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THE BRIDE OF THE NILE

By Georg Ebers

Volume 12.

CHAPTER XXI.

While Rustem, to whom Mary had entrusted the jeweller's gold, was making his preparations for their journey with all the care of a practised guide, and while Mary was comforting her governess and Mandane, to whom she explained that Rustem's journey was to save Paula's life, a fresh trial was going forward in the Court of Justice.

This time Orion was the accused. He had scarcely begun to study the maps and lists he required for his undertaking when he was bidden to appear before his judges.

The members composing the Court were the same as yesterday. Among the witnesses were Paula and the new bishop, as well as Gamaliel, who had been sent for soon after Mary had left him.

The prosecutor accused the son of the Mukaukas of having made away, in defiance of the patriarch's injunction, with a costly emerald bequeathed to the Church by his father.

Orion had determined to conduct his own defence; he recapitulated everything that he had told the prelate in self-justification in his father's private room, and then added, that to put a speedy end to this odious affair he was now prepared to restore the stone, and he placed it at the disposal of his judges.

He handed Paula's emerald to the Kadi who presented it to the bishop. John, however, did not seem satisfied; he referred to the written testimony of the widow Susannah, who had been present when the deceased Mukaukas had designated all the jewels in the Persian hanging as included in his gift to the Church. This was in Orion's presence so he was still under suspicion of a fraud; and it was difficult to determine whether the fine gem now lying on the table before them were indeed the same to which the Church laid claim.

All this was urged with excessive vehemence and bore the stamp of a hostile purpose.

Obedience and conviction alike prompted the zealous prelate to this demeanor, for the same carrier-pigeon which had brought from the patriarch his appointment to the bishopric required him to insist on Orion's punishment, for he was a thorn in the flesh of the Jacobite church, a tainted sheep who might infect the rest of the flock. If the young man should offer an emerald it was therefore to be closely examined, to see whether it were the original stone or a substitute.

On these grounds the bishop had expressed his doubts, and though they gave rise to an indignant murmur among the judges, the Kadi so far admitted the prelate's suspicions as to explain that last evening a letter had reached him from his uncle at Djidda, Haschim the merchant, in which mention was made of the emerald. His son happened to have weighed that stone, without his knowledge, before he started for Egypt, and Othman had here a note of its exact weight. The Jew Gamaliel had been desired to attend with his balances, and could at once use them to satisfy the bishop.

The jeweller immediately proceeded to do so, and old Horapollo, who was an expert in such matters, went close up to him, and watched him narrowly.

It was in feverish anxiety, and more eagerly than any other bystander, that Paula and Orion kept their eyes fixed on the Jew's hands and lips; after weighing it once, he did so a second time. Old Horapollo himself weighed it a third time, with a keen eye though his hands trembled a little; all three experiments gave the same result: this gem was heavier by a few grains of doura than that which the merchant's son had weighed, and yet the Jew declared that there was no purer, clearer, or finer emerald in the world than this.

Orion breathed more freely, and the question arose among the judges as to whether the young Arab might have failed in precision, or an exchange had in fact been effected. This was difficult to imagine, since in that case the accused would have given himself the loss, and the Church the advantage.

The bishop, an honest man, now said that the patriarch's suspicions had certainly led him too far in this instance, and after this he spoke no more.

All through this enquiry the Vekeel had kept silence, but the defiant gaze, assured of triumph, which he fixed on Paula and Orion alternately, augured the worst.

When the prosecutor next accused the young man of complicity in the much discussed escape of the nuns Orion again asserted his innocence, pointing out that during the fatal contest between the Arabs and the champions of the sisters, he had been with the Arab governor, as Amru himself could testify. By an act of unparalleled despotism, he had been deprived of his estates and his freedom on mere false suspicion, and he put his trust in the first instance in a just sentence from his judges and, failing that, he threw himself on the protection and satisfaction of his sovereign lord the Khaliff.

As he spoke his eyes flashed flames at the Vekeel; but the negro still preserved his self-control, and this doubled the alarm of those who wished the youth well.

It was clear from all this that Obada felt sure that he had the noose well around his victim's neck, and why he thought so, soon became evident; for Orion had hardly finished his defence when he rose, and with a malicious grin, handed to the Kadi the little tablet given him yesterday by old Horapollo, describing it as a document addressed to Paula and desiring the Kadi to examine it. The heat had effaced much of what had been written on the wax, but most of the words could still be deciphered. The venerable Horapollo had already made them out, and was quite ready to read to the judges all that the accused—who by his own account, was a spotless dove—had written in his innocence and truthfulness for his fair one. He signed to the old man and helped him as he rose with difficulty, but the Kadi begged him to wait, made himself acquainted with the contents of the letter by the help of the interpreter, and when the man had, with much pains, fulfilled his task, he turned, not to Horapollo, but to Obada, and asked whence this document had come.

"From Paula's desk," replied the Vekeel. "My old friend found it there." He pointed to Horapollo, who confirmed his statement by a nod of assent.

The Kadi rose, went up to the girl, whose cheeks were pale with indignation, and asked whether she

recognized the tablets as her property; Paula, after convincing herself, replied with a flaming glance of scorn and aversion at Horapollo: "Yes, my lord. It is mine. That base old man has taken it with atrocious meanness from among my things." For an instant her voice failed her; then, turning to the judges, she exclaimed:

"If there is one among you to whom helplessness and innocence are sacred and malice and cunning odious, I beg him to go to Rufinus' wife, over whose threshold this man has crept like a ferret into a dovecote, for no other end but to tread hospitable kindness in the dust, to rifle her home and make use of whatever might serve his vile purpose—to go, I say, and warn the lonely woman against this treacherous spy and thief."

At this the old man, gasping and inarticulate, raised his withered arm; the Christian judges whispered together, but at cross-purposes, while the Jew fidgeted his round little person on the bench, drumming incessantly with his fingers on his breast, and trying to meet Orion's or Paula's eye and to make her understand that he was the man who would warn Joanna. But a thump from the Vekeel's fist, that came down on his shoulder unawares, reduced him to sitting still; and while he sat rubbing the place with subdued sounds of pain, not daring to reproach the all-powerful negro for his violence, the Kadi gave the tablets to Horapollo and bid him read the letter.

But the terrible accusation cast at him by the hated Patrician maiden, ascribing his removal to Rufinus house to a motive which, in truth, had been far from his, had so enraged and agitated him that his old lungs, at all times feeble, refused their office. This woman had done him a fresh wrong, for he had gone to live with the widow from the kindest impulse; only an accident had thrown this document in his way. And yet it would not fail to be reported to Joanna in the course of the day that he had gone to her house as a spy, and there would be an end to the pleasant life of which he had dreamed—nay, even Philippus might perhaps quarrel with him.

And all, all through this woman.

He could not utter a word but, as he sank back on the seat, a glance so full of hatred, so dark with malignant fury, fell on Paula that she shuddered, and told herself that this man was ready to die himself if only he could drag her down too.

The interpreter now began to read Orion's letter and to translate it for the Arabs; and while he blundered through it, declaring that not a letter could be plainly made out, she recovered her self-control and, before the interpreter had done his task, a gleam as of sunshine lighted up her pure features. Some great, lofty, and rapturous thought must have flashed through her brain, and it was evident that she had seized it and was feeding on it.

Orion, sitting opposite to her, noticed this; still, he did not understand what her beseeching gaze had to say to him, what it asked of him as she pressed her hand on her breast, and looked into his eyes with such urgent entreaty that it went to his very heart.

The interpreter ceased; but what he had read had had a great effect on the judges. The Kadi's benevolent face expressed extreme apprehension, and the contents of the letter were indeed such as to cause it. It ran as follows:

"After waiting for you a long time in vain, I must at last make up my mind to go; and how much I still had to say to you. A written farewell."

Here a few lines were effaced, and then came the—fatal and quite legible conclusion:

"How far otherwise I had dreamed of ending this day, which has been for the most part spent in preparations for the flight of the Sisters; and I have found a pleasure in doing all that lay in my power for those kind and innocent, unjustly persecuted nuns. We must hope for the best for them; and for ourselves we must look to-morrow for an undisturbed interview and a parting which may leave us memories on which we can live for a long time. The noble governor Amru is, among the Arabs, such another as he whom we mourn was among the Egyptians . . ." Here the letter ended; not quite three lines were wanting to conclude it.

The Kadi held the tablets for a few minutes in his hand; then looking up again at the assembly, who were waiting in great suspense, he began: "Even if the accused was not one of those who raised their hands in mutiny against our armed troops, it is nevertheless indisputable, after what has just been read, that he not only knew of the escape of the nuns, but aided them to the utmost.—When did you receive this communication, noble maiden?"

At this Paula clasped her hands tightly and replied with a slightly bent head and her eyes fixed on the ground.

"When did I receive it?—Never; for I wrote it myself. The writing is mine."

"Yours?" said the Kadi in amazement. "It is from me to Orion," replied Paula.

"From you to him? How then comes it in your desk?"

"In a very simple way," she explained, still looking down. "After writing the letter to my betrothed I threw it in with the other tablets as soon as I had no need for it; for he himself came, and there was no necessity for his reading what could be better said by word of mouth."

As she spoke a peculiar smile passed over her lips and a loud murmur ran through the room. Orion looked first at the girl and then at the Kadi in growing bewilderment; but the Negro started up, struck his fist on the table, making it shake, and roared out:

"An atrocious fabrication! Which of you can allow yourself to be taken in by a woman's guile?" Horapollo, who had recovered himself by this time, laughed hoarsely and maliciously; the judges looked at each other much puzzled; but when the Vekeel went on raging the Kadi interrupted him, and desired that Orion might speak, for he had twice tried to make himself heard. Now, with scarlet cheeks and a choking utterance, he said:

"No, Othman—no, no indeed, my lords. Do not believe her. Not she, but I—I wrote the letter that. . . ."

But Paula broke in:

"He? Do you not feel that all he wants is to save me, and so he takes my guilt on himself? It is his generosity, his love for me! Do not, do not believe him! Do not allow yourselves to be deceived by him."

"I? No, it is she, it is she," Orion again asserted; but, before he could say more, Paula declared with a flashing glance that it was a poor sort of love which sacrificed itself out of false generosity. And as, at the same time, she again pressed her hand to her bosom with pathetic entreaty, he was suddenly silent, and casting his eyes up to heaven, he sank back on the prisoners' bench, deeply affected.

Paula joyfully went on:

"He has thought better of it, and given up his crazy attempt to take my guilt on himself. You see, Othman, you all see, worthy men.—Let me atone for what I did to help the poor nuns."

"Have your way!" shrieked the old man; but the Negro cried out:

"A hellish tissue of lies, an unheard-of deception! But in spite of the shield a woman holds before you, I have my foot on your neck, treacherous wretch! Is it credible—I ask you, judges—that a finished letter should be found, after weeks had elapsed, in the hands of the writer and not those of the person to whom it was addressed?"

The Kadi shrugged his shoulders and replied with calm dignity:

"Consider, Obada, that we are condemning this damsel on the evidence of a letter which was found in possession, not of the person to whom it was addressed, but of the writer. This document gave rise to no doubts in your mind. The judge should mete out equal measure to all, Obada."

The aptness of these words, spoken in a dogmatic tone, aroused the approval of the Arabs, and the Jew could not restrain himself from exclaiming: "Capital!" but no sooner had it escaped him than he shrank as quick as lightning out of the Vekeel's reach; and Obada hardly heard him, for he did not allow himself to be interrupted by the Kadi but went on to explain in wrathful words what a disgrace it was to them, as men and judges, to have dust cast in their eyes by a woman, and allow themselves to be mollified by the arts of a pair of love-stricken fools; and how desirable it must be in the eyes of every Moslem to guard the security of life and bring the severest punishment on the instigator of a sanguinary revolt against the champions of the Khaliff's power.

His eloquent and stormy address was not without effect; still, the Christians, who ascribed every form of evil to the Melchite girl, would have been satisfied with her death and have been ready to forgive the son of the Mukaukas this crime—supposing him to have committed it. And it was after the judges had agreed that it was impossible to decide by whom the letter on the tablet had been written, and there had been a great deal of argument on both sides, that the real discussion began.

It was long before the assembly could agree, and all the while Orion sat now looking as though he had already been condemned to a cruel death, and now exchanging glances with Paula, while he

pressed his hand to his heart as though to keep it from bursting. He perfectly understood her, and her magnanimity upheld him. He had indeed persuaded himself to accept her self-sacrifice, but he was fully determined that if she must die he would follow her to the grave. "Non dolet,"—[It does not hurt]—Arria cried to her lover Paetus, as she thrust the knife into her heart that she might die before him; and the words rang in his ear; but he said to himself that Paula would very likely be pardoned, and that then he would be free and have a whole lifetime in which to thank her.

At last—at last. The Kadi announced the verdict: It was impossible to find Orion worthy of death, and equally so to give up all belief in his guilt; the court therefore declared itself inadequate to pronounce a sentence, and left it to be decided by the Khaliff or by his representative in Egypt, Amru. The court only went so far as to rule that the prisoner was to be kept in close confinement, so that he might be within reach of the hand of justice, if the supreme decision should be "guilty!"

When the Kadi said that the matter was to be referred to the Khaliff or his representative, the Vekeel cried out:

"I—I am Omar's vicar!" but a disapproving murmur from the judges, as with one voice, rejected his pretensions, and at a proposal of the Kadi it was resolved that the young man should be protected against any arbitrary attack on the part of the Vekeel by a double guard; for many grave accusations against Obada were already on their way to Medina. The negro quitted the court, mad with rage, and concocting fresh indictments against Paula with the old man.

When Paula returned to her cell old Betta thought that she must have been pardoned; for how glad, how proud, how full of spirit she entered it! The worst peril was diverted from her lover, and she and her love had saved him!

She gave herself up for lost; but whatever fate might have in store for her, life lay open before him; he would have time to prove his splendid powers, and that he would do so, as she would have him do it, she felt certain.

She had not ended telling her nurse of the judges' decision, when the warder announced the Kadi. In a minute or two he made his appearance; she expressed her thanks, and he warmly assured her that he regarded the disgrace of being perhaps a beguiled judge as a favor of Fortune; then he turned the conversation on the real object of his visit.

In the letter, he began, which he had received the evening before from his uncle Haschim, there was a great deal about her. She had quite won the old merchant's heart, and the enquiries for her father which he had set on foot....

Here she interrupted him saying: "Oh, my lord; is the wish, the prayer of my life to be granted?"

"Your father, the noble Thomas, before whom even the Moslem bows, has been. . . ." and then Othman went on to tell her that the hero of Damascus had in fact retired to Sinai and had been living there as a hermit. But she must not indulge in premature rejoicing, for the messengers had found him ill, consumed by disease arising from his wounded lungs, and almost at death's door. His days were numbered....

"And I, I am a prisoner," groaned the girl. "Held fast, helpless, robbed of all means of flying to his arms!"

He again bid her be calm, and went on to tell her: in his soft, composed manner, that two days since a Nabathæan had come to him and had asked him, as the chief administrator of justice in Egypt, whether an old foe of the Moslems, a general who had fought in the service of the emperor and the cross against the Khaliff and the crescent, and who was now sick, weary, and broken, might venture on Egyptian soil without fear of being seized by the Arab authorities; and when he, Othman, had learnt that this man was no other than Thomas, the hero of Damascus, he had promised him his life and freedom, promised them gladly, as he felt assured his sovereign the Khaliff would desire.

So this very day her father had reached Fostat, and the Kadi had received him as a guest into his house. Thomas, indeed, stood on the brink of the grave; but he was inspirited and sustained by the hope of seeing his daughter. It had been falsely reported to him that she had perished in the massacre at Abyla and he had already mourned her fate.

It was now his duty to fulfil the wish of a dying man, and he had ordered the prison servants to prepare the room adjoining Paula's cell with furniture which was on the way from his house. The door between the two would be opened for her.

"And I shall see him again, have him again to live with—to close his eyes, perhaps to die with him!"

cried Paula; and, seizing the good man's hand, she kissed it gratefully.

The Moslem's eyes filled with tears as he bid her not to thank him, but God the All-merciful; and before the sun went down the head of the doomed daughter was resting on the breast of the weary hero who was so near his end, though his unimpaired mind and tender heart rejoiced in their reunion as fully and deeply as did his beloved and only child. A new and unutterable joy came to Paula in the gloom of her prison; and that same day the warder carried a letter from her to Orion, conveying her father's greetings; and, as he read the fervent blessing, he felt as though an invisible hand had released him for ever from the curse his own father had laid upon him. A wonderful glad sense of peace came over him with power and pleasure in work, and he gave his brains and pen no rest till morning was growing grey.

CHAPTER XXII.

Horapollo made his way home to his new quarters from the court of justice with knit and gloomy brows. As he passed Susannah's garden hedge he saw a knot of people gathered together and pointing out furtively to the handsome residence beyond.

They, like a hundred other groups he had passed, hailed him with words of welcome, thanks, and encouragement and, as he bowed to them slightly, his eyes followed the direction of their terrified gaze and he started; above the great garden gates hung the black tablet; a warning that looked like a mark of disgrace, crying out to the passer-by: "Avoid this threshold! Here rages the destroying pestilence!"

The old man had a horror of everything that might remind him of death, and a cold shiver ran through him. To live so near to a focus of the disease was most alarming and dangerous! How had it invaded this, the healthiest part of the town, which the last raging epidemic had spared?

An officer of the town-council, whom he called to him, told him that two slaves, father and son, whose duty it was to take charge of the baths in the widow's house, had been first attacked, but they had been carried quietly away in the night to the new tents for the sick; to-day, however, the widow herself had fallen ill. To prevent the spread of the infection, the plot of ground was now guarded on all sides.

"Be strict, be sharp; not a rat must creep out!" cried the old man as he rode on.

He was later than he had been yesterday; supper must be ready. After a short rest he was preparing to join the family at their meal, washing and dressing with the help of his servant, when a lame slave-girl came into his room and placed a tray covered with steaming dishes on the low table by the divan.

What was the meaning of this? Before he could ask, he was informed that for the future the women wished to eat by themselves; he would be served in his own room.

At this a bright patch of red colored his cheeks; after brief reflection he cried to his servant. "My ass!" and added to the girl: "Where is your mistress?"

"In the viridarium with Gamaliel the goldsmith; but they are going to supper immediately."

"And without their guest? I understand!" muttered the old man, taking up his hat and marching past the maid out of the room. In the hall he met Gamaliel, to whom a slave-girl was handing his stick. Horapollo could guess that the Jew had come only to warn the women against him and, without vouchsafing him a glance, he went into the dining-room. There he found Pulchena and Mary kneeling in tears by the side of Joanna, who was weeping too.

He guessed for whom were these lamentations, and prompted by the wish to prove the falsity of the accusation that charged him with having entered the house as a spy, he spoke to the widow. She shuddered as he entered, and she now pointed to the door with an outstretched finger; when he nevertheless stood still and was about to make his defence, she interrupted him loudly and urgently: "No, no, my lord! This house is henceforth closed against you! You yourself have broken every tie that bound us! Do not any longer disturb our peace! Go back to the place you came from."

At this the old man made one more attempt to speak; but the widow rose, and saying: "Come, my children," she hastily withdrew with the girls into the adjoining room, and closed the door.

Horapollo was left alone on the threshold.

Old as he was, in all his life he had never suffered such an insult; but he did not lay it to the score of those who had shown him the door, but to the already long one of the Syrian girl; as he rode back to his own home on his white ass, he stopped several times to speak to the passers- by.

During the following day or two he heeded not the heat of the weather, nor his own need of rest for his body, and quiet occupation for his mind; morning, noon and night he was riding about the streets stirring up the people, and setting forth in insinuating speeches that they must perish miserably if they rejected the only means of deliverance which he had pointed out to them. He was present at every meeting of the Senate, and his inflammatory eloquence kept the town council on his side, and nullified the efforts of the bishop, while he pressed them to fix the day of the marriage of the Nile with his bride.

He knew the Egyptians and their passion for the intoxicating joys of a splendid ceremonial. This festival: the wedding of the Bride of the Nile to her mighty and unresting spouse, on whom the weal or woe of the land depended, was to be as a flowery oasis in the waste of dearth and desolation. He recalled every detail of the reminiscences of his childhood as to the processions in Honor of Isis, and the festivals dedicated to her and her triad; every record of his own experience and that of former generations; all he had read in books of the great pilgrimages and dramas of heathen Egypt—and he described it all in his speeches, painted it in glowing colors to the Senate and the mob, and counselled the authorities to reproduce it all with unparalleled splendor on the occasion of this marriage.

Every man in whose veins flowed Egyptian blood listened to him attentively, took pleasure in his projects, and was quite ready to do his utmost to enhance the glories of this ceremonial, in which every one was to take part either active or passive. Thousands were ruined, but there was yet enough and to spare for this marriage feast, and the Senate did not hesitate to raise a fresh loan.

"Destruction or Deliverance!" was the watch-word Horapollo had given the Memphites. If everything came to ruin their hoarded talents would be lost too; if, on the other hand, the sacrifice produced its result, if the Nile should bless its children with renewed prosperity, what need the town or country care for a few thousand drachmae more or less?

So the day was fixed!

Not quite two weeks after Paula's trial, on the day of Saint Serapis the miraculous, saving, auspicious ceremonial was to take place. And how glowing was the picture given of the Bride's beauty by the old man, and by the judges and officials who had seen her! How brightly old Horapollo's eyes would flash with hate as he described it! The eyes of love could not be more radiant.

All that this patrician hussy had done to aggrrieve him—she should expiate it all, and his triumph meant woe, not only to that one woman, but to the Christian faith which he hated!

Bishop John, however, had not been idle meanwhile. Immediately after his interference with the popular vote he had despatched a letter by a carrier-pigeon to the patriarch in Upper Egypt, and Benjamin's reply would no doubt give him powers for still more vigorous measures. In church, before the Senate, and even in the highways, he and his clergy did their utmost to combat the atrocious project of the authorities and the populace, but the zeal which was stirred up by old Horapollo soon broke into brighter flames than the conservatism, orthodoxy and breadth of view which the ecclesiastics did their utmost to fan. The wind blew with equal force from both quarters, but on one side it blew on smoldering fuel, and on the other on overflowing and flaming stores. Famine and despair had undermined faith, and weakened discipline; even the mightiest weapons of the Church—Cursing and blessing—were powerless. A floating beam was held out to sinking men, and they would no longer wait for the life-boat that was approaching to rescue them, with strong hands at the oars and a trusty pilot at the helm.

Horapollo went no more to the widow's home. A few hours after she had shown him the door, his slaves came and fetched away the various things he had carried there with him. His body servant at the same time brought a large sealed phial and a letter to Dame Joanna, as follows:

"It is wrong to judge a man without hearing his defence. This you have done; but I owe you no grudge. Philippus, on his return, will perhaps pick up the ends of the tie and join again what you have this day cut. I send you a portion of the remedy he left with me at parting to use against the plague in case of need. Its good effects have been tested within the last few days. May the sickness which has fallen on your neighbors, spare you and yours."

Joanna was much pleased with this letter but, when she had read it aloud, little Mary exclaimed:

"If any one should fall ill he shall not take a drop of that mixture! I tell you he only wants to poison us!"

Joanna, however, maintained that the old man was not bad hearted in spite of his unaccountable hatred of Paula; and Pulcheria declared that it must be so, if only because Philip esteemed him so highly. If only he were here, everything would have been different and have turned out well.

Mary remained with the mother and daughter till it grew dark; her chatter always led them back to Paula; and when, in the afternoon, the Nabathæan messenger came to them, and told them from their captive friend that he had brought her father home to her, the women once more began to hope, and Mary could allow herself to give free expression to her fond love before she quitted them, without exciting their suspicions.

At length she said she must go to her lessons with Eudoxia; she had a hard task before her and they must think of her and wish her good success. She threw her arms first round the widow's neck and then round Pulcheria's; and, as the tears would start to her eyes, she asked them if she were not indeed a silly childish thing—but they were to think of her all the same and never to forget her.

She met the governess in her own room; Eudoxia cut off the fine, soft curls, shedding her first tears over them; and those tears flowed faster as she placed round Mary's neck a little reliquary containing a lock from the sheep-skin of St. John the Baptist, which had belonged to her own mother. It was very dear and sacred to her, and she had never before parted from it, but now it was to protect the child and bring her happiness—great happiness.

Had it brought her such happiness?—Not much, in truth; and yet she believed in the saving and beneficent influence of the relic.

At last Mary stood before her with short hair and in a boy's dress; and what a sweet and lovely little fellow it was; Eudoxia could not weary of looking at him. But Mary was too pretty, too frail for a boy; and Eudoxia advised her to pull her broad travelling hat low over her eyes as soon as she came in sight of men, or else to darken her color.

Gamaliel, who had in fact come to warn Dame Joanna against Horapollo, had kept them informed of the progress of this day's sitting, and Paula's conduct to save her lover had increased Mary's admiration for her. When she should confront Amru she could answer him on every head, so she felt equipped at all points as she stole through the garden with Eudoxia, and down to the quay.

When she had passed the gateway she once more kissed her hand to the house she loved and its inmates; then, pointing with a sigh to the neighboring garden, she said:

"Poor Katharina! she is a prisoner now.—Do you know, Eudoxia, I am still very fond of her, and when I think that she may take the plague, and die but no!—Tell Mother Joanna and Pulcheria to be kind to her. To-morrow, after breakfast, give them my letter; and this evening, if they get anxious, you can only quiet them by saying you know all and that it is of no use to fret about me. You will set it all right and not allow them to grieve."

As they passed a Jacobite chapel that stood open, she begged Eudoxia to wait for her and fell on her knees before the crucifix. In a few minutes she came out again, bright and invigorated and, as they passed the last houses in the town, she exclaimed:

"Is it not wicked, Eudoxia? I am leaving those I love dearly, very dearly, and yet I feel as glad as a bird escaping from its cage. Good Heaven! Only to think of the ride by night through the desert and over the hills, a swift beast under me, and over my head no ceiling but the blue sky and countless stars! Onward and still onward to a glorious end, left entirely to myself and entrusted with an important task like a grownup person! Is it not splendid? And by God's help—and if I find the governor and succeed in touching his heart.... Now, confess, Eudoxia, can there be a happier girl in the whole wide world?"

They found the Masdakite at Nesptah's inn with some capital dromedaries and the necessary drivers and attendants. The Greek governess gave her pupil much good advice, and added her "maternal" blessing with her whole heart. Rustem lifted the child on to the dromedary, carefully settling her in the saddle, and the little caravan set out. Mary waved repeated adieux to her old governess and newly-found friend, and Eudoxia was still gazing after her long after she had vanished in the darkness.

Then she made her way home, at first weeping silently with bowed head, but afterwards tearless, upright, and with a confident step. She was in unusually good spirits, her heart beat higher than it had done for years; she felt uplifted by the sense of relief from a burthensome duty, and of freedom to act independently on the dictates of her own intelligence. She would assert herself, she would show the others that she had acted rightly; and when at supper-time Mary was missing, and had not returned even at bed-time, there was much to do to soothe and comfort them, and much misconstruction to endure; but she took it all patiently, and it was a consolation to her to bear such annoyance for her little favorite.

Next morning, when she had delivered Mary's letter to Dame Joanna, her love and endurance were put to still severer proof; indeed, the meek-tempered widow allowed herself to be carried away to such an outbreak as hitherto would undoubtedly have led Eudoxia to request her dismissal, with sharp recrimination; but she took it all calmly.

It was not till noon-day—when the bishop made his appearance to carry the child off to the convent, and was highly wrathful at Mary's disappearance, threatening the widow, and declaring that he would search the whole country through for the little girl and find her at last, that Eudoxia felt that the moment of her triumph had come. She quietly allowed the bishop to depart, and then only did she send her last and best shaft at Joanna by informing her that she had in fact encouraged the child in her exploit on purpose to save her from the cloister. Her newly-found motherly feeling made her eloquent, and with a result that she had almost ceased to hope for: the warm-hearted little woman, who had hurt her with such cruel words, threw her arms round Eudoxia's tall, meagre figure, put up her face to kiss her, called her a brave, clever girl, and begged her forgiveness for all she had said and done the day before.

So, when the Greek went to bed, she felt as if her life had turned backwards and she had grown more like the happy young creature she had once been with her sisters in her parents' house.

CHAPTER XXIII.

Paula now understood what hung over her. It is Bishop John who had told her, as gently as he could, and with every assurance that he still clung to the hope that he could stop the hideous heathen abomination; but even without this she would certainly have known what was impending, for large crowds of people gathered every day under the prisonwalls, and loud cries reached her, demanding to see the "Bride of the Nile."

Now and again shouts of "Hail!" came up to her; but when the demented creatures had shrieked themselves hoarse, and in vain, they would abuse her vilely. The cry for the "Bride" never ceased from morning till night, and the head warder of the prison was glad that the bishop had relieved him of the task of explaining to Paula the meaning of the fateful word, whose significance she had repeatedly asked him.

At first this fresh and terrible peril had startled and shaken her; but she did her utmost to cling to the hope held out by the bishop so as to appear calm, and as far as possible cheerful, in her sick father's presence. And in this she succeeded so long as it was day; but at night she was a prey to agonizing terrors. Then, in fancy she saw herself surrounded by a raging mob, dragged to the river and cast into a watery grave before a thousand eyes. Then, prayer was of no avail, nor any resolve or effort; not the tender messages that constantly reached her from Orion, nor the songs he would sing for her in the brief moments of leisure he allowed himself; not the bishop's words of comfort, nor the visits of those she loved. The warder would admit her friends as often as he was able; and among those who found their way to her cell were the Senator Justinus and his wife.

By great good fortune Martina had quitted Susannah's house as soon as the two slaves had fallen ill and she had heard that the physician pronounced them to be sickening of the plague. She had returned to her rooms in the inn kept by Sostratus, but her nephew Narses had remained with Katharina and her mother. He was indeed intending to follow her with Heliodora; but, by the time they were ready to set out, Susannah, too, had fallen a victim to the pestilence and the authorities had forbidden all egress from her house.

Heliodora might have succeeded in leaving in time, alone; but she would not abandon her unfortunate brother-in-law; for he never felt easy but in her presence, would allow no one else to wait on him, and would take neither food nor drink unless they were offered him by her. Besides this, the cavalry officer, once so stalwart, had in his weakness become pathetically like her lost husband, and she knew that Narses had been the first to love her, and that it was only for his brother's sake that he had concealed his passion. Her motherly instincts found an outlet in the care of the half-crushed, but not hopelessly lost man; and the desire to drag him back to life kept her busy day and night, and made her regard everything else as trivial and of secondary importance. Her life had once more found a purpose; her efforts were for an attainable end, and she devoted herself to him body and soul.

Her uncle had told her that Orion was bound to Paula by a supreme passion.—This had been a painful

blow, but the Syrian girl had impressed her; she looked up to her, and it soothed her wounded self-esteem to reflect that she had lost her lover to no inferior woman. Though her longing for him still surged up in many a silent hour, she felt it an injustice, a stint of love to her invalid charge.

So far as Katharina was concerned, next to her mother, Heliodora was the object of her deepest anxiety. The least word of complaint from either terrified her; and if Susannah sank on the divan exhausted by the heat, or Heliodora had a headache after watching through the night by the sick man, the girl would turn pale, her heart would beat painfully, she would paint them in fancy stricken by the plague, with burning brows and the horrible, fatal spots on their foreheads and cheeks; and whenever these alarms pressed on the young criminal she felt the ominous weight on the top of her head where the dead bishop's hand had rested.

The senator's wife had so completely changed in her demeanor to the water-wagtail, since Paula's imprisonment, that to Katharina she was as a living reproach, so she had no regret at seeing the worthy pair depart. But scarcely had they left when misfortune took their place as an unbidden guest.

The slave whose duty it was to heat the baths had reserved a portion of the infected garments that had been given to him to burn; his son had helped him, and Katharina's nurse, the mother of her foster-brother Anubis, had come into direct contact with her immediately after her return from the soothsayer's and from the bishop's. All three had caught the disease. They had all three been removed to the hospital tents—the slave and the nurse as corpses.

But had the fearful infection been taken away with them? If not, it would be the turn next of those whom she herself had pushed into the arms of the fell monster: First Heliodora, and then her mother! And she, rightfully, ought to have fallen before them; and if the pestilence should seize her and death should drag her down into the grave it would be showing her mercy. She was still so young, and yet she hated life. It had nothing in store for her but humiliation and disappointment, arrows which, sent from the prison, pierced her to the heart, and a torturing fear which never gave her any peace, day or night.

When the physician came to transport the sick to the hospital in the desert, he mentioned incidentally that the judges had condemned Paula to death, and that the populace and senate, in spite of the new bishop's prohibition, had determined to cast her into the river in accordance with an ancient custom. Orion's fate was not to be decided till the following day; but it would hardly be to his advantage in the eyes of his Jacobite judges, that his betrothed was this Syrian Melchite.

At this Katharina was forced to support herself against her mother's arm-chair to save herself from sinking on her knees; with tingling cheeks she questioned the leech till he lost all patience and turned away much annoyed at such excessive feminine curiosity.

Yes! "The other" was his betrothed before all the world; but only to die! The blood rushed through her veins in a hot tide at the thought; she could have laughed aloud and fallen on the neck of every one she met. What she felt was hideous; malignant spite possessed her; but it gave her rapture—delicious rapture—a flower of hell, but with splendid petals and intoxicating perfume. But its splendor dazzled her and its fragrance presently sickened her. Sheer horror of herself came over her, and yet she could have shouted with joy each time that the thought flashed through her brain: "The other must die!"

Her mother feared that her daughter, too, was about to fall ill, her eyes glowed so strangely and she was so restless and nervously excitable.

Since Heliodora had taken the overwhelming news of Orion's betrothal to Paula with astonishing though sorrowful calmness, to the hot-blooded girl she was nothing, nobody, utterly unworthy of her notice.

To spite her she had committed a crime as like murder as one snake is like another, and imperilled her own mother's life! It was enough to drive her to despair, to make her scourge herself with rods!

When Susannah kissed her at parting for the night she complained of a slight sore throat and of her lips, which she fancied must be swollen. Katharina detained her, questioned her with a trembling voice, put the lamp close to her, and held her breath while she examined her face, her neck, and her arms for the dreadful spots. But none were to be seen and her mother laughed at her terrors, called her a dutiful, anxious child, and warned her not to be too full of fears, as they were supposed to invite the disease.

All night the girl could not sleep. Her malicious triumph was past; nothing but painful thoughts and grewsome images haunted her while awake, and pursued her more persistently when she dozed. By dawn of day her alarm for her mother was so great that she sprang out of bed and went to her room; Susannah was sleeping so soundly that she did not even hear her. Much relieved Katharina crept back to bed; but in the morning the worst had happened: Susannah could no longer leave her bed; she was

feverish, and on her lips, the very lips which had kissed her child's infected hair, there were indeed, between her nose and mouth, the first terrible, unmistakable spots.

The leech came and confirmed the fact.—The house was closed and barred.

The physician and Susannah, who was still in full possession of her senses, wished and insisted that Katharina should withdraw to the gardener's house, but she refused with defiant obstinacy, saying she would rather die with her mother than leave her.

Quite beside herself she threw herself on the sick woman, and kissed the spots on her mouth to divert the poison into her own blood; but the physician angrily pulled her away, and the sufferer reproved her with tears in her eyes which spoke her fervent affection.

She was now allowed to nurse her mother. Two nuns came to her assistance, and said, not only to the rich widow but behind her back, that they had never seen so devoted and loving a daughter. Even Bishop John, who did not shrink from entering the houses of the sick to give them spiritual consolation, praised Katharina's conduct; and he, who had hitherto regarded the water-wagtail as no more than a bright, restless child, treated her with respect, talked to her as to a grown-up person, and answered her questions—which for the most part referred to Paula—gravely and fully.

The prelate, who was full of admiration for Thomas' daughter, told Katharina how, to save her lover, she had taken a crime upon herself which deprived her of every claim to mercy. The Syrian girl was only a Melchite, but to take another's guilt, out of love, was treading indeed in the footsteps of Christ, if ever anything was. At this Katharina shrugged her shoulders, as though to say: "Do you think so much of that? Could not I gladly have done the same?"

The priest saw this and admonished her kindly to be on her guard against spiritual pride, though she had indeed earned the right to believe herself capable of the sternest devotion, and did not cease to set an example of filial and Christian love.

He departed; and Katharina, to whom every word in praise of her behavior to her mother, whom her sin had brought to her death-bed, was a torturing mockery, felt that she had deceived one more worthy soul. She did not, to be sure, deserve to be charged with spiritual pride; for in this silent chamber, where death stood on the threshold, she thought over all the horrible things she had done, and told herself repeatedly that she was the chief and most vile of sinners.

Many times she felt impelled to confide in another soul, to invite a pitying eye to behold and share her inward suffering.

To the bishop above all, the most venerable priest she knew, she would most readily have confessed everything and have submitted to any penance, however severe, at his hands, but shame held her back; and even more did another more urgent consideration. The prelate, she knew, would demand of her that she should forsake her old life, root out from her soul the old feelings and desires, and begin a new existence; but for this the time had not yet come: her love was still an indispensable condition of life, and her hatred was even more dear to her. When Paula's terrible doom should indeed have overtaken her, and Katharina, her heart full of those old feelings, had gloated over it; when she should have been able to prove to Orion that her love was no less great and strong and self-sacrificing than that of Thomas' daughter; when she should have compelled him—as she would and must—to acknowledge that he had cruelly misprized her and sinned against her; then, and not till then, would she make peace with herself, with the Church, and with her Saviour. Nay, if need be, she would take the veil and mourn away the rest of her young life as a penitent, in a convent or a solitary rock-cell. But now—when Paula, his betrothed, had done this great thing for him—to perish now, with her love unseen, unknown, uncared for, perhaps forgotten by him, to retire into herself and vanish from his ken—that was too much for human nature! Sooner would she be lost forever; body and soul in everlasting perdition, a prey to Satan and hell—in which she believed as firmly as in her own existence.

So she went on nursing her mother, saw the red spots spread over the sick woman's whole body—watched the fever that increased from day to day, from hour to hour; listened with a mixture of horror and gladness—at which she herself shuddered, though she fed her heart on it—to the reports of the preparations for the sacrifice of the Bride of the Nile, and to all the bishop could tell her of Paula, and her dying father, and Orion. She trembled for little Mary, who had disappeared from the neighboring garden, till she heard that the child had fled to escape the cloister; each day she learnt that Heliodora, who had moved to the gardener's house with her invalid, had as yet escaped the pestilence; while in the prayers, which even now she never failed to offer up morning and evening, she implored the Almighty and her patron saints to rescue the young widow, to save her from causing the death of her own mother, and to forgive her for having indirectly caused that of worthy old Rufinus, who had always been so good to her, and of so many innocent creatures by her treachery.

Thus the terrible days and nights of anguish passed by; and the captives whom the girl's sins had brought to prison were happier than she, in spite of the doom that threatened them.

The fate of his betrothed tortured Orion more than a hundred aching wounds. Paula's terrible end was fast approaching, and his brain burned at the mere thought. Now, as he was told by the warder, by the bishop, and by Justinus, the day after to-morrow was fixed for the bridal of his betrothed. In two days the bride, decked by base and mocking hands for an atrocious and accursed farce, would be wreathed and wedded, not to him, the bridegroom whom she loved, but to the Nile—the insensible, death-dealing element. He rushed up and down his cell like a madman, and tore his lute-strings when he tried to soothe his soul with music; but then a calm, well-intentioned voice would come from the adjoining room, exhorting him not to lose hope, to trust in God, not to forget his duty and the task before him. And Orion would control himself resolutely, pull himself together, and throw himself into his work again.

Day and night were alike to him. The senator had provided him with a lamp and oil. When he was wearied out, he allowed himself no longer sleep on his hard couch than human nature imperatively demanded; and as soon as he had shaken it off he again became absorbed in maps and lists, plied his pen, thought, sketched, calculated, and reflected. Then, if a doubt arose in his mind or he could not trust his own memory and judgment, he knocked at the wall, and his shrewd and experienced friend was at all times ready to help him to the best of his knowledge and opinion. The senator went to Arsinoe for him, to gain information as to the seaboard from the archives preserved there; and so the work went forward, approaching its end, strengthening and raising his sinking spirit, bringing him the pleasures of success, and enabling him not unfrequently to forget for hours that which otherwise might have brought the bravest to despair.

The warder, the senator or his worthy wife, Dame Joanna or Eudoxia—who twice had the pleasure of accompanying her—each time they visited him had some message or note to carry to Paula, telling her how far his work had progressed; and to her it was a consolation and heartfelt joy to be able to follow him in his labors. And many a token of his love, esteem, and admiration gave her courage, when even her brave heart began to quail.

Ah! It was not alone her terror of a horrible death that tortured her soul. Her father, whom she considered it her greatest joy in life to have found again, was fading beyond all hope under her loving hands. His poor wounded lungs refused its service. It was with great difficulty that he could swallow a few drops of wine and mouthfuls of food; and in these last days his clear mind had lain as it were under a shroud—perhaps it was happier so, as she told herself and as her friends said to comfort her.

He, too, had heard the cries of: "Hail to the Bride of the Nile!"

"Bring out the Bride!"

"Away with the Bride of the Nile!" Though he had no suspicion of their meaning, they had haunted his thoughts incessantly during the last few days; and the terrible, strange words had seemed to charm his fancy, for to Paula's distress he would murmur them to himself tenderly or thoughtfully as the case might be.

Many times the idea occurred to her that she might put an end to her life before the worst should befall, before she became a spectacle for a whole nation, to be jeered at and made a delightful and exciting show to rouse their cruelty or their compassion. But dared she do it? Dared she defy the Most High, the Lord in whom she put her trust, into whose hand she commended herself in a thousand dumb but fervent prayers.

No. To the very last she would trust and hope. And wonderful to say! Each time she had reached the very limits of her powers of endurance, feeling she could certainly bear no more and must succumb, something came to her to revive her faith or her courage: a message would be brought her from Orion, or Dame Joanna or Pulcheria came to see her; the bishop sought an interview, or her father's mind rallied and he could speak to her in beautiful and stimulating words. Often the warder would announce the senator and his wife, and their vigorous and healthy minds always hit on the very thing she needed. Martina, particularly, with her subtle motherly instinct, always understood whatever was agitating her; and once she showed her a letter from Heliodora, in which she spoke of the calmness she had won through nursing their dear invalid, and said how thankful she was to see the reward of her care and toil. Narses was already quite another man, and she could know no higher task than that of reconciling the hapless man to life, nay, of making it dear to him again. She no longer thought of Orion but as she might of a beautiful song she once had heard in a delightful hour.

Thus time passed, even for the imprisoned maiden, till only two nights remained before St. Serapis' day when the fearful marriage was to be solemnized.

It was evening when the bishop came to visit Paula. He regarded it as his duty to tell her that the execution of her sentence was fixed for the day after to-morrow. He should hope and believe till the last, but his own power over the misguided mob was gone from him. In any case, and if the worst should befall, he would be at her side to protect her by the dignity of his office. He had come now, so as to give her time to prepare her self in every respect. The care of her noble father till his last hour on earth he would take upon himself as a dear and sacred duty.

Though she had believed herself surely prepared long since for the worst, this news fell on her like a thunderbolt. What lay before her seemed so monstrous, so unexampled, that it was impossible that she ever could look forward to it firmly and calmly.

For a long time she could not help clinging desperately to her faithful Betta, and it was only by degrees that she so far recovered herself as to be able to speak to the bishop, and thank him. He, however, could only lament his inability to earn her fullest gratitude, for the patriarch's reply to his complaint of those who promised rescue to the people by the instrumentality of a heathen abomination—a document on which he had founded his highest hopes for her—had had a different result from that which he had expected. The patriarch, to be sure, condemned the abominable sacrifice, but he did it in a way which lacked the force necessary to terrify and discourage the misled mob. However, he would try what effect it might have on the people, and a number of scribes were at work to make copies of it in the course of the night. These would be sent to the Senators next morning, posted up in the market-place and public buildings, and distributed to the people; but he feared all this would have no effect.

"Then help me to prepare for death," said Paula gloomily. "You are not a priest of my confession, but no church has a more worthy minister. If you can absolve me in the name of your Redeemer, mine will pardon me. We look at Him, it is true, with different eyes, but He is the Saviour of us both, nevertheless." A contradictory reply struggled for utterance in the strict Jacobite's mind, but at such a moment he felt he must repress it; he only answered:

"Speak, daughter, I am listening."

And she poured forth all her soul, as though he had been a priest of her own creed, and his eyes grew moist as he heard this confession of a pure and loving heart, yearning for all that was highest and best. He promised her the mercy of the Redeemer, and when he had ended with "Amen," and blessed her, he looked down at the ground for some minutes and presently said, "Follow me, Child."

"Whither?" she asked in surprise; for she thought that her last hour had already come, and that he was about to lead her away to the place of execution, or to her watery, ever-flowing tomb; but he smiled as he replied: "No, child. To-day I have only the pleasing duty of blessing your betrothal before God; if only you will promise not to estrange your husband from the faith of his fathers—for what will not a man sacrifice to win the love of a woman.—You promise? Then I will take you to your Orion."

He rapped on the door of the cell, and when the warder had opened it he whispered his orders; Paula followed him silently and with blushing cheeks, and in a few minutes she was clasped to her lover's breast while, for the first time—and perhaps the last—their lips met in a kiss.

The prelate gave them a few minutes together; when he had blessed them both and solemnized their betrothal, he led her back to her cell. However, she had hardly time to thank him out of the fulness of her overflowing heart, when a town-watchman came to fetch him to see Susannah; her last hour was at hand, if not already past. John at once went with the messenger, and Paula drew a deep breath as she saw him depart. Then she threw herself on to her nurse's shoulders, crying:

"Now, come what may! Nothing can divide us; not even death!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

The bishop was too late. He found the widow Susannah a corpse; standing at the head of the bed was little Katharina, as pale as death, speechless, tearless, utterly annihilated. He kindly tried to cheer her, and to speak words of comfort; but she pushed him away, tore herself from him, and before he could stop her, she had fled out of the room.

Poor child! He had seen many a loving daughter mourning for her mother, but never such grief as this. Here, thought he, were two human souls all in all to each other, and hence this overwhelming

sorrow.

Katharina had escaped to her own room, had thrown herself on the couch —cowering so close that no one entering the room would have taken the undistinguishable heap for a human being, a grown up, passionately suffering girl.

It was very hot, and yet a cold shiver ran through her slender frame. Was she now attacked by the pestilence? No; it would be too merciful of Fate to take such pity on her woes.

The mother was dead, dragged to the grave by her own daughter. The disease had first shown itself on her lips; and how many times had the physician expressed his surprise at the plague having broken out in this healthy quarter of the town, and in a house kept so scrupulously clean. She knew at whose bidding the avenging angel had entered there, and whose criminal guile had trifled with him. The words "murdered your mother" haunted her, and she remembered the law of the ancients which refused to prescribe a punishment for the killing of parents, because they considered such a monstrous deed impossible.

A scornful smile curled her lip. Laws! Principles! Was there one that she had not defied? She had contemned God, meddled with magic, borne false witness, committed murder—and as to the one law with promise, which, if Philippus was right, was exactly the same in the code of her forefathers as on the tables of Moses, how had she kept that? Her own mother was no more, and by her act!

All through this frightful retrospect she had never ceased to shiver and, as this was becoming unendurable, she took to walking up and down and seeking excuses for her sinful doings: It was not her mother, but Heliodora whom she had wished to kill; why had malicious Fate....?

Here she was interrupted, for the young widow, who had heard the sad news, sought her out to comfort her and offer her services. She spoke to the girl with real affection; but her sweet, low tones reminded Katharina of that evening after the old bishop's death; and when Heliodora put out her arm to draw her to her, she shrank from her, begging her in a dry, hoarse voice, not to touch her for her clothes were infected. She wanted no comfort; all she asked was to be left alone— quite alone—nothing more. The words were hard and unkind, and as the door closed on the young woman Katharina's eyes glared after her.

Why had this doom passed over Heliodora's head and demanded the sacrifice of one whose loss she could never cease to mourn?

This brought her mother vividly to her mind. She flew back to her death-bed and fell on her knees—but even there she could not bear to stay long, so she wandered into the garden and visited every spot where she and her mother had been together. But there were such strange crackings in the shrubs, and the trees and bushes cast such uncanny shadows that she hailed daybreak as a deliverance.

She was on her way back to the house when her foster-brother Anubis came limping to meet her. Poor fellow! She had made a cripple of him, too, and his mother had died through her fault.

The lad spoke to her, giving expression to his sympathy, and she accepted it; but she said such strange things, and answered him so utterly at random, that he began to fear that grief had turned her brain. She went on to ask him point-blank how much money she now had, and as he happened to know approximately, he could tell her; she clasped her hands, for how could any one human being who was not a king possess such enormous wealth! Finally she enquired whether he knew how a will should be drawn up, and that, too, he answered affirmatively.

She made him describe it all, and then he added that the signature must be made valid by those of two witnesses; but she, he added, was too young to be thinking of making her will.

"Why?" said she. "Is Paula much older than I am?"

"And the day after to-morrow," the boy went on, "she is to be cast into the Nile. All the people call her the Bride of the Nile."

At this that hideous, malignant smile again curled her lips, but she hastily suppressed it and walked straight on into the house. At the door he timidly asked her whether he might once more look on his mistress; but she was obliged to forbid it for fear of infection. However, he proudly replied: "What you do not fear, has no terrors for me," and he followed her to the side of the bed where the corpse now lay washed and in fine array; and when he saw Katharina kiss the dead woman's hand he, too, as soon as she looked away, pressed his lips on the place hers had touched. Then he sat down by the bed and remained there till she sent him away.

Before noon the bishop arrived to perform the last rites. He found the body surrounded by beautiful flowers. Katharina had been out in the garden again and had cut all the rarest and finest; and though she had allowed the gardener to carry the basket for her, she would not have him help her in gathering them. The feeling that she was doing something for her mother had been a comfort to her; still, by day everything about her seemed even more intolerable than by night. Everything looked so large, so coarse, so insistent, so menacing, and reminded her at every step of some injustice or some deed of which she was ashamed. Every eye, she fancied, must see through her; and now and then it seemed as though the pillars of the great banqueting-hall, where her mother still lay, were tottering, and the ceiling about to fall in and crush her.

She answered the bishop's questions absently and often quite at random, and the old man supposed that she was stunned by her great sorrow; so to give her thoughts a new direction he began telling her about Paula, and believing that Katharina was fond of her, he confided to her that he had taken Paula, the day before, to Orion's cell, and consecrated their betrothal.

At this her face was convulsed in a manner that alarmed the bishop; a fearful tumult raged in her soul, her bosom rose and fell spasmodically, and all she could utter was the question: "But they will sacrifice her all the same?"

The bishop thought he understood. She was horror stricken by the idea of the sudden, cruel end that hung over the young bride, and he replied sadly; "I shall not be able to restrain the wretches; still, no means shall remain untried. The patriarch's rescript, condemning this mad crime, shall be made public to-day, and I will read and expound it at the Curia, and try to give it keener emphasis.—Would you like to read it?"

As she eagerly assented, the prelate signed to the acolyte who had waited on him with the holy vessels, and he produced from a packet a written sheet which he handed to Katharina. As soon as she was alone she read the patriarch's epistle; at first superficially, then more carefully, and at last in deep attention and growing interest, stirred by it to strange thoughts, till at length her eyes flashed and her breath came fast, as though this paper referred to herself, and could seal her fate for life.

When the bearers came in to fetch away the body she was still sitting there, gazing as if spell-bound at the papyrus; but she sprang up, shook herself, and then bid farewell to the cold rigid form of the mother on whose warm heart she had so often rested, and to whom she had been the dearest thing on earth—and even then the solace of tears was denied her.

She no longer suffered the deep remorse that had tormented her; for she felt now that her intercourse with her last mother had not been put an end to by death; that after a short parting they would meet again—soon perhaps, perhaps even to-morrow—meet for a fulness of speech, an outpouring of the heart, a revelation of all the past more open and unreserved than could ever be between mortal beings, even between mother and daughter. And when she who was sleeping there, blind, deaf, and senseless, should awake again, up there, with eyes clearer than those of men below, and the ears and senses of a spiritual being to see and hear and judge all she had known and done, all she had felt and made others feel—then, she told herself, her mother might perhaps blame her and punish her more than she had ever done on earth, but she would also clasp her more closely to her heart and comfort her more earnestly.

She whispered gently in her ear as if she were still alive: "Wait awhile, only wait: I shall come soon and tell you everything!"

And then she kissed her so passionately and recklessly that the nuns were shocked and dragged her away, ordering the bearers to close the coffin. They obeyed, and when the wooden lid fell over the sleeping form, shutting it in with a slam, and hiding it from the girl's sight, the barrier gave way which had hitherto restrained her tears and she began to weep bitterly; now, too, the feeling that she had indeed lost her mother took complete possession of her—the sense of being an orphan and alone, quite alone in the wide world.

She saw and heard no more of what took place round the beloved dead; for when she took her hands from her face streaming with tears, the house of the rich widow no longer sheltered its mistress; her remains had been borne away to the nearest mortuary. The law forbade its being any longer kept within doors, but did not allow of its being buried till night fell. The child might not follow her own mother to the cemetery.

With a drooping head Katharina withdrew to her room and there stood looking out into the garden. It all was hers now; she was mistress of it all and of much besides, as free and unfettered to command as hitherto she had been over the birds, her little dog, or the jewels that lay on her toilet-table. She could make hundreds happy with a word, a wave of the hand—but not herself. She had never felt so grown-

up, independent, womanly, nay powerful, and at the same time so unutterably wretched and helpless as she felt in this hour.

What did she care for all these vanities? They could not suffice to check one sigh of disappointed yearning.

She had parted from her mother with a promise; the fervent longing that filled her soul was never still; and now the patriarch's letter had given her a hint as to how she might fulfil the one and silence the other. She hastily took the document up again, and read it through once more.

Its instructions were precise to stop the proceedings of the misguided Memphites with stern promptitude. It explained that the death of the Christ Jesus, who shed His blood to redeem the world, had satisfied the need for a human victim. Throughout the wide realms which the Cross overshadowed with blessing human sacrifice must therefore be accounted a useless and accursed abomination. It went on to point out how the heathen had devised their gods in the image of weak, sinful, earthly beings, and chosen victims in accordance with this idea. "But our God," it said, "is as high above men as the Spirit is above the flesh, and the sacrifice He demands is not of the flesh, but of the spirit. Will He not turn away in wrath and sorrow from the blinded Christians of Memphis who, in their straits, feel and are about to act like the cruel and foolish heathen? They take for their victim a heretic and a stranger, deeming that that will diminish the abomination in the eyes of the Lord; but it moves Him to loathing all the same, for no human blood may stain the pure and sacred altars of our mild faith, which gives life and not death.

"Ask your blind and misguided flock, my brother: Can the Father of Love feel joy at the sight of one of His children, even an erring one, suffocated in the waters to the honor of the Most High, while struggling, and cursing her executioners?

"If, indeed, there were a pure maiden, possessed with the blessed intoxication of the love of God, who was ready to follow the example of Him who redeemed man by His death, to fling herself into the waters while she cried to Heaven with her dying breath: 'Take me and my innocence as an offering, O Lord! Release my people from their extremity!'—that would be a victim indeed; and perchance, the Lord might say: 'I will accept it; but the will alone is enough. No child of mine may cast away the life that I have lent her as the most sacred and precious of gifts.'"

The letter ended with pious exhortations to the community.

Then a maiden who should voluntarily sacrifice herself in the river to save the people in their need would be a victim pleasing in the sight of the Lord—so said the Man of God, through whose mouth the Most High spoke. And this opinion, this hint, was to Katharina like a distaff from which she spun a lengthening thread to warp to the loom and weave from it a tangible tissue.

She would be the maiden whom the patriarch had imagined—the real, true Bride of the Nile, inspired to cast off her young life to save her people in their need. In this there was expiation such as Heaven might accept; this would release her from the burthen of life that weighed upon her, and would reunite her to her mother; in this way she could show her lover and the bishop and all the world the immensity of her self-sacrifice, which was in nothing behind that of "the other"—the much-vaunted daughter of Thomas! She would do the great deed before Paula's eyes, in sight of all the people. But Orion must know whose image she bore in her heart and for whose sake she made that leap from blooming life into a watery grave.

Oh! it was wonderful, splendid! Would she not thus compel him inevitably to remember her whenever he should think of Paula? Yes, she would force him to allow her image to dwell in his soul, inseparable from that "other;" and would not such an unparalleled act add such height to her figure, that it would be equal to that of her Syrian rival in the estimation of all men—even in his?

She now began to long for the supreme moment. Her vain little heart laughed in anticipation of the delight of being seen, praised and admired by all. Tomorrow she, her little self, would tower above all the world; and the more she felt the oppressive heat of the scorching day, the more delicious it seemed to look forward to finding rest from the torments of life in the cool element.

She saw no difficulties in the way of her achievement; she was mistress now, and her slaves and servants must obey her orders. At the same time she remembered, too, to protect her large possessions from falling into the hands of relations for whom she did not care; with a firm hand she drew up a will in which she bequeathed part of her fortune to her uncle Chrysippus, small portions to her foster-brother Anubis, and to Rufinus' widow, to whom she owed reparation for great wrong; then the larger half, and she owned many millions, she bequeathed to her dear friend Orion, whom she freely forgave, and who, she hoped, would see that even in the little "water-wagtail" there had been room for some

greatness. She begged him also to take her house, since she had not been altogether guiltless of the destruction of the home of his fathers.

The condition she attached to this bequest showed the same keen, alert spirit that had guided her through life.

She knew that the patriarch's indignation might be fatal to the young man, so to serve as a mediator, and at the same time to ensure for herself the prayers of the Church, which she desired, she enjoined Orion to bestow the greater part of his inheritance on the patriarch for the Church and for benevolent purposes. But not at once, not for ten years, and in instalments of which Orion himself was to determine the proportion. In the event of his dying within the next three years all his claims were to be transferred to her uncle Chrysippus. She added a request to the Church, to which she belonged with her whole heart, that every year on her saint's day and her mother's they should be prayed for in every church in the land. A chapel was to be erected on the scene of her self-immolation, and if the patriarch thought her worthy of the honor, it was to bear the name of the Chapel of Susannah and Katharina.

She gave all her slaves their freedom and devised legacies to all the officials of her household.

As she sat for long hours of serious meditation, drawing up this last will, she smiled frequently with satisfaction. Then she copied it out fair, and finally called the physician and all the free servants in the house to witness her signature.

Though no one had suspected the "water-wagtail" of such forethought, it was no matter of surprise that the young heiress, shut up in the plague-stricken house, should dispose of her estates, and before night-fall the physician brought Alexander, the chief of the Senate, to the garden gate by her desire, and there they spoke to each other without opening it. He was an old friend of her father's, and since the death of the Mukaukas, had been her guardian; he now agreed to stand as her Kyrios, and as such he ratified her will and the signature, though she would not allow him to read the document.

Finally she went to the slaves quarters, from whence a few more sufferers had been removed to the Necropolis, and desired her boatman to get the holiday barge in readiness early in the morning, as she purposed seeing the ceremonial from the river. She gave particular orders to the gardener as to how it was to be decorated, and what flowers he was to cut for her personal adornment.

She went to bed far less excited than she had been the night before, and before she had ended her evening prayer, slumber overtook her weary brain.

When she awoke at sunrise, the large and splendid boat, which her father had had built at great cost in Alexandria, was manned and ready to put out. No one interfered to prevent her embarking with Anubis and a few female servants, for all the guards who had surrounded the house till yesterday had been withdrawn to do duty at the great ceremonial of the marriage and sacrifice, since a popular tumult was not unlikely to arise.

CHAPTER XXV.

A great number of persons had collected during the night on the quay near Nesptah's inn. The crowd was increasing every minute, and in spite of the intense heat, not a Memphite could bear to stop within doors, Men, women and children were flocking to the scene of the festival; they came in thousands from the neighboring towns, hamlets and villages, to witness the unprecedented sacrifice which was to put an end to the misery of the land. Who had ever heard of such a marriage? What a privilege, what a happiness, to be so fortunate as to see it!

The senate had not been idle and had done all in their power to surround it with magnificence and to enable as many as possible to enjoy the pageant, which had been planned with a lavish hand and liberal munificence.

Round the cove by Nesptah's inn a semi-circular wooden stand had been constructed, on which thousands found seats or standing-room. Stalls furnished with hangings were erected in the middle of the tribune for the authorities and their families as well as for the leading Arab officials, and arm-chairs were placed in them for the Vekeel, for the Kadi, for the head of the senate, for old Horapollo and also for the Christian priesthood, though it was well known that they would not be present at the ceremony.

The lower classes, who could not afford to pay for admission to these seats, had established themselves on the banks of the river; wandering dealers had followed them, and wherever the crowd was densest they had displayed their wares—light refreshments or solid food—on two-wheeled trucks, or on little carpets spread on the ground. In the tribune itself the cries of the water-sellers were incessant as they offered filtered Nile water and fruit syrups for sale.

The parched tops of the palms, where turtle doves, lapwings and sparrow-hawks were wont to perch, were crowded with the vagabond boys of the town, who whiled away the time by pulling the withered and diseased dates from the great clumps and flinging them down on the bystanders below, till the guard took aim at them with their arrows and stopped the game.

The centre of attraction to all eyes was a wooden platform or pontoon, built far out into the stream; from thence the bride was to be flung into the watery embrace of the expectant bridegroom. Here the masters of the ceremonies had put forth their best efforts, and it was magnificently decorated with hangings and handkerchiefs, palm-leaves and flags; with heavy garlands of tamarisk and willow, mingled with bright blossoms of the lotos and mallow, lilies and roses; with devices emblematic of the province, and other gilt ornaments. Only the furthest end of it was unadorned and without even a railing, that there might be nothing to intercept the view of the "marriage."

Three hours before noon none were absent but those whose places were secured, and ere long curiosity brought them also to the spot. The town-watch found it required all their efforts to keep the front ranks of the people from being pushed into the river by those behind; indeed, this accident could not be everywhere guarded against; but, thanks to the shallow state of the water, no one was the worse. But the cries of those who were in danger nevertheless drowned the music of the bands performing on raised platforms and the shouts of applause which rose on all sides to hail Horapollo—who was here, there, everywhere on his white ass as brisk as a lad—or to greet some leading official.

And now and again loud cries of anguish were heard, or the closely-packed throng parted with exclamations of horror. A citizen had had a sunstroke, or had been seized by the plague. Then the fugitives dragged others away with them; screaming mothers trying to save their little ones from the crush on one hand and the contagion on the other, oversetting one dealer's truck, smashing the eggs and cakes of another. A whole party were pushed into a deep but half-dried up water-course; the guardians of the peace flourished their staves, yelling and making their victims yell in their efforts to restore order—but all this hardly affected the vast body of spectators, and suddenly peace reigned, the confusion subsided, the shrieks were silenced. Those who were doomed might fall or die, be crushed or plague-stricken. Trumpet calls and singing were heard approaching from the town: the procession, the Bridal procession was coming! Not a man but would have perished rather than be deprived of seeing a single act of this stupendous drama.

Those Arabs—what fools they were! Besides the Vekeel only three of their magnates were present, and those men whom no one knew. Even the Kadi was nowhere to be seen; and he must have forbidden the Moslem women to come, for not a single veiled beauty of the harem was visible. Not one Egyptian woman would have failed to appear if the plague had not kept so many imprisoned in their houses. Such a thing would never be seen again; this day's doings would be a tale to tell to future great-grandchildren!

The music and singing came nearer and nearer; and it did not indeed sound as if it were escorting a hapless creature to a fearful end. Blast after blast rang out from the trumpets, filling the air with festive defiance; cheerful bridal songs came nearer and nearer to the listeners, the shrill chorus of boys and maidens sounding above the deeper and stronger chant of youths and men of all ages; flutes piped a gay invitation to gladness; the dull roar of drums muttered like the distant waves in time to a march, broken by the clang of cymbals and the tinkle of bells hung around tambourines held high by girlish hands which struck, rattled and waved them above their flowing curls; lute players discoursed sweet music on the strings; and as this vast tide of mingled tones came closer, behind it there was still more music and more song.

To the ear the procession seemed endless, and the eye soon confirmed the impression.

All were listening, gazing, watching to see the Bride and her escort. Every eye seemed compelled to turn in the same direction; and presently there came: first the trumpeters on spirited horses, and these ranged themselves on each side of the road by the shore leading to the scene of the "marriage." In front of them the choir of women took their stand to the left and, on the right, the men who had marched after them. All alike were arrayed in light sea-green garments, and loaded with lotos-flowers. The women's hair, twined with white blossoms, flowed over their shoulders; the men carried bunches of papyrus and reeds;—they represented river gods that had risen from the stream.

Then came boys and bearded men, in white robes, with panther-skins on their shoulders, as the

heathen priests had been wont to wear them. They were headed by two old men with long white beards, one holding a silver cup and the other a golden one, ready to fling them into the waves as a first offering, according to the practise of their forefathers, as Horapollo had described and ordered it. These went on to the pontoon, to its farthest end, and took their place on one side of the platform whence the Bride was to be cast into the river. Behind them came a large troop of flute-players and drummers, followed by fifty maidens holding tambourines, and fifty men all dressed and carrying emblems as followers of Dionysus, or Osiris-Bacchus, who had been worshipped here in the time of the Romans; with these came the drunken Silenus, goathoofed Satyrs and Pan, with his reed-pipes, all riding grey asses strangely bedaubed with yellow.

Then followed giraffes, elephants, ostriches, antelopes, gazelles; even some tamed lions and panthers were led past the wondering crowd; for this had been done in the famous procession in honor of the second Ptolemy, described by Callixenus of Rhodes.

Next came a large car drawn by twelve black horses, and on it a symbolical group of Famine and Pestilence overthrown; they were surrounded by shrieking black children, with pointed wings on their shoulders and horns on their foreheads, bound to stakes to represent the hosts of hell—a performance which they tried to make at once ghastly and droll.

On another car the Goddess of the Inundation was to be seen. She sat amid sheaves, fruits, and garlands of vine; while round her were groups of children with apples and corn, pomegranates and bunches of dates, wine-jars and cups in their hands.

Presently there appeared in a large shell, as though lounging in a bath, the goddess of health; she was drawn by eight snow-white horses, and held in one hand a golden goblet and in the other a caduceus. After her came the river-god Nile, the bridegroom of the marriage, studied from the famous statue carried away from Alexandria by the Romans: a splendid and mighty bearded man, resting against an urn. Sixteen naked children—the sixteen ells that the river must rise for its overflow to bless the land—played round his herculean form, and a bridal wreath of lotos-flowers crowned his flowing locks. This car, which was decorated with crocodiles, sheaves, dates, grapes, and shells, was hailed with shouts of enthusiasm; it was escorted by old men in the costume of the heathen priesthood.

Behind this came more music and singers, with a troop of young men and maidens led by lute-players singing. These too were dressed as the genie, and nymphs of the river and were the groomsmen and bridesmaids in attendance on the betrothed.

The longer the procession lasted and the nearer the looked-for victim approached, the more eagerly attent were the gazing multitude.

When this group of youths and maidens had gone by, there was hardly a sound to be heard in the tribune and among the crowd. No one felt the fierce heat of the sun, no one heeded the thirst that parched every tongue; all eyes were bent in one direction; only the black Vekeel, whose colossal form towered up where he stood, occasionally sent a sinister and anxious glance towards the town. He expected to see smoke rising from the quarter near the prison, and suddenly his lips parted and he displayed his dazzlingly white teeth in a scornful laugh. That which he looked for had come to pass; the little grey cloud which he discerned grew blacker, and then, in the heart of it, rose a crimson glow which did not take its color from the sun. But of all those thousands he was the only one who looked behind him and observed it.

The bride's attendants had by this time taken their station on the pontoon; here came another band of youths with panther skins on their shoulders; and now—at last, at last—a car came swaying along, drawn by eight coal-black oxen dressed with green ostrich-feathers and water-plants.

The car was shaded by a tall canopy, supported by four poles, against which leaned four men in the robes of the heathen priesthood; this awning was lavishly decorated with wreaths of lotos and reeds, and fenced about with papyrus, bulrushes, tall grasses and blossoming river-weeds. Beneath it sat the queen of the festival—the Bride of the Nile.

Robed in white and closely veiled, she was quite motionless. Her long, thick brown hair fell over her shoulders; at her feet lay a wreath, and rare rose-colored lotos-flowers were strewn on the car.

The bishop had been sitting at her side, the first Christian priest, certainly, of all the swarms of monks and ecclesiastics in Memphis, who had ever appeared at such a scene of heathen abomination. He was now standing, looking down at the crowd with a deeply knit brow and menacing gaze. What good had come of the penitential sermons in all the churches, of his and his vicar's warnings and threats? In spite of all remonstrance he had mounted the car with the condemned victim, after administering the last consolations to her soul. It might cost him his life, but he would keep his

promise.

In her hand Paula held two roses: one was Orion's last greeting delivered by Martina; the other Pulcheria had brought her early in the morning. Yesterday, in a lucid moment, her dying father had given her his fondest blessing, little knowing what hung over her; to-day he had not come to himself, and had neither noticed nor returned her parting kiss. Quite unconscious, he had been moved from the prison out of doors and to the house of Rufinus. Dame Joanna would not forego the privilege of giving him a resting-place and taking care of him till the end.

Orion's last note was placed in Paula's hands just before she set out; it informed her that his task was now successfully ended. He had been told that it was to-morrow, and not to-day, that the hideous act would be accomplished; and it was a consolation to her to know that he was spared the agony of following her in fancy in her fearful progress.

She had allowed the women who came to clothe her in bridal array to perform their task; among them was Emau, the chief warder's wife, and her overflowing compassion had done Paula good. But even in the prison-yard she had felt it unendurable to exhibit herself decked in her bridal wreaths to the gaping multitude; she had torn them from her and thrown them on the ground.

How long—how interminably long—had the road to the river appeared; but she had never raised her eyes to look at the curious crowd, never ceased lifting up her heart in prayer; and when her proud blood boiled, or despair had almost taken possession of her, she had grasped the bishop's hand and he had never wearied of encouraging her and exhorting her to cling to love and faith, and not even yet abandon all hope.

Thus they at last reached the pontoon at whose further end life would begin for her in another world. The shouts of the crowd were as loud, as triumphant, as expectant as ever; music and singing mingled with the roar of thousands of spectators; she allowed herself to be lifted from the car as though she were stunned, and followed the young men and maidens who formed the bridal train, and in alternate choruses sang the finest nuptial song of Sappho the fair Lesbian.

The bishop now made an attempt to address the people, but he was soon reduced to silence. So he once more joined Paula, and hand in hand they went on to the pier.

All she had in her of strength, pride, and heroic courage she summoned to her aid to enable her to walk these last few paces with her head erect, and without tottering; she had gone half way along the wooden structure, with a mien as lofty and majestic as though she were marching to command the obedience of the mob, when hoofs came thundering after her on the boards.

Old Horapollo, on his white ass, had overtaken her and stopped her on her road. Breathless, bathed in perspiration, scornful and triumphant, he desired her to remove her veil, and ordered the bishop to leave her and give up his place to the man who represented Father Nile—a gigantic farrier who followed him, somewhat embarrassed in his costume, but very ready to perform his part to the end.

The priest and Paula, however, refused to obey. At this the old man tore the veil from her face and signed to the Nile-God; he stepped forward and assumed his rights, after bowing respectfully to the prelate—who was forced to make way—and then led the Bride to the end of the platform. Here the two elders who had headed the procession in honor of Bacchus, cast the gold cups as offerings into the river, and then a lawyer, in the costume of a heathen priest, proceeded to expound, in a well-set speech, the meaning of this betrothal and sacrifice. He took Paula's hand to place in that of the farrier, who made ready to cast her into the river for which he stood proxy.

But an obstacle intervened before he could do so. A large and splendid barge had drawn up close to the platform, and shouts were heard from the tribune and from the mob which had till now looked on in breathless suspense and profound silence:

"Susannah's barge!"

"Look at the Nile, look at the river!"

"It is the water-wagtail—Philammon's rich heiress!"

"A pretty sight!"

"Another Bride—a second Bride!"

And the gaze of the multitude was now, as one eye, fixed on Katharina.

Susannah's handsome barge had been passing up and down near the platform for the last hour, and

the guards on duty had several times desired that it was to be kept at a distance from the scene of the "marriage;" but in vain; and they in their little boats were not strong enough to take active measures against the larger vessel manned by fifty rowers. It had now steered quite close to the pontoon, and the splendid gilding and carving, the tall deck-house supported on silver pillars, and the crimson embroidered sails would have been a gorgeous feast for the eye, but that the black flag floating from the mast gave it a melancholy and gloomy aspect.

Within the cabin Katharina had made her waiting-women dress her in white and deck her with white flowers-myrtle, roses and lotos; but she vouchsafed no reply to their anxious enquiries.

The maid who fastened the flowers on her bosom could feel her mistress's heart beating under her hand, and the lotos-blossoms which drooped from her shoulder rose and fell as though they were already rocking on the waves of the Nile. Her lips, too, never ceased moving, and her cheeks were as pale as death.

"What is she going to do?" her attendants asked each other.

Her mother dead only yesterday, and now she chose to be present at this ceremonial, desiring the steersman to run close to the platform and keep near to it, where all the world could see her. But she evidently wished to display herself to the people in all her finery and be admired, for she presently went up on the roof of the deck-house. And she looked lovely, as lovely as a guileless angel, as she mounted the steps with childlike diffidence-timidly, but with wide open eyes, as though something grand was awaiting her there—something she had long yearned for with her whole heart.

Anubis had to help her up the last steps, for her knees gave way; but once at the top she sent him down again to remain below with the others, as she wished to be alone. The lad was accustomed to obey; and Katharina now stepped on a seat close to the side of the boat, turned to Paula, whom she was now rapidly approaching, and held out to her and the bishop two tall lily-stems covered with splendid blossoms. At the very moment when the farrier was measuring by eye the distance between the platform and the barge, and had judged it impossible to cast the Bride into the stream till the vessel had moved on, Katharina cried out:

"Reverend Father John—and all of you! Take me, me and not the daughter of Thomas! It is I, not she—I am the true Bride of the Nile. Of my own free will—hear me, John!—of my own free will I am ready to give my life for my hapless land and the misery of the people, and the patriarch said that such a sacrifice as mine would be acceptable to Heaven. Farewell! Pray for me!—Lord have mercy upon me! Mother, dear Mother, I am coming to you!"

Then she called to the steersman: "Put out from the platform!" and as soon as a few strokes of the oars had carried the barge into the deeper channel she stepped nimbly on to the edge of the bulwark, dropped the lilies into the river, and then with a smile, her head gracefully bent on one side and her skirt modestly held round her, she slipped into the water.

The waves closed over her; but she was a good swimmer and could not help coming once to the surface. Her expression was that of a bather enjoying the cool fresh water that laved and gurgled round her. Perhaps the wild storm of applause, the mingled cries of horror, compassion and thanksgiving that went up from the assembled thousands once more reached her ear—but she dived head foremost to rise no more.

The "River-God," a good-hearted man, who in his daily life could never have let a fellow-creature drown under his very eyes, forgot his part, released Paula, and sprang after Katharina, as did Anubis and a few boatmen; but they could not reach her, and the boy, who found swimming difficult with his crippled leg followed the girl to whom his young heart was wholly devoted to a watery death.

Her speech had reached no ears but those to whom it was addressed; but before she was lost in the waters Bishop John turned to the people, took Paula's hand—and she felt free once more when her terrible bridegroom had deserted her—and holding up the Crucifix which hung at his girdle he shouted loudly:

"Behold the desires of our holy Father Benjamin, by whom God himself speaks to you, have met with fulfilment. A pure and noble Jacobite maiden, of her own free and beautiful impulse, has sacrificed herself after the example of the Saviour, for the sufferings of her nation, before your eyes. This one," and he drew Paula to him, "this one is free; the Nile has had his victim!"

But almost before he had done speaking—before the people could proclaim their vote—Horapollo had rushed at him and interrupted him. He had dismounted from his ass during the earlier part of the proceedings, and, not to let his prey escape, he now came between Paula and the bishop, grasped her dress and cried to the chorus of youths:

"Come on—at once! One of you take the part of the Nile-God—into the river with the Bride!" The bishop however forced himself between the speaker and the girl to protect her. But Horapollo flew into a fury and rushed at the prelate to snatch away the image of the Saviour, while John exclaimed in a voice of ominous thunder: "Anathema!"

This word of fear roused the Christian blood in the Egyptians; the sacrilegious attempt stirred the zeal which they had proved in many a struggle, and which had only been kept under by an effort during these times of trouble: the leader of the choir dragged the old man away and took part with the bishop. Others followed his example, while several, on the contrary, sided with old Horapollo who clung tightly to Paula, preferring to die himself rather than allow her to escape his hatred and vengeance.

At this moment the clang of bells was heard from the town with a terrific and unaccountable uproar, and a young man was seen forcing his way through the throng, a naked sword in his hand, and in spite of his torn garments, his wild hair, and his blackened face, he was at once recognized as Orion. Every one made way for him, for he rushed on like a madman; as he reached the pontoon and took in at a glance what was going forward there, he sprang past the mummers with mighty leaps to the platform, pushing aside sundry groups of fighting champions; and before the principal actors were aware of his presence, he had snatched Paula from the old man's clutch, and called her by her name. She sank on his breast half-fainting with terror, surprise and unspeakable rapture, and he clasped her to him with his left arm, while the flashing sword in his right hand and his flaming looks warned all bystanders that it would be as wise to attack a lioness defending her young as to defy this desperate man, who was prepared to face death with the woman he loved.

His push had sent Horapollo tottering to some distance; and when the old man had pulled himself together, to throw himself once more on his victim, he found himself the centre of a fight. A wild troop had followed Orion and beset the struggling mob, whom they presently drove over the edge of the pontoon into the river, and with them Horapollo. Most of these saved themselves by swimming, but the old man sank, and nothing more was seen of him but his clenched fist, which rose in menace for some minutes above the waters.

Meanwhile the Vekeel had become aware of what was going forward on the platform; he leaped in fury from his seat to restore order, intending to seize Orion whom he fancied he had seen, or, if necessary to cut him down with his own hand.

But a vast multitude stopped his progress, for a fearful horde of released prisoners with Orion at their head had come rushing down to the scene of the festival yelling: "Fire! the prison is burning, the town is in flames!"

Every one who could run fled at once to Memphis to save his house, his possessions and those dear to him. Like a flock of doves scared by the scream of a hawk, like autumn leaves driven before the wind, the multitude dispersed. They hurried back to the town in wild tumult and inextricable confusion, jumping into the festal cars, cutting loose the horses from that of the goddess of health, to mount them and ride home, overthrowing everything that stood in their way and dragging back the Vekeel who was striving, sword in hand, to get to the pontoon.

The smoke and flames of the city were rising every moment, and acted like magic in spurring the flying crowd to reach their homes in time. But, before Obada had succeeded in his efforts, the pushing throng were once more brought to a standstill; horses were heard approaching. Dense masses of dust hid them and their riders; but it was certainly an armed troop that was coming clattering onwards, for flashing gleams were seen here and there through the dull clouds that shrouded them, the reflection of the sun's bright rays from polished and glittering helmets, breast-plates, and sabres.

Now they were visible even where the Vekeel was. Foremost rode the Kadi, and just as he came up with Obada he sprang from the saddle on to the wooden structure, and with a loud cry of: "Free-saved!" in which all the joy of his heart found utterance, he stretched out both his hands to Paula, who was advancing towards the shore clinging closely to Orion.

Othman did not observe the Vekeel, who was but a few paces distant. The words "Free!" "Saved!" from the supreme judge, gave the negro to understand that a pardon must have arrived for his youthful foe, and this of course implied the condemnation of his own proceedings. All his hopes were wrecked, for this meant that Omar still ruled and that the attempt on the Khaliff's life had failed. Dismissal, punishment or death must be his doom, when Amru should return. Still, he would not succumb till the instrument of his ruin had preceded him to the grave. Taking the Kadi by surprise he thrust him aside, and prepared to deal a fearful blow that should fell Orion before he himself should fall. But the captain of the body-guard, who had followed Othman, had watched his movements: Swift as lightning he rose in his saddle and swung his cimeter, which cut deep into the Vekeel's neck. With a hideous curse Obada let his arm drop, and fell struggling for his last breath at the feet of the newly united couple.

The populace afterwards declared that his blood was not red like that of other men, but black like his skin and his soul. They had good cause to curse his memory, for his villainy had reduced more than half Memphis to ashes that day, and brought the city to beggary.

He had hired two venial wretches to set fire to the prison while the festival was proceeding, with a view to suffocating Orion in his cell; but the gang were detected and all the prisoners were released in time. Thus the young man had been able to reach the scene of the ceremonial at the head of his fellow-captives. The fire, however, had gained the upper hand in the deserted town. It had spread from house to house along the sun-scorched streets, and next day nothing remained of the city of the Pyramids but the road along the shore, and a few wretched alleys. The ancient Capital of the Pharaohs was reduced to a village, and the houseless residents moved across to the eastern bank, to people as Moslems the newly-founded town of Fostat, or sought a home on Christian territory.

Among the houses that had escaped was that of Rufinus, and thither the Kadi escorted Orion and Paula. It was to serve as their prison till the return of Amru, and there they spent delightful days in the society of their friends, and there Thomas was so happy as to clasp his children to his heart once more, and bless them before he died.

A few minutes before the Kadi had reached the scene of the festival two carrier pigeons had arrived, each bearing the Arab governor's commands that the sacrifice of Paula was at any rate to be stopped, and her life spared till his return. He also reserved the right of deciding Orion's fate.

Mary and Rustem had met Amru at Berenice, on the Egyptian coast of the Red Sea. This decaying sea-port was connected with Medina by a pigeon-post, and in reply to his viceroy's enquiry with reference to the victim about to be offered by the despairing Egyptians to the Nile, Omar had sent a reply which had been immediately forwarded to the Kadi.

The burning of their town had brought new and fearful suffering on the stricken Memphites, and notwithstanding Katharina's death the Nile still did not rise. The Kadi therefore once more summoned a meeting of all the inhabitants from both sides of the river, three days after the interrupted marriage-festival. It was held under the palms by Nesptah's inn, and there he proclaimed to the multitude, Moslem and Christian, by means of the Arab herald and Egyptian interpreter, what the Khaliff commanded him to declare, namely: that God, the One, the All-merciful, scorned human sacrifice. In this firm conviction he, Omar, would beseech Allah the Compassionate, and he sent a letter which was to be cast into the river in his name.

And this letter was addressed:

"To the River of Egypt." And its contents were as follows:

"If thou, O River, flowest of thyself, then swell not; but if it be God, the One, the Compassionate, that maketh thee to flow, then we entreat the All-merciful that he will bid thee rise!"

"That which is not of God," wrote Amru in the letter which enclosed Omar's, "what shall it profit men? But all things created are by Him, and so is your noble river. The Most High will hearken to Omar's prayers and ours, and I therefore command that all of you—Moslems, Christians, and Jews, shall gather together in the Mosque on the other side of the Nile which I have built to the glory of the All-merciful, and that you there lift up your souls in one great common prayer, to the end that God may hear you and take pity on your sufferings!"

And the Kadi bid all the people to go across the Nile and they obeyed his bidding. Bishop John called on his clergy and marched at their head, leading the Christians; the priests and elders of the Jews led their people next to the Jacobites; and side by side with these the Moslems gathered in the magnificent pillared sanctuary of Amru, where the three congregations of different creeds lifted up, their hearts and eyes and voices to the pitying Father in Heaven.

And this very Mosque of Amru has more than once been the scene of the same sublime spectacle; even within the lifetime and before the eyes of the narrator of this tale have Moslems, Christians, and Jews united there in one pious prayer, which must have been acceptable indeed in the ears of the Lord.

Not long after the letter from the Khaliff Omar had been cast into the Nile, and the prayer of the united assembly had gone up to Heaven from the Mosque of Amru, a pigeon came in announcing a sudden rise in the waters at the cataracts; and after some still anxious but hopeful days of patience, the Nile swelled higher and yet higher, overflowed its banks, and gave the laborer a right to look forward to a rich harvest; and then, when a heavy storm of rain had laid the choking dust, the plague, too, disappeared.

Just when the river was beginning to rise perceptibly Amru returned; bringing in his train little Mary

and Rustem, Philippus the leech and Haschim, who had joined the governor's caravan at Djidda.

In the course of their journey they received news of all that had been happening at Memphis, and when the travellers were approaching their last night-quarters, and the Pyramids were already in sight, the governor said to little Mary:

"What do you say little one? Do we not owe the Memphites the treat of a splendid marriage festival?"

"No, my lord, two," replied the child.

"How is that?" laughed Amru, "You are too young and do not count yet, and I know no other maiden in Memphis whose wedding I should care to provide for."

"But there is a man towards whom you feel most kindly, and who lives as lonely as a recluse. I should like to see him married, and at the same time as Orion and Paula. I mean our good friend Philippus."

"The physician? And is he still unwed?" asked Amru in surprise; for no Moslem of the leech's age and position could remain unmarried without exposing himself to the contempt of his fellow-believers. "He is a widower then!"

"No," replied Mary. "He has never yet found a wife to suit him; but I know one created on purpose for him by God himself!"

"You little Khatbe!"—[A professional go-between]—cried the governor. "Well, settle the matter, and it shall be no fault of mine if the second wedding lacks magnificence."

"And we will have a third!" interrupted the child, clapping her hands and laughing. "My worthy escort Rustem...."

"The colossus! Why, child, to you all things are possible! Have you found a wife for him too?"

"No, he found Mandane for himself without my help."

"It is the same thing!" cried the governor jovially. "I will provide for her. But that must satisfy you, or else all those unbelievers whom we are settling here will drive us Moslem Arabs out of the land."

The great man had often held such discourse as this with the child since she had entered his tent at Berenice, there to lay before him the case of the couple she loved, and for whom she had taken on herself great risk and hardship; she had pleaded so eloquently, so kindly, and with such fervent and pathetic words, that Amru had at once made up his mind to grant her everything that lay in his power. Mary had done him a service, too, by bringing him the information she could give him, for it enabled him to avert perils which threatened the interests of the Crescent, and also to save the children of two men he honored—the son of the Mukaukas, and the daughter of Thomas—from imminent danger.

He found, on his return home, that the Vekeel's crimes far exceeded his worst fears. Obada's proceedings had begun to undermine that respect for Arab rule and Moslem justice which Amru had done his utmost to secure. It was only by a miracle that Orion had escaped his plots, for he had three times sent assassins to the prison, and it was entirely owing to the watchful care of pretty Emau's husband that the youth had been able to save himself in the fire. Obada had done all this to clear out of his path the hated man whose statements and impeachments might ruin him. The wretch had met a less ignominious death than his judges would have granted him. The wealth found hoarded in his dwelling was sent to Medina; and even Orion was forced to see the vast sums of which the Negro had plundered his treasury, appropriated by the Arabs. The Arab governor thought it only right to inflict this penalty for the share he had taken in the rescue of the nuns; and the young man submitted willingly to a punishment which restored him and his bride to freedom, and enabled Amru to apply a larger proportion of the revenues of his native land for its own benefit.

The Khaliff Omar, however, never received these moneys, which constituted far more than half of Orion's patrimony. The Prophet's truest friend, the wise and powerful ruler, fell by the assassin's hand, and the world now learnt that the Vekeel had been one of the chief conspirators and had been spurred on to the rashest extremes by his confidence of success.

Amru received the son of the Mukaukas as a father might; after examining the result of his labors he found it far superior to his own efforts in the same direction, and he charged Orion to carry out the new division of the country, which he confirmed excepting in a few details.

Perform your duty and do your utmost in the future to go on as you have begun!" cried Amru; and the young man replied:

"In this bitter and yet happy interval I have become clear on many points."

"And may I ask on what?" asked the governor. "I would gladly hear."

"I have discovered, my lord," replied Orion, "that there is no such thing as happiness or unhappiness in the sense men give to the words. Life appears to each of us as we ourselves paint it. Hard times which come into our lives from outside are often no more than a brief night from which a brighter day presently dawns—or the stab of a surgeon's knife, which makes us sounder than before. What men call grief is, times without number, a path to greater ease; whereas the ordinary happiness of mankind flows, swiftly as running waters, down from that delightful sense of ease. Like a ship, which, when her rudder is lost, is more likely to ride out the storm on the high seas than near the sheltering coast, so a man who has lost himself may easily recover himself and his true happiness in the wildest turmoil of life, but rarely and with difficulty if his existence runs calmly on. All other blessings are comparatively worthless if we are not upheld by the consciousness of fulfilling the task of life in faithful earnest, and of cheerfully dealing with the problems it sets before us. The lost one was found as soon as he placed his whole being and faculties at the service of a higher duty, with God in his heart and before his eyes. I have learnt from my own experience, and from Paula's good friends, to strive untiringly after what is right, and to find my own weal in that of others.

"The sense of lost liberty is hard to bear; but leave me love, and give me room and opportunity to prove my best powers in the service of the community, even in a prison—and though I cannot be perfectly happy, for that is impossible without freedom—I will be far happier than such an idle and useless spendthrift of time and abilities as I used to be among the dissipations of the capital."

"Then enjoy the consciousness of duty well performed, with liberty and love," replied the governor. "And believe me, my friend, your father in Paradise will no more grudge you all that is loveliest and best than I do. You are on the road where every curse is turned to blessing."

The three marriages which Amru had promised to provide for, were celebrated with due splendor.

That of Orion and Paula was a day never to be forgotten by the gay world of Memphis. Bishop John performed the ceremony, and the young couple at once took possession of the beautiful house left them by Katharina, the real Bride of the Nile. If it could have been granted to her to read Paula's and Orion's hearts, and see how they held her in remembrance, she would have found that to them she was no longer the childish water-wagtail, and that they knew how to value the sacrifice of her young life.

Their first beloved guest, who went with them to their new home, was little Mary, and she remained their dearest companion till she married happily. The governess, Eudoxia, to whom also Orion offered an asylum, accompanied Mary to her own delightful home; and there at last Mary closed her old friend's eyes, after the good woman had brought up her little ones, not like a hireling but as a true mother.

The Patriarch Benjamin, too, who was led by many considerations—and not least by Katharina's will to remain on good terms with the son of the Mukaukas, was a visitor to the youthful pair. Neither he nor the Church ever had reason to repent his alliance with Orion; and when Paula presented her husband with a son, the prelate offered to be his sponsor, and named him George after his grandfather.

Orion's son, too, inherited the office of Mukaukas, when he came to man's estate, from his father who was appointed to it, but under a new Arab title, shortly after his marriage.

Ere long, however, Orion, as the highest Christian authority in his native land, had to change his place of residence and leave Memphis, which was doomed to ruin, for Alexandria. From thence his power extended over the whole Nile-valley, and he devoted himself to his charge with so much zeal, fidelity, justice, and prudence, that his name was remembered with veneration and affection by generations long after.

Paula was the pride and joy of his life, and they lived together in devoted union to an advanced age. He regarded it as one of the duties of his life, to care for the woman who had made him what he was from a lost and reprobate creature, and to fill every day of her life with joy. When he built his palace at Alexandria, he graced it with the inscription that had been engraved on Thomas' ring: "God hath set the sweat of man's brow before virtue."

Philippus and his Pulcheria also found a new home in Alexandria. He had no long wooing to do; for when, on his return, the girl of whom he had thought constantly during his long journeying, met him for the first time in her mother's house and held out both her hands with trustful warmth of welcome, he clasped her to him and would not release her till Joanna had given them her maternal blessing. The widow lived in the leech's house with her children and grandchildren, and often visited her husband's grave. At length she was laid to rest by him and his soft-hearted mother, in the cemetery of Alexandria.

Rustem, made a rich man by Orion, became a famous breeder of horses and camels in his own country, while Mandane ruled mildly but prudently over his possessions—which he never shared with others, though he remained a Masdakite till he died. The first daughter his wife bore him was named Mary, and the first boy Haschim; but she would not agree to Rustem's proposal that the second should be called Orion; she preferred to give him the name of Rufinus, and his successors were Rustem and Philippus.

The senator and his wife were only too glad to quit Egypt. Martina, however, had the satisfaction of assisting at the marriage of her dear Heliodora on the shores of the Nile; not, indeed, to her "Great Sesostris," but to her nephew Narses, who by the young widow's devoted care was restored, if not to perfect vigor, at any rate to very enduring good health.

Paula's wedding gift to her was the great emerald, which had meanwhile been brought back again to Memphis. Justinus and Martina always remained on terms of cordial friendship with the young Mukaukas and his wife: Nilus lived long after to perform his duties with industry and judgment; and whenever Haschim came to Alexandria there was a contest between Orion and Philippus, for neither would yield him to the other. But Philip could no longer envy his former rival the wife he had won. He had not, indeed, ceased to admire her; but at the same time he would say: "My comfortable little Pulcheria has not her match; our rooms would be too small for Paula, but they suit my golden-haired girl best."

He remained unselfishly devoted to his work till the end, and, when he saw Orion wearing himself out in energetic toil, he would often say: "He knows now what life demands, and acts accordingly; and that is why he grows no older, and his laugh is as winning and gay as ever. It is an honor to be called friend by a woman who like the Bride of the Nile. saved herself from certain death, and a man who, like the young Mukaukas, has freed himself from the heaviest of all curses."

To this day the Bride of the Nile is not forgotten. Before the river begins to rise on the Night of Dropping the inhabitants of the town of Cairo, which grew up after the ruin of Memphis, on the eastern shore by the side of Fostat, erect a figure of clay, representing a maiden form, which they call Aroosa or the Bride.

ETEXT EDITOR'S BOOKMARKS:

Sea-port was connected with Medina by a pigeon-post

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE BRIDE OF THE NILE — VOLUME 12 ***

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