feelings revolted; still, this sacrifice had never failed of its effect, no, never. Here was the evidence—and he pointed to the manuscripts in his lap.

The councillors had begun to be restless in their seats, and first the president and then the others, one after another, exclaimed and asked:

"But the victim?"

"What did they sacrifice?"

"What about the victim?"

"Allow me to say no more about it till another time," said the old man. "What good could it do to tell you that now? The first thing is to find the thing that is acceptable to the gods."

"What is it?"

"Speak—do not keep us on the rack!" was shouted on all sides; but he remained inexorable, promising only to call the council together when the right time should come and desiring that the president would proclaim from the balcony that Horapollo knew of a sacrifice which would cause the Nile at last to rise. As soon as the right victim could be found, the people should be invited to give their consent. In the time of their forefathers it had never failed of its effect, so men, women, and children might go home in all confidence, and await the future with new and well-founded hopes.

And this announcement, with which the president mingled his praises of the venerable Horapollo, had a powerful effect. The crowd hallooed with glee, as though they had found new life. "Hail, hail !" was shouted again and again, and it was addressed, not merely to the old man who had promised them deliverance, but also to the Fathers of the city, who felt as if a fearful load had fallen from their souls.

The old man's scheme was, to be sure, not pious nor rightly Christian; but had the power of the Church been in any way effectual? And this having failed they must of their own accord have had recourse to means held reprobate by the priesthood. Magic and the black arts were genuinely Egyptian; and when faith had no power, these asserted themselves and superstition claimed its own. Though Medea had been taken by surprise and imprisoned, this had not been done to satisfy the law, but with a view to secretly utilizing her occult science for the benefit of the community. In such dire need no means were too base; and though the old man himself was horrified at those he proposed he was sure of public approbation if only they had the desired result. If only they could avert the calamity the sin could be expiated, and the Almighty was so merciful!

The bishop had a seat and voice in the council, but Fate itself had saved them from the dilemma of having to meet his remonstrances.

When Horapollo went out into the market-place he was received with acclamations, and as much gratitude as though he had already achieved the deliverance of the people and country.

What had he done?—Whether the work he had set going were to fail or to succeed he could not remain in Memphis, for in either case he would never have peace again. But that did not daunt him; it would certainly be very good for the two women to be removed from the perilous neighborhood of the Arab capital, and he was firmly determined to take them away with him. For his dear Philip, too, nothing could be better than a transplantation into other soil.

At the house of Rufinus he now learnt the fate that had fallen on Paula.

She was out the way, at any rate for the present; still, if she should be released to-morrow or the day after, or even a month hence, she would be as great a hindrance as ever. His plots against her must therefore be carried out. His own isolation provoked him, and what a satisfaction it would be if only he should succeed in stirring up the Egyptian Christians to the heathen deed to which he was endeavoring to prompt them.

If Paula should be condemned to death by the Arabs, the execution of the scheme would be greatly promoted; and now the first point was to ensure the favor of the black Vekeel, for everything depended on his consent.

Joanna and Pulcheria thought him more good-humored and amiable than they had ever known him; his proposal that he and Philippus should join their household was hailed with delight even by little Mary, and the women conducted him all over the house, supporting his steps with affectionate care. All he saw there pleased him beyond measure. Such neatness and comfort could only exist where there was a woman's eye to direct and watch over everything. The rooms on the ground floor, which had been the master's, should be his, and the corresponding wing on the other side could be made ready for Philippus. The dining-room, the large ante-chamber, and the viridarium would be common ground, and the upper story was large enough for the women and any guests. He would move in as soon as he had settled some business he had in hand.

It must be something of a pleasant nature, for as the old man spoke of it his sunken lips mumbled with satisfaction, while his sparkling eyes seemed to say to Pulcheria: "And I have something good in store for you, too, dear child."

ETEXT EDITOR'S BOOKMARKS:

Thin-skinned, like all up-starts in authority

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE BRIDE OF THE NILE — VOLUME 10 ***

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