

The Bride of the Nile, Volume 11.

Georg Ebers

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THE BRIDE OF THE NILE

By Georg Ebers

Volume 11.

CHAPTER XVII.

Paula passed a fearful night in the small, frightfully hot prison-cell in which she and Betta were shut up. She could not sleep, and when once she succeeded in closing her eyes she was roused by the yells and clanking chains of the captives in the common prison and the heavy step of another sufferer who paced the room overhead, even more restless than herself.

Poor fellow-victim! Was it a tortured conscience that drove him hither and thither, or was he as innocent as she was, and was it longing, love, and anxiety that bereft him of sleep?

He was no vulgar criminal. There was no room for those in this part of the building; and at midnight, when the noise in the large hall was suddenly silenced, soft sounds of the lute came down to her from his cell, and only a master could strike the strings with such skill.

She cared nothing for the stranger; but she was grateful for his gift of music, for it diverted her thoughts from herself, and she listened with growing interest. Glad of an excuse for rising from her hard, hot bed, she sprang up and placed herself close to the one window, an opening barred with iron. But then the music ceased and a conversation began between the warder and her fellow-prisoner.

What voice was that? Did she deceive herself, or hear rightly?

Her heart stood still while she listened; and now every doubt was silenced: It was Orion, and none other, whom she heard speaking in the room above. Then the warder spoke his name; they were talking of her deceased uncle; and now, as if in obedience to some sign, they lowered their voices. She heard whispering but could not distinguish what was said. At length parting words were uttered in louder tones, the door of the cell was locked and the prisoner approached his window.

At this she pressed her face close to the heated iron bars, looked upwards, listened a moment and, as nothing was stirring, she said, first softly, and then rather louder: "Orion, Orion!"

And, from above, her name was spoken in reply. She greeted him and asked how and when he had come hither; but he interrupted her at the first words with a decisive: "Silence!" adding in a moment, "Look out!"

She listened in expectancy; the minutes crept on at a snail's pace to a full half hour before he at last said: "Now!" And, in a few moments, she held in her hand a written scroll that he let down to her by a lute string weighted with a scrap of wood.

She had neither light nor fire, and the night was moonless. So she called up "Dark!" and immediately added, as he had done: "Look out."

She then tied to the string the two best roses of those Pulcheria had brought her, and at her glad "Now!" they floated up.

He expressed his thanks in a few low chords overflowing with yearning and passion; then all was still, for the warder had forbidden him to sing or play at night and he dared not risk losing the man's favor.

Paula laid down again with Orion's letter in her hand, and when she felt slumber stealing upon her, she pushed it under her pillow and ere long was sleeping on it. When they both woke, soon after sunrise, they had been dreaming of each other and gladly hailed the return of day.

How furious Orion had felt when the prison door closed upon him! He longed to wrench the iron bars from the window and kick down or force the door; and there is no more humiliating and enraging feeling for a man than that of finding himself shut up like a wild beast, cut off from the world to which he belongs and which he needs, both to give him all that makes life worth having, and to receive such good as he can do and give.

Yesterday their dungeon had seemed a foretaste of hell, they had each been on the verge of despair; to-day what different feelings animated them! Orion had been the victim of blow on blow from Fate--Paula had looked forward to his return with an anxious and aching heart; to-day how calm were their souls, though both stood in peril of death.

The legend tells us that St. Cecilia, who was led away to the rack from her marriage feast, even in the midst of the torments of martyrdom, listened in ecstasy to heavenly music and sweet echoes of the organ; and how many have had the same experience! In the extremity of anguish and danger they find greater joys than in the midst of splendor, ease and the intoxicating pleasures of life; for what we call happiness is the constant guest of those who have within reach that for which their souls most ardently long, irrespective of place and outward circumstances.

So these two in their prison were what they had not been for a long time: full of heartfelt bliss; Paula with his letter, which he had begun at the Kadi's house, and in which he poured out his whole soul to her; Orion in the possession of her roses, on which he feasted his eyes and heart, and which lay before him while he wrote the following lines, which the kindhearted warder willingly transmitted to her:

Lo! As night in its gloom and horror fell on my prison,
Methought the sun sank black, dark forever in death.

I drew thy roses up, and behold! from their crimson petals
Beamed a glory of light, a glow as of sunshine and day!

Love! Love is the star that rose with those fragrant flowers;
Rose, as Phoebus' car comes up from the tossing waves.

Is not the ardent flame of a heart that burns with passion

Like the sparkling glow-worm hid in the heart of the rose?

While it yet was day, and we breathed in freedom and gladness,
While the sun still shone, that light seemed small and dim;

But now, when night has fallen, sinister, dark, portentous,
Its kindly ray beams forth to raise our drooping souls.

As seeds in the womb of earth break from the brooding darkness,
Or as the soul soars free, heaven-seeking from the grave,

So the hopeless soil of a dungeon blossoms to rapture,
Blooms with roses of Love, more sweet than the wildling rose!

And when had Paula ever felt happier than at the moment when this offering from her lover, this humble prison-flower, first reached her.

Old Betta could not hear the verses too often, and cried with joy, not at the poem, but at the wonderful change it had produced in her darling. Paula was now the radiant being that she had been at home on the Lebanon; and when she appeared before the assembled judges in the hall of justice they gazed at her in amazement, for never had a woman on her trial for life or death stood in their presence with eyes so full of happiness. And yet she was in evil straits. The just and clement Kadi, himself the loving father of daughters, felt a pang at his heart as he noted the delusive confidence which so evidently filled the soul of this noble maiden.

Yes, she was in evil straits: a crushing piece of evidence was in their hands, and the constitution of the court--which was in strict conformity with the law must in itself be unfavorable to her. Her case was to be tried by an equal number of Egyptians and of Arabs. The Moslems were included because by her co-operation, Arabs had been slain; while Paula, as a Christian and a resident in Memphis, came under the jurisdiction of the Egyptians.

The Kadi presided, and experience had taught him that the Jacobite members of the bench of judges kept the sentence of death in their sleeves when the accused was of the Melchite confession. What had especially prejudiced them against this beautiful creature he knew not; but he easily discovered that they were hostile to the accused, and if they should utter the verdict "guilty", and only two Arabs should echo it, the girl's fate was sealed.

And what was the declaration which that whiterobed old man among the witnesses desired to make--the venerable and learned Horapollo? The glances he cast at Paula augured her no good.

It was so oppressively, so insufferably hot in the hall! Each one felt the crushing influence, and in spite of the importance of the occasion, the proceedings every now and then came to a stand-still and then were hurried on again with unseemly haste.

The prisoner herself seemed happily to be quite fresh and not affected by the sultriness of the day. It had cost her small effort to adhere to her statement that she had had no share in the escape of the sisters, when catechised by the ruffianly negro; but she found it hard to defy Othman's benevolent questioning. However, there was no choice, and she succeeded in proving that she had never quitted Memphis nor the house of Rufinus at

the time when the Arab warriors met their death between Athribis and Doomiat. The Kadi endeavored to turn this to account for her advantage and Obada, who had found much to whisper over with his grey-headed neighbor on the bench reserved for witnesses, let him talk; but no sooner had he ended than the Vekeel rose and laid before the judges the note he had found in Orion's room.

It was undoubtedly in the young man's handwriting and addressed to Paula, and the final words: "But do not misunderstand me. Your noble, and only too well-founded desire to lend succor to your fellow-believers would have sufficed...." could not fail to make a deep impression. When the Kadi questioned Paula, however, she replied with perfect truth that this document was absolutely unknown to her; at the same time she did not deny that the sisters of St. Cecilia, who were of her own confession, had always had her warmest wishes, and that she had hoped they might succeed in asserting their rights in opposition to the patriarch.

The deceased Mukaukas, and the Jacobite members of the town-council even, had shared these feelings and the Arabs had never interfered with the pious sicknurses.

The calm conciseness with which she made these statements had a favorable effect, on her Moslem judges especially, and the Kadi began to have some hopes for her; he desired that Orion should be called as being best able to account for the meaning of the letter he had written but never sent.

On this the young man appeared, and though he and Paula did their utmost to preserve a suitable demeanor, every one could see the violent agitation they felt at meeting each other in such a situation. Horapollo never took his eyes off Orion, whom he now saw for the first time, and his features put on a darkening and menacing expression.

The young man acknowledged that he had written the letter in question, but he and Paula alike referred it to the danger with which the sisterhood had long been threatened from the patriarch's hostility. The assistance which, in that document, he had refused he would have afforded readily and zealously at a later and fit season, and he could have counted on the aid of the Arab governor Amru, who, as he would himself confirm, shared the views of the Mukaukas George as to the nuns' rights.

At this the old sage murmured loud enough to be heard: "Clever, very clever!" and the Vekeel laughed aloud, exclaiming:

"I call that a cunning way of lengthening your days! Be on your guard, my lords. These two are partners in the game and are intimately allied. I have proof of that in my own hands. That youngster takes as good care of the damsel's fortune as though it were his own already, and what is more. . . ."

Here Paula broke in. She did not know what the malicious man was going to say, but it was something insulting beyond a doubt. And there stood Orion, just as she had pictured him in moments of tender remembrance; she felt his eye resting on her in ecstasy. To go up to him, to tell him all she was feeling in this critical struggle for life or death, seemed impossible; but as the Vekeel began to disclose to their judges matters which concerned only herself and her lover, every impulse prompted her to interpose and, in this fateful hour, to do her friend such service as she once, like a coward, had shrank from. So with eager emotion, her eyes flashing, she interrupted the negro "Stop!" she cried, "you are wasting

words and trouble. What you are trying to prove by subtlety I am proud and glad to declare. Hear it, all of you. The son of the Mukaukas is my betrothed!"

At the same time her eye sought to meet Orion's. And thus, in the very extremity of danger, they enjoyed a solemn moment of the purest, deepest happiness. Paula's eyes were moist with grateful tenderness, when Orion exclaimed:

"You have heard from her own lips what makes the greatest bliss of my life. The noble daughter of Thomas is my promised bride!"

There was a murmur among the Jacobite judges. 'Till this moment several of them, oppressed by the heat, had sat dreaming with their heads sunk on their breasts, but now they were suddenly as wide-awake and alert as though a jet of cold water had been turned on to them, and one cried out: "And your father, young man? You have forgotten him in a hurry! What would he have said to such a disgrace to his blood as your marriage to a Melchite, the daughter of those who caused your two brothers to be murdered? Oh! if the dead could. . . ."

"He blessed our union on his death-bed," Orion put in.

"Did he, indeed?" asked another Jacobite with sarcastic scorn. "Then the patriarch was in the right when he refused to let the priests follow his corpse. That I should live to be witness to such crimes!"

But such words fell on the ears of the enraptured pair like the chirping of crickets. They felt, they cared for nothing but what this blissful moment had brought them, and never suspected that Paula's glad avowal had sealed her death-warrant.

The wrath of the Jacobite faction now hastened the end. The prosecutor, an Arab, now represented how many Moslems had lost their lives in the affair of the nuns, and once more read Orion's letter. His Christian colleagues tried to prove that this document could only refer to the flight, so ingeniously plotted, of the sisters; and now something quite new and unlooked-for occurred, which gave a fresh turn to the proceedings: the old man interrupted the Kadi to make a statement. At this Paula's confidence rose again for the last speaker had somewhat shaken it. She felt sure that the tried friend and adoptive father of her faithful Philippos would take her part.

But what was this?

The old man seemed to measure her height in a glance which struck to her heart with its fierce enmity, and then he said deliberately:

"On the morning of the nuns' flight the accused, Paula, went to the convent and there tolled the bell. Contradict me if you can, proud prefect's daughter; but I warn you beforehand, that in that case, I shall be compelled to bring forward fresh charges."

At this the horror-stricken girl pictured to herself the widow and daughter of Rufinus at her side on the condemned bench before the judges, and felt that denial would drag her friends to destruction with her; with quivering lips she confirmed the old man's statement.

"And why did you toll the bell?" asked the Kadi.

"To help them," replied Paula. "They are my fellow-believers, and I love them."

"She was the originator of the treasonable and bloody scheme," cried the Vekeel, "and did it for no other purpose than to cheat us, the rulers of this country."

The Kadi however signed to him to be silent and bid the Jacobite counsel for the accused speak next. He had seen her early in the day, and came forward in the Egyptian manner with a written defence in his hand; but it was a dull formal performance and produced no effect; though the Kadi did his utmost to give prominence to every point that might help to justify her, she was pronounced guilty.

Still, could her crime be held worthy of death? It was amply proved that she had had a hand in the rescue of the nuns; but it was no less clear that she had been far enough away from the sisters and their defenders when the struggle with the Arabs took place. And she was a woman, and how pardonable it seemed in a pious maiden that she should help the fellow-believers whom she loved to evade persecution.

All this Othman pointed out in eloquent words, repeatedly and sternly silencing the Vekeel when he sought to argue in favor of the sentence of death; and the humane persuasiveness of the lenient judge won the hearts of most of the Moslems.

Paula's appearance had a powerful effect, too, and not less the circumstance that their noblest and bravest foe had been the father of the accused.

When at length it was put to the vote the extraordinary result was that all her fellow Christians--the Jacobites--without exception demanded her death, while of the infidels on the judges' bench only one supported this severe meed of punishment.

Sentence was pronounced, and as the Vekeel Obada passed close to Orion--who was led back to his cell pale and hardly master of himself--he said, mocking him in broken Greek: "It will be your turn to-morrow, Son of the Mukaukas!"

Orion's lips framed the retort: "And yours, too, some day, Son of a Slave!"--but Paula was standing opposite, and to avoid infuriating her foe he was able to do what he never could have done else: to let the Vekeel and Horapollo pass on without a word in reply.

As soon as the door was closed on this couple, Othman nodded approvingly at Orion and said:

"Rightly and wisely done, my friend! The eagle should never forget that he must not use his pinions in a cage as he does between the desert and the sky."

He signed to the guards to lead him away, and stood apart while the young man looked and waived an adieu to his betrothed.

Finally the Kadi went up to Paula, whose heroic composure as she heard the sentence of death had filled him with admiration.

"The court has decided against you, noble maiden," he said. "But its verdict can be overruled by the clemency of our Sovereign Lord the Khaliff and the mercy of God the compassionate. Do you pray to Him-- I and a few friends will appeal to the Khaliff."

He disclaimed her gratitude, and when she, too, had been led away he added, in the figurative language of his nation, to the friends who were waiting for him:

"My heart aches! To have to pronounce such a verdict oppressed me like a load; but to have an Obada for a fellow Moslem and be bound to obey him-- there is no heavier lot on earth!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

The mysterious old sage had no sooner left the judgment-hall with the Vekeel than he begged for a private interview. Obada did not hesitate to turn the keeper of the prison, with his wife and infant, out of his room, and there he listened while Horapollo informed him of the fate to which he destined the condemned girl. The old man's scheme certainly found favor with the Negro; still, it seemed to him in many respects so daring that, but for an equivalent service which Horapollo was in a position to offer Obada, he would scarcely have succeeded in obtaining his consent.

All the Vekeel aimed at was to make it very certain that Orion had had a hand in the flight of the nuns, and chance had placed a document in the old man's hands which seemed to set this beyond a doubt.

He had effected his removal to the widow's dwelling in the cool hours of early morning. He had taken with him, in the first instance, only the most valuable and important of his manuscripts, and as he was placing these in a small desk--the very same which Rufinus had left for Paula's use--Horapollo found in it the note which the youth had hastily written when, after waiting in vain for Paula as she sat with little Mary, he had at last been obliged to depart and take leave of Amru. This wax-tablet, on which the writing was much defaced and partly illegible, could not fail to convince the judges of Orion's guilt, and the production of this piece of evidence enabled the old man to extort Obada's consent to his proposal as to the mode of Paula's death. When they finally left the warder's room, the Negro once more turned to the keeper of the prison and told him with a snort, as he pointed to his pretty wife and the child at her breast, that they should all three die if he allowed Orion to quit his cell for so much as an instant.

He then swung himself on to his horse, while Horapollo rode off to the Curia to desire the president of the council to call a meeting for that evening; then he betook himself to his new quarters.

There he found his room carefully shaded, and as cool as was possible in such heat. The floor had been sprinkled with water, flowers stood wherever there was room for them, and all his properties in scrolls and other matters had found places in chests or on shelves. There was not a speck of dust to be seen, and a sweet pervading perfume greeted his sensitive nostrils.

What a good exchange he had made! He rubbed his withered hands with

satisfaction as he seated himself in his accustomed chair, and when Mary came to call him to dinner, it was a pleasure to him to jest with her.

Pulcheria must lead him through the viridarium into the dining-room; he enjoyed his meal, and his cross, wrinkled old face lighted up amazingly as he glanced round at his feminine associates; only Eudoxia was absent, confined to her room by some slight ailment. He had something pleasant to say to each; he frankly compared his former circumstances with his present position, without disguising his heartfelt thankfulness; then, with a merry glance at Pulcheria, he described how delightful it would be when Philippus should come home to make the party complete--a true and perfect star: for every Egyptian star must have five rays. The ancients had never painted one otherwise nor graven it in stone; nay, they had used it as the symbol for the number five.

At this Mary exclaimed: "But then I hope--I hope we shall make a six-rayed star; for by that time poor Paula may be with us again!"

"God grant it!" sighed Dame Joanna. Pulcheria, however, asked the old man what was wrong with him, for his face had suddenly clouded. His cheerfulness had vanished, his tufted eyebrows were raised, and his pinched lips seemed unwilling to part, when at length he reluctantly said:

"Nothing--nothing is wrong... At the same time; once for all--I loathe that name."

"Paula?" cried the child in astonishment. "Oh! but if you knew. . ."

"I know more than enough," interrupted the old man. "I love you all--all; my old heart expands as I sit in your midst; I am comfortable here, I feel kindly towards you, I am grateful to you; every little attention you show me does me good; for it comes from your hearts: if I could repay you soon and abundantly--I should grow young again with joy. You may believe me, as I can see indeed that you do. And yet," and again his brows went up, "and yet, when I hear that name, and when you try to win me over to that woman, or if you should even go so far as to assail my ears with her praises--then, much as it would grieve me, I would go back again to the place where I came from."

"Why, Horapollo, what are you saying?" cried Joanna, much distressed.

"I say," the old man went on, "I say that in her everything is concentrated which I most hate and contemn in her class. I say that she bears in her bosom a cold and treacherous heart; that she blights my days and my nights; in short, that I would rather be condemned to live under the same roof with clammy reptiles and cold-blooded snakes than. . ."

"Than with her, with Paula?" Mary broke in. The eager little thing sprang to her feet, her eyes flashed lightnings and her voice quivered with rage, as she exclaimed: "And you not only say it but mean it? Is it possible?"

"Not only possible, but positive, sweetheart," replied the old man, putting out his hand to take hers, but she shrank back, exclaiming vehemently:

"I will not be your sweetheart, if you speak so of her! A man as old as you are ought to be just. You do not know her at all, and what you say

about her heart. . ."

"Gently, gently, child," the widow put in; and Horapollo answered with peculiar emphasis.

"That heart, my little whirlwind!--it would be well for us all if we could forget it, forget it for good or for evil. She has been tried to-day, and that heart is sentenced to cease beating."

"Sentenced! Merciful Heaven!" shrieked Pulcheria, and as she started up her mother cried out:

"For God's sake do not jest about such things, it is a sin.--Is it true? --Is it possible? Those wretches, those... I see in your face it is true; they have condemned Paula."

"As you say," replied Horapollo calmly. "The girl is to be executed."

"And you only tell us now?" wept Pulcheria, while Mary broke out:

"And yet you have been able to jest and laugh, and you--I hate you! And if you were not such a helpless, old, old man. . ." But here Joanna again silenced the child, and she asked between her sobs:

"Executed?--Will they cut off her head? And is there no mercy for her who was as far away from that luckless fight as we were--for her, a girl, and the daughter of Thomas?"

To which the old man replied:

"Wait a while, only wait! Heaven has perhaps chosen her for great ends. She may be destined to save a whole country and nation from destruction by her death. It is even possible. . ."

"Speak out plainly; you make me shudder with your oracular hints," cried the widow; but he only shrugged his shoulders and said coolly:

"What we foresee is not yet known. Heaven alone can decide in such a case. It will be well for us all--for me, for her, for Pulcheria, and even our absent Philip, if the divinity selects her as its instrument. But who can see into darkness? If it is any comfort to you, Joanna, I can inform you that the soft-hearted Kadi and his Arab colleagues, out of sheer hatred of the Vekeel, who is immeasurably their superior in talent and strength of will, will do everything in their power..."
"To save her?" exclaimed the widow.

"To-morrow they will hold council and decide whether to send a messenger to Medina to implore pardon for her," Horapollo went on with a horrible smile. "The day after they will discuss who the messenger is to be, and before he can reach Arabia fate will have overtaken the prisoner. The Vekeel Obada moves faster than they do, and the power lies in his hands so long as Amru is absent from Egypt. He, they say, perfectly dotes on the Mukaukas' son, and for his sake--who knows? Paula as his betrothed."

"His betrothed?"

"He called her by that name before the judges, and congratulated himself on his promised bride."

"Paula and Orion!" cried Pulcheria, jubilant in the midst of her tears,
and clapping her hands for joy.

"A pair indeed!" said the old man. "You may well rejoice, my girl! Feeble hearts as you all are, respect the experience of the aged, and bless Fate if it should lame the horse of the Kadi's messenger!--However, you will not listen to anything oracular, so it will be better to talk of something else."

"No, no," cried Joanna. "What can we think of but her and her fate? Oh, Horapollo, I do not know you in this mood. What has that poor soul done to you, persecuted as she is by the hardest fate--that noble creature who is so dear to us all? And do you forget that the judges who have sentenced her will now proceed to enquire what Rufinus, and we all of us. . ."

"What you had to do with that mad scheme of rescue?" interrupted Horapollo. "I will make it my business to prevent that. So long as this old brain is able to think, and this mouth to speak, not a hair of your heads shall be hurt."

"We are grateful to you," said Joanna. "But, if you have such power, set to work--you know how dear Paula is to us all, how highly your friend Philip esteems her--use your power to save her."

"I have no power, and refuse to have any," retorted the old man harshly."

"But Horapollo, Horapollo!--Come here, children!--We were to find in you a second father--so you promised. Then prove that those were no empty words, and be entreated by us."

The old man drew a deep breath; he rose to his feet with such vigor as he could command, a bright, sharply-defined patch of color tinged each pale cheek, and he exclaimed in husky tones:

"Not another word! No attempt to move me, not a cry of lamentation! Enough, and a thousand times too much, of that already. You have heard me, and I now say again--me or Paula, Paula or me. Come what may in the future, if you cannot so far control yourselves as never to mention her in my presence, I--no, I do not swear, but when I have said a thing I keep to it--I will go back to my old den and drag out life the richer by a disappointment--or die, as my ruling goddess shall please."

With this he left the room, and little Mary raised her clenched right fist and shook it after him, exclaiming: "Then let him go, hard-hearted, unjust, old scarecrow! Oh, if only I were a man!" And she burst out crying aloud. Heedless of the widow's reproof, she went on quite beside herself: "Oh, there is no one more wicked than he is, Dame Joanna! He wants to see her die, he wishes her to be dead; I know it, he even wishes it! Did you hear him, Pul, he would be glad if the messenger's horse went lame before he could save her? And now she is my Orion's betrothed --I always meant them for each other--and they want to kill him, too, but they shall not, if there is still a God of justice in heaven! Oh if I--if I. . . ." Her voice failed her, choked with sobs. When she had somewhat recovered she implored Pulcheria and her mother to take her to see Paula, and as they shared her wish they prepared to start for the prison before it should grow dark.

The nearer they went to the market-place, which they must cross, the more crowded were the streets. Every one was going the same way; the throng almost carried the women with it; yet, from the market came, as it were, a contrary torrent of shouts and shrieks from a myriad of human throats. Dame Joanna was terrified in the press by the uproarious doings in the market, and she would gladly have turned back with the girls, or have made her way through by-streets, but the tide bore her on, and it would have been easier to swim against a swollen mountain stream than to return home. Thus they soon reached the square, but there they were brought to a standstill in the crush.

The widow's terrors now increased. It was dreadful to be kept fast with the young people in such a mob. Pulcheria clung closely to her, and when she bid Mary take her hand the child, who thoroughly enjoyed the adventure, exclaimed: "Only look, Mother Joanna, there is our Rustem. He is taller than any one."

"If only he were by our side!" sighed the widow. At this the little girl snatched away her hand, made her way with the nimbleness of a squirrel through the mass of men, and soon had reached the Masdakite. Rustem had not yet quitted Memphis, for the first caravan, which he and his little wife were to join, was not to start for a few days. The worthy Persian and Mary were very good friends; as soon as he heard that his benefactress was alarmed he pushed his way to her, with the child, and the widow breathed more freely when he offered to remain near her and protect her.

Meanwhile the yelling and shouting were louder than ever. Every face, every eye was turned to the Curia, in the evident expectation of something great and strange taking place there.

"What is it?" asked Mary, pulling at Rustem's coat. The giant said nothing, but he stooped, and to her delight, a moment later she had her feet on his arms, which he folded across his chest, and was settling herself on his broad shoulder whence she could survey men and things as from a tower. Joanna laid her hand in some tremor on the child's little feet, but Mary called down to her: "Mother--Pulcheria--I am quite sure our old Horapollo's white ass is standing in front of the Curia, and they are putting a garland round the beast's neck--a garland of olive."

At this moment the blare of a tuba rang out from the Senate-house across the square, through the suffocatingly hot, quivering air; a sudden silence fell and spread till, when a man opened his mouth to shout or to speak, a neighbor gave him a shove and bid him hold his tongue. At this the widow held Mary's ankles more tightly, asking, while she wiped the drops from her brow:

"What is going on?" and the child answered quickly, never taking her eyes off the scene:

"Look, look up at the balcony of the Curia; there stands the chief of the Senate--Alexander the dyer of purple--he often used to come to see my grandfather, and grandmother could not bear his wife. And by his side--do you not see who the man is close by him?"

"It is old Horapollo. He is taking the laurel-crown off his wig!--Alexander is going to speak."

She was interrupted by another trumpet call, and immediately after a

loud, manly voice was heard from the Curia, while the silence was so profound that even the widow and her daughter lost very little of the speech which followed:

"Fellow-citizens, Memphites, and comrades in misfortune," the president began in slow, ringing tones, "you know what the sufferings are which we all share. There is not a woe that has not befallen us, and even worse loom before us."

The crowd expressed their agreement by a fearful outcry, but they were reduced to silence by the sound of the tuba, and the speaker went on:

"We, the Senate, the fathers of the city, whom you have entrusted with the care of your persons and your welfare. . ."

At this point he was interrupted by wild yells, and cries could be distinguished of: "Then take care of us--do your duty!"

"Money bags!"

"Keep your pledge!"

"Save us from destruction!"

The trumpet call, however, again silenced them, and the speaker went on, almost beside himself with vehement excitement.

"Hearken! Do not interrupt me! The dearth and misery fall on our heads as much as on yours. My own wife and son died of the plague last night!"

At this only a low murmur ran through the crowd, and it died away of its own accord as the dignified old man on the balcony wiped his eyes and went on:

"If there is a single man among you who can prove us guilty of neglect--a man, woman, or child--let him accuse us before God, before our new ruler the Khaliff, and yourselves, the citizens of Memphis; but not now, my fellow-sufferers, not now! At this time cease your cries and lamentations; now when rescue is in sight. Listen to me, and let us know what you feel with regard to the last and uttermost means of deliverance which I now come to propose to you."

"Silence! Hear him! Down with the noisy ones!" was heard on all sides, and the orator went on:

"We, as Christians, in the first instance addressed ourselves to our Father in Heaven, to our one and only divine Redeemer, and to His Holy Church to aid us; and I ask you: Has there been any lack of prayers, processions, pilgrimages, and pious gifts? No, no, my beloved fellow-citizens! Each one be my witness--certainly not! But Heaven has remained blind and deaf and dumb in sight of our need, yea as though paralyzed. And yet no; not indeed paralyzed, for it has been powerful and swift to move only to heap new woes upon us. Not a thing that human foresight and prudence could devise or execute has remained untried.

"The time-honored arts of the magicians, sorcerers, and diviners, which aforesaid have often availed to break the powers of evil spirits, have proved no less delusive and ineffectual. So then we remembered our glorious forefathers and ancestors, and we recollected that a man lives

in our midst who knew many things which we others have lost sight of in the lapse of years. He has made the wisdom of our forefathers his own in the course of a long life of laborious days and nights. He has the key to the writing and the secrets of the ancients, and he has communicated to us the means of deliverance to which they resorted, when they suffered from such afflictions as have befallen us in these dreadful days; and this venerable man at my side, the wise and truthful Horapollo, will acquaint us with it. You see the antique scrolls in his hand: They teach us the wonders it wrought in times past."

"Here the speaker was interrupted by a cry of: "Hail Horapollo, the Deliverer!" and thousands took it up and expressed their satisfaction and gratitude by loud shouting.

The old man bowed modestly, pointed to his narrow chest and toothless mouth and then to the head of the Council as the man who had undertaken to transmit his opinion to the populace; so Alexander went on:

"Great favors, my friends and fellow-citizens, must be purchased by great gifts. The ancients knew this, and when the river--on which, as we know only too well, the weal or woe of this land solely depends--refused to rise, and its low ebb brought evils of many kinds upon its banks, they offered in sacrifice the thing they deemed most noble of all the earth has to show a pure and beautiful maiden.

"It is just as we expected: you are horrified! I hear your murmur, I see your horror-stricken faces; how can a Christian fail to be shocked at the thought of such a victim? But is it indeed so extraordinary? Have we ever wholly given up everything of the kind? Which of us does not entreat Saint Orion, either at home or under the guidance of the priests in church, whenever he craves a gift from our splendid river; and this very year as usual, on the Night of Dropping, did we not cast into the waters a little box containing a human finger.

[So late as in the XIV. century after Christ the Egyptian Christians still threw a small casket containing a human finger into the Nile to induce it to rise. This is confirmed by the trustworthy Makrizi.]

"This lesser offering takes the place of the greater and more precious sacrifice of the heathen; it has been offered, and its necessity has never at any time been questioned; even the severest and holiest luminaries of the Church--Antonius and Athanasius, Theophilus and Cyrillus had nothing to say against it, and year after year it has been thrown into the waters under their very eyes.

"A finger in a box! What a miserable exchange for the fairest and purest that God has allowed to move on earth among men. Can we wonder if the Almighty has at last disdained and rejected the wretched substitute, and claims once more for His Nile that which was formerly given? But where is the mother, where is the father, you will ask, who, in our selfish days, is so penetrated with love for his country, his province, his native town, that he will dedicate his virgin daughter to perish in the waters for the common good? What daughter of our nation is ready of her own free will to die for the salvation of others?

"But be not afraid. Have no fears for the growing maiden, the very apple of your eye, in your women's rooms. Fear not for your granddaughters, sisters, playfellows and betrothed: From the earliest ages a stringent

law forbade the sacrifice of Egyptian blood; strangers were to perish, or those who worshipped other gods than those in Egypt.

"The same law, citizens and fellow-believers, is incumbent on us. And mark me well, all of you! Would it not seem as though Fate desired to help us to bring to our blessed Nile the offering which for so many centuries has been withheld? The river claims it; and, as if by a miracle, it has been brought to our hand. For a crime which does not taint her purity our judges have to-day condemned to death a beautiful and spotless maiden--a stranger, and at the same time a Greek and a heretic Melchite.

"This stirs you, this fills your souls with joyful thankfulness; I see it! Then make ready for thy bridal, noble stream, Benefactor of our land and nation! The virgin, the bride that thou hast longed for, we deck for thee, we lead to thine embrace--she shall be Thine!

"And you, Memphites, citizens and fellow-sufferers," and the orator leaned far over the parapet towards the crowd, "when I ask you for your suffrages, when I appeal to you in the name of the senate, and of this venerable sage...."

But here he was interrupted by the triumphant shout of the assembled multitude; a thousand voices went up in a mighty, heaven-rending cry:

"To the Nile with her--the maiden to the Nile!"

"Marry the Melchite to the river! Bring wreaths for the bride of the Nile, bring flowers for her marriage."

"Let us abide by the teaching of our fathers!"

"Hail to the councillor! Hail to the sage, Horapollo! Hail to our chief Senator!"

These were the glad and enthusiastic shouts that rose in loud confusion; and it was only on the north side, where the money-changers' tables now stood deserted--for gold and silver had long since been placed in safety--that a sinister murmur of dissent was heard. The little girl in the Persian's arms had long since been breathing hard and deep. She thought she knew whom that fiend up there had his eye upon for his cursed heathen sacrifice; and as Mary bent down to Dame Joanna to see whether she shared her hideous suspicion, she perceived that her eyes and Pulcheria's were full of tears.--That was enough; she asked no questions, for a new act in the drama claimed her attention.

Close to the money-changer's stalls a hand was lifted on high, holding a crucifix, and the child could see it steadily progressing through the crowd towards the Curia. Every one made way for the sacred symbol and the bearer of it; and to Mary's fancy the throng parted on each side of the advancing image of the Redeemer, as the waters of the Red Sea had parted at the approach of the people of God. The murmurs in that part of the square grew louder; the acclamations of the populace waxed fainter; every voice seemed to fail, and presently a frail figure in bishop's robes, small but rigidly dignified, was seen to mount the steps and finally disappear within the portals of the Curia.

The turmoil sank like an ebbing wave to a low, enquiring mutter, and even this died away when the diminutive personage, who looked the taller,

however, for the crucifix which he still held, came out on the balcony, approached the parapet, and stretched forth the arm that held the image above the heads of the foremost rows of the people.

At this Horapollo stepped up to Alexander, his eyes flashing with rage, and demanded that the intruder should be forbidden to speak; but the commanding eye of the new-comer rested on the dyer, who bowed his head and allowed him to proceed. Nor did one of the senators dare to hinder him, for every one recognized him as the zealous, learned, and determined priest who had, since yesterday, filled the place of the deceased bishop.

Their new pastor began, addressing his flock in as loud a voice as he could command:

"Look on this Cross and hearken to its minister! You languish for the blessing of Christ, and you follow after heathen abominations. The superstitious triumph, through which I have struggled to reach you, will be turned to howls of anguish if you stop your ears and are deaf to the words of salvation.

"Yea, you may murmur! You will not reduce me to silence, for Truth speaks in me and can never be dumb. I say to each of you that knows it not: The staff of the departed Plotinus has been placed in my hands. I would fain bear it with gentleness and mercy; but, if I must, I will wield it as a sword and a scourge till your wounds bleed and your bruises ache.

"Behold in my right hand the image of your Redeemer! I hold it up as a wall between you and the heathen abomination which you hail with joy in your blindness.

"Ye are accursed and apostate. Lift up your hearts, and look at Him who died on the cross to save you. Verily He will not let him perish who believeth in Him; but you! where is your faith? Because it is night ye lament and cry: 'The Light is dead!' Because ye are sick ye say: 'The physician cannot heal!'

"What are these blasphemies that I hear: 'The Lord and His Church are powerless! Magic, enchantments, and heathen abominations may save us.' --But, inasmuch as ye trust not in the true Saviour and Redeemer, but in heathen wickedness, magic, and enchantments, punishment shall be heaped on punishment; and so it will be,--I see it coming--till ye are choked in the mud and seek with groans the only Hand that is able to save.

"That whereby the blinded sons of men hope to escape from the evil, that, and that only, is the source of their sufferings and I stand here to stay that spring and dig a channel for its overflow.

"Children of Moloch ye try to be and I hope to make you Christians again. But the maiden whom your fury would cast into the abyss of the river is under the merciful protection of the supreme Church, for the death of her body will bring death to your souls. Saint Orion turns from you with horror! Away from the hapless victim! Away, I say, with your accursed desires and sacrilegious hands!"

"And sit with them in our laps and wring them in prayer till they ache, while want and the plague snatch away those that are left!" interrupted the old man's voice, thin and feeble, but audible at a considerable distance, and from the market-place thousands proclaimed their approval

by loud shouts.

The president of the senate had listened with a penitent mien and bowed head, but now he recovered his presence of mind and exclaimed indignantly:

"The people die, the town and country are going to ruin, plague and horrors rise up from the river. Show us some other way of escape, or let us trust to our forefathers and try this last means."

But the little man drew himself up more stiffly, pointed with his left hand to the crucifix, and cried with unmoved composure:

"Believe, hope, and pray!"

"Perhaps you think that no evil is come upon us!" cried Alexander. "You, to be sure, have seen no wife with glazing eyes, no child struggling for breath. . . ." And a fresh tumult came up from below, wilder and louder than ever. Each one whose home or beasts had been blighted by death, whose gardens and fields had perished of drought, whose dates had dropped one by one from the trees, lifted up his voice and shrieked:

"The victim, the victim!"

"To the river with the maiden!"

"All hail to our deliverer, the wise Horapollo!" But others shouted against them:

"Let us remain Christians! Hail to Bishop John!"

"Think of our souls!"

The prelate made an effort once more to rivet the attention of the populace, and failing in this he turned to the senators and the trumpeters, whom at length he succeeded in persuading to blow again and again, and more loudly through their brazen tuba. But the call produced no effect, for in the market square groups had formed on opposite sides, and blows and wrestling threatened to end in a sanguinary street-riot.

The women succeeded in getting away from the scene of action under the protection of the Masdakite, before the Arab cavalry rode across to separate the combatants; but in the Curia Bishop John explained to the Fathers that he would make every effort to prevent this inhuman and unchristian sacrifice of a young girl, even though she was a Melchite and under sentence of death. This very day a carrier pigeon should be dispatched to the patriarch in Upper Egypt, and bring back his decision.

When, on this, Horapollo replied that the Khaliff's representative here had signified his consent to the proceedings, and that even against the will of the clergy the misery of the people must be put an end to, the Bishop broke out vehemently and threatened all who had first suggested this hideous scheme with the anathema of the Church. But Horapollo retorted again with flaming eloquence, the desperate Senators took his part, and the Bishop left the Curia in the highest wrath.

CHAPTER XIX.

Few things could be more intolerable to the gentle and retiring widow than such a riot of the people. The unchained passion, the tumult, and all the vulgar accessories that surrounded her there grieved her tender nature; all through the old man's speech she had felt nothing but the desire to escape, but as soon as she had acquired the certainty that Paula was the hapless being whom her terrible house-mate was preparing to hand over to the superstition of the mob, she thought no more of getting home, but waited in the crush till at length she and the two children could be conducted by Rustem to the prison, though the way thither was through the most crowded streets.

Had the nameless horrors that hung over Paula already found their way to her ears through the prisonwalls, or might it yet be her privilege to be able to prepare the girl for the worst, and to comfort the victim who must already have been driven to the verge of desperation by the sentence of death?

On the previous day the chief warder had acceded without demur to her wish to see Paula, for the Kadi had enjoined him to show her and Orion all possible courtesy, but the Vekeel's threats made him now refuse to admit Dame Joanna. However, while he was talking with her, his infant son stretched out his arms to Pulcheria, who had played with him the day before in her sweet way, and she now took him up and kissed him, thus bringing a kindly feeling to three hearts at once; and most of all to that of the child's mother who immediately interested herself for them, and persuaded her husband to oblige them once more.

Pretty Emau had always waited on the mirthful Orion, under the palms by her father's inn, more gladly than on most other guests; and her husband who, after the manner of the Egyptians, was docile to his better half though till now he had not been quite free from jealousy, was even more ready to serve his benefactor's son since hearing that he was betrothed to the fair Paula.

There was a great uproar in the large common prison to-day, as usual when the judges had passed sentence of death on any criminal, and the women shuddered as the miserable wretches hallooed and bellowed. Many a shriek came up, of which it was hard to say whether it was the expression of wild defiance or of bitter jesting, and no more suitable accompaniment could be conceived to this terrific riot than the clank of chains.

When the women reached Paula's cell their hearts throbbled painfully, for within the door which the warder unlocked anguish and despair must dwell.

The prisoner was standing at the window, pressing her brow against the iron bars and listening to the lute played by her lover, which sounded, amid the turmoil of the other prisoners, like a bell above the roar of thunder and the storm. By the bed sat Betta on a low stool, asleep with the distaff in her lap; and neither she nor her mistress heeded the entrance of the visitors. A miserable lamp lighted the squalid room.

Mary would have flown to her friend, but Joanna held her back and called Paula tenderly by name in a low voice. But Paula did not hear; her soul was no doubt absorbed in anguish and the terror of death. The widow now raised her voice, and the ill-fated girl turned round; then, with a little cry of joy, she hastened to meet the faithful creatures who could

find her even in prison, and clasped first the widow, then Pulcheria, then the child in a tender embrace. Joanna put her hands fondly round her face to kiss it, and to see how far fear and affliction had altered her lovely features, and a faint cry of astonishment escaped her, for she was looking, not at a grief and terror-stricken face, but a glad and calm one, and a pair of large eyes looked brightly and gratefully into hers.

Had she not been told then what was hanging over her? Nay--for she at once asked whether they had heard that she was condemned to die. And she went on to tell them how things had gone with her at her trial, and how her good Philip's friend and foster-father had suddenly and inexplicably become her bitterest foe.

At this the others could not check their tears; it was Paula who had to comfort and soothe them, by telling them that she had found a paternal friend in the Kadi who had promised to intercede for her with the Khaliff.

Dame Joanna could scarcely take it all in. This girl and her heroic demeanor, in the face of such disaster, seemed to her miraculous. Her trust was beautiful; but how easily might it be deceived! how insecure

was the ground in which she had cast the anchor of hope.

Even little Mary seemed more troubled than her friend, and threw herself sobbing on her bosom. And Paula returned her fondness, and tried to mollify Pulcheria as to the disgraceful conduct of their old housemate, and smiled kindly at the widow when she asked where she had found such composure in the face of so much misfortune, saying that it was from her example that she had learnt resignation to the worst that could befall her. Even in this dark hour she found more to be thankful for than to lament over; indeed, it had brought her a glorious joy. And this for the first time reminded Joanna and the girls that she was now betrothed, and again she was clasped in their loving arms.

Just then the warder rapped; Paula rose thoughtfully, and exclaimed in a low voice: "I have something to send to Orion that I dare not entrust to a stranger: but now, now I have you, my Mary, and you shall take it to him."

As she spoke she took out the emerald, gave it to the little girl, and charged her to deliver it to her uncle as soon as they should be alone together. In the little note which she had wrapped around it she implored her lover to regard it as his own property, and to use it to satisfy the claims of the Church.

The man was easily induced to take Mary to her uncle; and how happily she ran on before him up to Orion's cell, how great was his joy at seeing her again, how gratefully he pressed the emerald to his lips! But when she exclaimed that her prophecy had been fulfilled, and that Paula, was now his, his brow was knit as he replied, with gloomy regret, that though he had won the woman he loved, it was only to lose her again.

"But the Kadi is your friend and will gain pardon from the Khaliff!" cried the child.

"But then another enemy suddenly starts up: Horapollo !"

"Oh, our old man!" and the child ground her teeth. "If you did but

know, Orion!--And to think that I must live under the same roof with him!"

"You!" asked the young man.

"Yes, I. And Pulcheria, and Mother Joanna," and Mary went on to tell him how the old man had come to live with them and Orion could guess from various indications that she was concealing some important fact; so he pressed her to keep nothing from him, till the child could not at last evade telling him all she had seen and heard.

At this he lost all caution and self-control. Quite beside himself he called aloud the name of his beloved, invoking in passionate tones the return of the Governor Amru, the only man who could help them in this crisis. His sole hope was in him. He had shown himself a real father to him, and had set him a difficult but a noble task.

"Into which you have plunged over head and ears!" cried the child.

"I thought it all out while on my journey," replied Orion. "I tried yesterday to write out a first sketch of it, but I lacked what I most wanted: maps and lists. Nilus had put them all up together; I was to have taken them with me on the voyage with the nuns, and I ordered that they should be carried to the house of Rufinus. . . ."

"That they should come to us?" interrupted the child with sparkling eyes. "Oh, they are all there! I saw the documents myself, when the chest was cleared out for old Horapollo, and to-morrow, quite early to-morrow, you shall have them." Orion kissed her brow with glad haste; then, striking the wall of his cell with his fist, he waited till something had been withdrawn with a grating sound on the other side, and exclaimed:

"Good news, Nilus! The plans and lists are found: I shall have them to-morrow!"

"That is well!" replied the treasurer's thin voice from the adjoining room. "We shall need something to comfort us! A prisoner has just been brought in for having attacked an Arab horseman in a riot in the market square. He tells me some dreadful news."

"Concerning my betrothed?"

"Alas! yes, my lord."

"Then I know it already," replied the young man; and after exchanging a few words with his master with reference to the old man's atrocious proposal, Nilus went on:

"My prison-mate tells me, too, that while he was in custody in the guard-house the Arabs were speaking of a messenger from the governor announcing his arrival at Medina, and also that he intended making only a short stay there. So we may expect his return before long."

"Then he will have started long before the Kadi's messenger can have arrived and laid the petition for pardon before the Khaliff!--We have no hope but in Amru; if only we could send information to him on his way..."

"He would certainly not tarry in Upper Egypt, but hasten his journey, or

send on a plenipotentiary," said the voice on the other side of the wall. "If we had but a trusty man to despatch! Our people are scattered to the four winds, and to hunt them up now. . . ."

At this Mary's childish tones broke in with: "I can find a messenger."

"You? What are you thinking of, child?" said Orion. She did not heed his remonstrance, but went on eagerly, quite sure of her own meaning:

"He shall be told everything, everything! Ought he to know what I heard about your share in the flight of the sisters?"

"No, no; on no account!" cried Nilus and his master both at once; and Mary understood that her proposition was accepted. She clapped her hands, and exclaimed full of enterprise and with glowing cheeks:

"The messenger shall start to-morrow; rely on me. I can do it as well as the greatest. And now tell me exactly the road he is to take. To make sure, write the names of the stages on my little tablet.--But wait, I must rub it smooth."

"What is this on the wax?" asked Orion. "A large heart with squares all over it.--And