

The Bride of the Nile, Volume 9.

Georg Ebers

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THE BRIDE OF THE NILE

By Georg Ebers

Volume 9.

CHAPTER IX.

Philippus started up from the divan on which he had been reclining at breakfast with his old friend. Before Horapollo was a half-empty plate; he had swallowed his meal less rapidly than his companion, and looked disapprovingly at the leech, who drank off his wine and water as he stood, whereas he generally would sit and enjoy it as he talked to the old man of matters light or grave. To the elder this was always the pleasantest hour of the day; but now Philippus would hardly allow himself more than just time enough to eat, even at their principal evening meal.

Indeed, not he alone, but every physician in the city, had as much as he could do with the utmost exertion. Nearly three weeks had elapsed since the attack on the nuns, and the fearful heat had still gone on in creasing. The river, instead of rising had sunk lower and lower; the carrier-pigeons from Ethiopia, looked for day by day with growing anxiety and excitement, brought no news of a rising stream even in the upper Nile, and the shallow, stagnant and evil-smelling waters by the banks began to be injurious, nay, fatal, to the health of the whole population.

Close to the shore, especially, the water had a reddish tinge, and the usually sweet, pure fluid in the canals was full of strange vegetable growths and other foreign bodies putrid and undrinkable. The common people usually shirked the trouble of filtering it, and it was among them that the greater number died of a mortal and infectious pestilence, till then unknown. The number of victims swelled daily, and the approach of the comet kept pace with the growing misery of the town. Every one connected it with the intense heat of the season, with the delay in the inundation, and the appearance of the sickness; and the leech and his friend often argued about these matters, for Philippus would not admit that the meteor had any influence on human affairs, while Horapollo believed that it had, and supported his view by a long series of examples.

His antagonist would not accept them and asked for arguments; at the same time he, like every one else, felt the influence of a vague dread of some imminent and terrible disaster hanging over the earth and humanity at large.

And, just as every heart in Memphis felt oppressed by such forebodings, and by the weight of a calamity, which indeed no longer threatened them but had actually come upon them, so the roads, the gardens, the palms and

sycamores by the way-side were covered by thick layers of dingy, choking dust. The hedges of tamarisk and shrubs looked like decaying walls of colorless, unburnt mud-bricks; even in the high-roads the wayfarer walked in the midst of dense white clouds raised by his feet, and if a chariot, or a horseman galloped down the scorching street, fine, grey sand at once filled the air, compelling the foot-passengers to shut their eyes and lips.

The town was so silent, so empty, so deserted! No one came out of doors unless under pressure of business or piety. Every house was a furnace, and even a bath brought no refreshment, for the water had long since ceased to be cold. A disease had also attacked the ripening dates as they hung; they dropped off in thousands from the heavy clusters under the beautiful bending crown of leaves; and now for two days hundreds of dead fish had been left on the banks. Even the scaly natives of the river were plague-stricken; and the physician explained to his friend that this brought the inhabitants a fresh danger; for who could clear the shores of the dead fish?--And, in such heat, how soon they would become putrid!

The old man did not conceal from himself that it was hard, cruelly hard, for the physician to follow his calling conscientiously at such a time; but he knew his friend; he had seen him during months of pestilence two years since--always brisk, decisive and gay, indeed inspired to greater effort by the greater demands on him. What had so completely altered him, had poisoned and vexed his soul as with a malignant spell? It was not the almost superhuman sacrifices required by his duties;--it came of the unfortunate infatuation of his heart, of which he could not rid himself.

Philippus had kept his promise. He went every day to the house of Rufinus, and every day he saw Paula; but, as a murdered body bleeds afresh in the presence of the assassin, so every day the old pain revived when he was forced to meet her and speak with her. The only cure for this particular sufferer was to remove the cause of his pain: that is to say, to take Paula away out of his path; and this the old man made his care and duty.

Little Mary and the other patients under Rufinus' roof were on the way to recovery; still there was much to cast gloomy shadows over this happy termination. Joanna and Pulcheria were very anxious as to the fate of Rufinus. No news had been received of him or of the sisters, and Philippus was the vessel into which the forsaken wife and Pulcheria--who looked up to him as to a kind, faithful, and all-powerful protecting spirit-poured all their sorrows, cares, and fears. Their forebodings were aggravated by the fact that three times Arab officials had come to the house to enquire about the master and his continued absence. All that the women told them was written down, and Dame Joanna, whose lips had never yet uttered a lie, had found herself forced to give a false clue by saying that her husband had gone to Alexandria on business, and might perhaps have to proceed to Syria.--What could these enquiries forebode? Did they not indicate that Rufinus' complicity in the rescue of the nuns was known at Fostat?

The authorities there were, in fact, better informed than the women could suspect. But they kept their knowledge a secret, for it would never do to let the oppressed people know that a handful of Egyptians had succeeded in defeating a party of Arab soldiers; so the Memphites heard no more than a dark rumor of what had occurred.

Philippus had known nothing of the old man's purpose till he had gone too far to be dissuaded; and it was misery to him now to reflect that his dear old friend, and his whole household, might come to ruin for the sake of the sisterhood who were nothing to them; for he had received private information that there had been a skirmish between the Moslems and the deliverers of the nuns, which had cost the lives of several combatants on both sides.

And Paula! If only he could have seen her happy--But she was pale; and that which robbed the young girl--healthy as she was in mind and body--of her proud, frank, independent bearing was not the heat, which tormented all creation, but a secret, devouring sorrow; and this sorrow was the work of one alone--of him on whom she had set her heart, and who made, ah! what a return, for the royal gift of her love.

Philippus had frequent business at the governor's residence, and a fortnight since he had plainly perceived what it was that had brought Neforis into this strange state. She was taking the opium that her husband had had, taking it in excessive quantities; and she could easily procure more through some other physician. However, her piteous prayer that Philippus would not abandon her to her fate had prevailed to induce him to continue to see her, in the hope of possibly restricting her use of the drug.

The senator's wife, Martina, also required his visits to the palace. She was not actually ill, but she suffered cruelly from the heat, and she had always been wont to see her worthy old house-physician every day, to hear all the latest gossip, and complain of her little ailments when anything went wrong with her usually sound health. Philippus was indeed too much overburdened to chatter, but his professional advice was good and helped her to endure the fires of this pitiless sky. She liked this incisive, shrewd, plain-spoken man--often indeed sharp and abrupt in his freedom--and he appreciated her bright, natural ways. Now and then Martina even succeeded in winning a smile from "Hermes Trismegistus," who was "generally as solemn as though there was no such thing on earth as a jest," and in spurring him to a rejoinder which showed that this dolorous being had a particularly keen and ready wit.

Heliodora attracted him but little. There was, to be sure, an unmistakable likeness in her "imploring eyes" to those of Pulcheria; but the girl's spoke fervent yearning for the grace and love of God, while the widow's expressed an eager desire for the admiration of the men she preferred. She was a graceful creature beyond all question, but such softness, which never even attempted to assert a purpose or an opinion, did not commend itself to his determined nature; it annoyed him, when he had contradicted her, to hear her repeat his last statement and take his side, as if she were ashamed of her own silliness. Her society, indeed, did not seem to satisfy the clever older woman, who at home, was accustomed to a succession of visitors, and to whom the word "evening" was synonymous with lively conversation and a large gathering. She spoke of the leech's visits as the oasis in the Egyptian desert, and little Katharina even she regarded as a Godsend.

The water-wagtail was her daily visitant, and the girl's gay and often spiteful gossip helped to beguile her during this terrific heat. Katharina's mother made no difficulties; for Heliodora had gone to see her in all her magnificence, and had offered her and her daughter hospitality, some day, at Constantinople. They were very likely going

thither; at any rate they would not remain in Memphis, and then it would be a piece of good fortune to be introduced to the society of the capital by such people as their new acquaintances.

Martina thus heard a great deal about Paula; and though it was all adverse and colored to her prejudice she would have liked to see the daughter of the great and famous Thomas whom she had known; besides, after all she had heard, she could fear nothing from Paula for her niece: uncommonly handsome, but haughty, repellent, unamiable, and--like Heliadora herself--of the orthodox sect.--What could tempt "great Sesostris" to give her the preference?

Katharina herself proposed to Martina to make them acquainted; but nothing would have induced Dame Martina to go out of her rooms, protected to the utmost from the torrid sunshine, so she left it to Heliadora to pay the visit and give her a report of the hero's daughter. Heliadora had devoted herself heart and soul to the little heiress, and humored her on many points.

This was carried out. Katharina actually had the audacity to bring the rivals together, even after she had reported to each all she knew of Orion's position with regard to the other. It was exquisite sport; still, in one respect it did not fulfil her intentions, for Paula gave no sign of suffering the agonies of jealousy which Katharina had hoped to excite in her. Heliadora, on the other hand, came home depressed and uneasy; Paula had received her coldly and with polite formality, and the young widow had remained fully aware that so remarkable a woman might well cast her own image in Orion's heart into the shade, or supplant it altogether.

Like a wounded man who, in spite of the anguish, cannot resist touching the wound to assure himself of its state, Heliadora went constantly to see Katharina in order to watch her rival from the garden or to be taken to call on her, though she was always very coldly received.

At first Katharina had pitied the young woman whose superior in intelligence she knew herself to be; but a certain incident had extinguished this feeling; she now simply hated her, and pricked her with needle-thrusts whenever she had a chance. Paula seemed invulnerable; but there was not a pang which Katharina would not gladly have given her to whom she owed the deepest humiliation her young life had ever known. How was it that Paula failed to regard Heliadora as a rival? She had reflected that, if Orion had really returned the widow's passion, he could not have borne so long a separation. It was on purpose to avoid Heliadora, and to remain faithful to what he was and must always be to Paula, that he had gone with the senator, far from Memphis. Heliadora--her instinct assured her--was the poor, forsaken woman with whom he had trifled at Byzantium, and for whom he had committed that fatal theft of the emerald. If Fate would but bring him home to her, and if she then yielded all he asked--all her own soul urged her to grant, then she would be the sole mistress and queen of his heart--she must be, she was sure of it! And though, even as she thought of it, she bowed her head in care, it was not from fear of losing him; it was only her anxiety about her father, her good old friend, Rufinus, and his family, whom she had made so entirely her own.

This was the state of affairs this morning, when to his old friend's vexation, Philippus had so hastily and silently drunk off his after-breakfast draught; just as he set down the cup, the black door-keeper

announced that a hump-backed man wished to see his master at once on important business.

"Important business!" repeated the leech. "Give me four more legs in addition to my own two, or a machine to make time longer than it is, and then I will take new patients--otherwise no! Tell the fellow. . . ."

"No, not sick. . . ." interrupted the negro. "Come long way. Gardener to Greek man Rufinus."

Philippus started: he could guess what this messenger had to say, and his heart sank with dread as he desired that he might be shown in.

A glance at Gibbus told him what he had rightly feared. The poor fellow was hardly recognizable. He was coated with dust from head to foot, and this made him look like a grey-haired old man; his sandals hung to his feet in strips; the sweat, pouring down his cheeks, had made gutters as it were in the dust on his face, and his tears, as the physician held out his hand to him, washed out other channels.

In reply to the leech's anxious, long drawn "Dead?" he nodded silently; and when Philippus, clasping his hands to his temples, cried out: "Dead! My poor old Rufinus dead! But how, in Heaven's name, did it happen? Speak, man, speak!"--Gibbus pointed to the old philosopher and said: "Come out then, with me, Master. No third person. . . ."

Philippus, however, gave him to understand that Horapollo was his second self; and the hunch-back went on to tell him what he had seen, and how his beloved master had met his end. Horapollo sat listening in astonishment, shaking his head disapprovingly, while the physician muttered curses. But the bearer of evil tidings was not interrupted, and it was not till he had ended that Philippus, with bowed head and tearful eyes, said:

"Poor, faithful old man; to think that he should die thus--he who leaves behind him all that is best in life, while I--I. . . ." And he groaned aloud. The old man glanced at him with reproachful displeasure.

While the leech broke the seals of the tablets, which the abbess had carefully closed, and began to read the contents, Horapollo asked the gardener: "And the nuns? Did they all escape?"

"Yes, Master! on the morning after we reached Doomiat, a trireme took them all out to sea."

And the old man grumbled to himself: "The working bees killed and the Drones saved!"

Gibbus, however, contradicted him, praising the laborious and useful life of the sisters, in whose care he himself had once been.

Meanwhile Philippus had read his friend's last letter. Greatly disturbed by it he turned hither and thither, paced the room with long steps, and finally paused in front of the gardener, exclaiming: "And what next? Who is to tell them the news?"

"You," replied Gibbus, raising his hands in entreaty.

"I-oh, of course, I!" growled the physician. "Whatever is difficult,

painful, intolerable, falls on my shoulders as a matter of course! But I cannot--ought not--I will not do it. Had I any part or lot in devising this mad expedition? You observe, Father?--What he, the simpleton, brewed, I--I again am to drink. Fate has settled that!"

"It is hard, it is hard, child!" replied the old man. "Still, it is your duty. Only consider--if that man, as he stands before us now, were to appear before the women...."

But Philippus broke in: "No, no, that would not do! And you, Gibbus--this very day there has been an Arab again to see Joanna; and if they were to suspect that you had been with your master--for you look strangely.--No, man; your devotion merits a better reward. They shall not catch you. I release you from your service to the widow, and we--what do you say, Father?--we will keep him here."

"Right, very right," said Horapollo. "The Nile must some day rise again. Stay with us; I have long had a fancy to eat vegetables of my own growing."

But Gibbus firmly declined the offer, saying he wished to return to his old mistress. When the physician again pointed out to him how great a danger he was running into, and the old man desired to know his reasons, the hunch-back exclaimed:

"I promised my master to stay with the women; and now, while in all the household I am the only free man, shall I leave them unprotected to secure my own miserable life? Sooner would I see a scimitar at my throat. When my head is off the rascals are welcome to all that is left."

The words came hollow and broken from his parched tongue, and as he spoke the faithful fellow's face changed. Even under the dust he turned pale, and Philippus had to support him, for his feet refused their office. His long tramp through the torrid heat had exhausted his strength; but a draught of wine soon brought him to himself again and Horapollo ordered the slave to lead him to the kitchen and desire the cook to take the best care of him.

As soon as the friends were alone, the elder observed:

"That worthy, foolhardy, old child who is now dead, seems to have left you some strange request. I could see that as you were reading."

"There--take it!" replied Philippus; and again he walked up and down the room, while Horapollo took the letter. Both faces of the tablets were covered with irregular, up-and-down lines of writing to the following effect:

"Rufinus, in view of death, to his beloved Philippus:

"One shivering fit after another comes over me; I shall certainly die to-day. I must make haste. Writing is difficult. If only I can say what is most pressing.--First: Joanna and the poor child. Be everything you can be to them. Protect them as their guardian, Kyrios, and friend. They have enough to live on and something still to spare for others. My brother Leonax manages the property, and he is honest. Joanna knows all about it.--Tell her and the poor child that I send them ten thousand blessings--and to Joanna endless

thanks for all her goodness.--And to you, my friend: heed the old man's words. Rid your heart of Paula. She is not for you: you know, young Orion. But as to yourself: Those who were born in high places rarely suit us, who have dragged ourselves up from below to a better position. Be her friend; that she deserves--but let that be all. Do not live alone, a wife brings all that is best into a man's life; it is she who weaves sweet dreams into his dull sleep. You know nothing of all this as yet; and your worthy old friend--to whom my greetings--has held aloof from it all his life....

"For your private eye: it is a dying man who speaks thus. You must know that my poor child, our Pul, regards you as the most perfect of men and esteems you above all others. You know her and Joanna. Bear witness to your friend that no evil word ever passed the lips of either of them. Far be it from me to advise you, who bear the image of another woman in your heart,--to say: marry the child, she is the wife for you. But this much to you both--Father and son--I do advise you to live with the mother and daughter as true and friendly house-mates. You will none of you repent doing so. This is a dying man's word. I can write no more. You are the women's guardian, Philip, a faithful one I know. A common aim makes men grow alike. You and I, for many a year.--Take good care of them for me; I entreat you--good care."

The last words were separated and written all astray; the old man could hardly make them out. He now sat looking, as Phillipus had done before, sorely puzzled and undecided over this strange document.

"Well?" asked the leech at last.

"Aye-well?" repeated the other with a shrug. Then both again were silent; till Horapollo rose, and taking his staff, also paced the room while he murmured, half to himself and half to his younger friend "They are two quiet, reasonable women. There are not many of that sort, I fancy. How the little one helped me up from the low seat in the garden!" It was a reminiscence that made him chuckle to himself; he stopped Philippus, who was pacing at his side, by lightly patting his arm, exclaiming with unwonted vivacity: "A man should be ready to try everything--the care of women even, before he steps into the grave. And is it a fact that neither of them is a scold or a chatter-box?"

"It is indeed."

"And what 'if' or 'but' remains behind?" asked the old man. "Let us be reckless for once, brother! If the whole business were not so diabolically serious, it would be quite laughable. The young one for me and the old one for you in our leisure hours, my son; better washed linen; clothes without holes in them; no dust on our books; a pleasant 'Rejoice' every morning, or at meal-times;--only look at the fruit on that dish! No better than the oats they strew before horses. At the old man's everything was as nice as it used to be in my own home at Philae: Supper a little work of art, a feast for the eye as well as the appetite! Pulcheria seems to understand all that as well as my poor dead sister did. And then, when I want to rise, such a kind, pretty little hand to help one up! I have long hated this dwelling. Lime and dust fall from the ceiling in my bedroom, and here there are wide gaps in the flooring--I stumbled over one yesterday--and our niggardly landlords, the officials, say that if we want anything repaired we may do it ourselves, that they have no money left for such things. Now, under that worthy old

man's roof everything was in the best order." The philosopher chuckled aloud and rubbed his hands as he went on: "Supposing we kick over the traces for once, Philip. Supposing we were to carry out our friend's dying wish? Merciful Isis! It would certainly be a good action, and I have not many to boast of. But cautiously--what do you say? We can always throw it up at a month's notice."

Then he grew grave again, shook his head, and said meditatively: "No, no; such plans only disturb one's peace of mind. A pleasant vision! But scarcely feasible."

"Not for the present, at any rate," replied the leech.

"So long as Paula's fate remains undecided, I beg you to let the matter rest."

The old man muttered a curse on her; then he said with a vicious, sharp flash in his eyes: "That patrician viper! Every where in everything--she spoils it all! But wait a while! I fancy she will soon be removed from our path, and then... No, even now, at the present time, I will not allow that we should be deprived of what would embellish life, of doing a thing which may turn the scale in my favor in the day of judgment. The wishes of a dying man are sacred: So our fathers held it; and they were right. The old man's will must be done! Yes, yes, yes. It is settled. As soon as that hindrance is removed, we will keep house with the two women. I have said; and I mean it."

At this point the gardener came in again, and the old man called out to him:

"Listen, man. We shall live together after all; you shall hear more of this later. Stay with my people till sundown, but you must keep your own counsel, for they are all listeners and blabs. The physician here will now take the melancholy tidings to the unfortunate widow, and then you can talk it all over with her at night. Nothing startling must take place at the house there; and with regard to your master, even his death must remain a secret from every one but us and his family."

The gardener knew full well how much depended on his silence; Philippus tacitly agreed to the old man's arrangement, but for the present he avoided discussing the matter with the women. When, at length he set off on his painful errand to the widow, Horapollo dismissed him saying:

"Courage, courage, my Son.--And as you pass by, just glance at our little garden;--we grieved to see the fine old palm-tree perish; but now a young and vigorous shoot is growing from the root."

"It has been drooping since yesterday and will die away," replied Philippus shrugging his shoulders.

But the old man exclaimed: "Water it, Gibbus! the palm-tree must be watered at once."

"Aye, you have water at hand for that!" retorted the leech, but he added bitterly as he reached the stairs, "If it were so in all cases!"

"Patience and good purpose will always win," murmured the old man; and when he was alone he growled on angrily: "Only be rid of that dry old palm-tree--his past life in all its relations to that patrician hussy

Away with it, into the fire!--But how am I to get her? How can I manage it?"

He threw himself back in his arm-chair, rubbing his forehead with the tips of his fingers. He had come to no result when the negro requested an audience for some visitors. These were the heads of the senate of Memphis, who had come as a deputation to ask counsel of the old sage. He, if any one, would find some means of averting or, at any rate, mitigating the fearful calamity impending over the town and country, and against which prayer, sacrifice, processions, and pilgrimages had proved abortive. They were quite resolved to leave no means untried, not even if heathen magic should be the last resource.

CHAPTER X.

All Katharina's sympathy with Heliodora had died finally in the course of the past, moonless night. She had secretly accompanied her, with her maid and an old deaf and dumb stable-slave, to a soothsayer--for there still were many in Memphis, as well as magicians and alchemists; and this woman had told the young widow that her line of life led to the greatest happiness, and that even the wildest wishes of her heart would find fulfilment. What those wishes were Katharina knew only too well; the probability of their accomplishment had roused her fierce jealousy and made her hate Heliodora.

Heliodora had gone to consult the sorceress in a simple but rich dress. Her peplos was fastened on the shoulder, not by an ordinary gold pin, but by a button which betrayed her taste for fine jewels, as it consisted of a sapphire of remarkable size; this had at once caught the eye of the witch, showing her that she had to deal with a woman of rank and wealth. She had taken Katharina, who had come very plainly dressed, for her companion or poor friend, so she had promised her no more than the removal of certain hindrances, and a happy life at last, with a husband no longer young and a large family of children.

The woman's business was evidently a paying one; the interior of her house was conspicuously superior to the wretched hovels which surrounded it, in the poorest and most squalid part of the town. Outside, indeed, it differed little from its neighbors; in fact; it was intentionally neglected, to mislead the authorities, for witchcraft and the practice of magic arts were under the penalty of death. But the fittings of the roofless centre-chamber in which she was wont to perform her incantations and divinations argued no small outlay. On the walls were hangings with occult figures; the pillars were painted with weird and grewsome pictures; crucibles and cauldrons of various sizes were simmering over braziers on little altars; on the shelves and tables stood cups, phials, and vases, a wheel on which a wryneck hopped up and down, wax images of men and women--some with needles through their hearts, a cage full of bats, and glass jars containing spiders, frogs, leeches, beetles, scorpions, centipedes and other foul creatures; and lengthways down the room was stretched a short rope walk, used in a Thracian form of magic. Perfumes and pungent vapors filled the air, and from behind a curtain which hid the performers came a monotonous music of children's voices, bells, and dull drumming.

Medea, so the wise woman was called, though scarcely past five and forty, harmonized in appearance with this strange habitation, full as it was of objects calculated to rouse repulsion, dread, and amazement. Her face was pale, and her extraordinary height was increased by a mass of coal-black hair, curled high over a comb at the very top of her head.

At the end of the first visit paid her by the two young women, who had taken her by surprise, so that several things were lacking which on the second occasion proved to be very effective in the exercise of her art, she had made Heliadora promise to return in three days' time. The young widow had kept her word, and had made her appearance punctually with Katharina.

To be in Egypt, the land of sorcery and the magic arts, without putting them to the test, was impossible. Even Martina allowed this, though she did not care for such things for herself. She was content with her lot; and if any change for the worse were in prospect she would rather not be tormented beforehand by a wise prophet; nor was it better to be deluded by a foolish one. Happiness as of Heaven itself she no longer craved; it would only have disturbed her peace. But she was the last person to think ill of the young, whose life still lay before them, if they longed to look into futurity.

The fair widow and her companion crossed the sorceress' threshold in some trepidation, and Katharina was the more agitated of the two; for this afternoon she had seen Philippus leave the house of Rufinus, and not long after some Arab officials had called there. Paula had come into the garden shortly before sundown, her eyes red with weeping; and when, soon after, Pulcheria and her mother had joined her there, Paula had thrown herself on Joanna's neck, sobbing so bitterly that the mother and daughter--"whose tears were near her eyes"--had both followed her example. Something serious had occurred; but when she had gone to the house to pick up further information, old Betta, who was particularly snappish with her, had refused her admission quite rudely.

Then, on their way hither, she and Heliadora had had a painful adventure; the chariot, lent by Neforis to convey them as far as the edge of the necropolis, was stopped on the way by a troop of Arab horse, and they were subjected to a catechism by the leader.

So they entered the house of "Medea of the curls," as the common people called the witch, with uneasy and throbbing hearts; they were received, however, with such servile politeness that they soon recovered themselves, and even the timid Heliadora began to breathe freely again. The sorceress knew this time who Katharina was, and paid more respectful attention to the daughter of the wealthy widow.

The young crescent moon had risen, a circumstance which Medea declared enabled her to see more clearly into the future than she could do at the time of the Luna-negers as she called the moonless night. Her inward vision had been held in typhornian darkness at the time of their first visit, by the influence of some hostile power. She had felt this as soon as they had quitted her, but to-day she saw clearer. Her mind's eye was as clear as a silver mirror, she had purified it by three days' fasting and not a mote could escape her sight.--"Help, ye children of Horapollo! Help, Hapi and Ye three holy ones!"

"Oh, my beauties, my beauties!" she went on enthusiastically. "Hundreds of great dames have proved my art, but such splendid fortunes I never

before saw crowding round any two heads as round yours. Do you hear how the cauldrons of fortune are seething? The very lids lift! Amazing, amazing."

She stretched out her hand towards the vessels as though conjuring them and said solemnly: "Abundance of happiness; brimming over, brimming over! Bursting storehouses! Zefa-oo Metramao. Return, return, to the right levels, the right heights, the right depth, the right measure! Your Elle Mei-Measurer, Leveller, require them, Techuti, require them, double Ibis!"

She made them both sit down on elegant seats in front of the boiling pots, tied the "thread of Anubis" round the ring-finger of each, asked in a low whisper between muttered words of incantation for a hair of each, and after placing the hairs both in one cauldron she cried out with wild vehemence, as though the weal or woe of her two visitors were involved in the smallest omission:

"Press the finger with the thread of Anubis on your heart; fix your eyes on the cauldron and the steam which rises to the spirits above, the spirits of light, the great One on high!"

The two women obeyed the sorceress' directions with beating hearts, while she began spinning round on her toes with dizzy rapidity; her curls flew out, and the magic wand in her extended hand described a large and beautiful curve. Suddenly, and as if stricken by terror, she stopped her whirl, and at the same instant the lamps went out and the only light was from the stars and the twinkling coals under the cauldrons. The low music died away, and a fresh strong perfume welled out from behind the curtain.

Medea fell on her knees, lifted up her hands to Heaven, threw her head so far back that her whole face was turned up to the sky and her eyes gazed straight up at the stars-an attitude only possible to so supple a spine. In this torturing attitude she sang one invocation after another, to the zenith of the blue vault over their heads, in a clear voice of fervent appeal. Her body was thrown forward, her mass of hair no longer stood up but was turned towards the two young women, who every moment expected that the supplicant would be suffocated by the blood mounting to her head, and fall backwards; but she sang and sang, while her white teeth glittered in the starlight that fell straight upon her face. Presently, in the midst of the torrent of demoniacal names and magic formulas that she sang and warbled out, a piteous and terrifying sound came from behind the curtain as of two persons gasping, sighing, and moaning: one voice seemed to be that of a man oppressed by great anguish; the other was the half-suffocated wailing of a suffering child. This soon became louder, and at length a voice said in Egyptian: "Water, a drink of water."

The woman started to her feet, exclaiming: "It is the cry of the poor and oppressed who have been robbed to enrich those who have too much already; the lament of those whom Fate has plundered to heap you with wealth enough for hundreds." As she spoke these words, in Greek and with much unction, she turned to the curtain and added solemnly, but in Egyptian: "Give drink to the thirsty; the happy ones will spare him a drop from their overflow. Give the white drink to the wailing child-spirit, that he may be soothed and quenched.--Play, music, and drown the lamentations of the spirits in sorrow."

Then, turning to Heliodora's kettle she said sternly, as if in obedience

to some higher power:

"Seven gold pieces to complete the work,"--and while the young widow drew out her purse the sorceress lighted the lamps, singing as she did so and as she dropped the coin into the boiling fluid: "Pure, bright gold! Sunlight buried in a mine! Holy Seven. Shashef, Shashef! Holy Seven, marry and mingle--melt together!"

When this was done she poured out of the cauldron a steaming fluid as black as ink, into a shallow saucer, called Heliadora to her side, and told her what she could see in the mirror of its surface.

It was all fair, and gave none but delightful replies to the widow's questioning. And all the sorceress said tended to confirm the young woman's confidence in her magic art; she described Orion as exactly as though she saw him indeed in the surface of the ink, and said he was travelling with an older man. And lo! he was returning already; in the bright mirror she could see Heliadora clasped in her lover's arms; and now--it was like a picture: A stranger--not the bishop of Memphis--laid her hand in his and blessed their union before the altar in a vast and magnificent cathedral.

Katharina, who had been chilled with apprehensions and a thrill of awe, as she listened to Medea's song, listened to every word with anxious attention; what Medea said--how she described Orion--that was more wonderful than anything else, beyond all she had believed possible. And the cathedral in which the lovers were to be united was the church of St. Sophia at Constantinople, of which she had heard so much.

A tight grip seemed to clutch her heart; still, eagerly as she listened to Medea's words, her sharp ears heard the doleful gasping and whimpering behind the hanging; and this distressed and dismayed her; her breath came short, and a deep, torturing sense of misfortune possessed her wholly. The wailing child-spirit within, a portion of whose joys Medea said had been allotted to her--nay, she had not robbed him, certainly not--for who could be more wretched than she? It was only that beautiful, languishing young creature who was so lavishly endowed by Fortune with gifts enough and to spare for others without number. Oh! if she could but have snatched them from her one after another, from the splendid ruby she was wearing to-day, to Orion's love!

She was pale and tremulous as she rose at the call of the sorceress, after she also had offered seven gold pieces. She would gladly have purchased annihilating curses to destroy her happier rival.

The black liquid in the saucer began to stir, and a sharply smelling vapor rose from it; the witch blew this aside, and as soon as the murky fluid was a little cool, and the surface was smooth and mirror-like, she asked Katharina what she most desired to know. But the answer was checked on her lips; a fearful thundering and roaring suddenly made the house shake; Medea dropped the saucer with a piercing shriek, the contents splashed up, and warm, sticky drops fell on the girl's arms and dress. She was quite overcome with the startling horror, and Heliadora, who could herself scarcely stand, had to support her, for she tottered and would have fallen.

The sorceress had vanished; a half-grown lad, a young man, and a very tall Egyptian girl in scanty attire were rushing about the room. They flew hither and thither, throwing all the vessels they could lay hands on

into an opening in the floor from which they had lifted a trap-door; pouring water on the braziers and extinguishing the lights, while they drove the two strangers into a corner of the hall, rating and abusing them. Then the lads clambered like cats up to the opening in the roof, and sprang off and away.

A shrill whistle rang through the house, and in moment Medea burst into the room again, clutched the two trembling women by the shoulders, and exclaimed: "For Christ's sake, be merciful! My life is at stake Sorcery is punishable by death. I have done my best for you. You came here-- that is what you must say--out of charity to nurse the sick." She pushed them both behind the hanging whence they still heard feeble groans, into a low, stuffy room, and the over-grown girl slipped in behind them.

Here, on miserable couches, lay an old man shivering, and showing dark spots on his bare breast and face: and a child of five, whose crimson cheeks were burning with fever.

Heliodora felt as if she must suffocate in the plague stricken, heavy atmosphere, and Katharina clung to her helplessly; but the soothsayer pulled her away, saying: "Each to one bed: you to the child, and you-- the old man."

Involuntarily they obeyed the woman who was panting with fright. The water-wagtail, who never in her life thought of a sick person, turned very sick and looked away from the sufferer; but the your widow, who had spent many and many a night by the death-bed of a man she had loved, and who, tender-hearted, had often tended her sick slaves with her own hand, looked compassionately into the pretty, pain-stricken face of the child, and wiped the dews from his clammy brow.

Katharina shuddered; but her attention was presently attracted to something fresh; from the other side of the house came a clatter of weapons, the door was pushed open, and the physician Philippus walked into the room. He desired the night-watch, who were with him, to wait outside. He had come by the command of the police authorities, to whose ears information had been brought that there were persons sick of the plague in the house of Medea, and that she, nevertheless, continued to receive visitors. It had long been decided that she must be taken in the act of sorcery, and warning had that day been given that she expected illustrious company in the evening. The watch were to find her red-handed, so to speak; the leech was to prove whether her house was indeed plague-stricken; and in either case the senate wished to have the sorceress safe in prison and at their mercy, though even Philippus had not been taken into their confidence.

The visitors he had come upon were the last he had expected to find here. He looked at them with a disapproving shake of the head, interrupted the woman's voluble asseverations that these noble ladies had come, out of Christian charity, to comfort and help the sick, with a rough exclamation: "A pack of lies!" and at once led the coerced sick nurses out of the house. He then represented to them the fearful risk to which their folly had exposed them, and insisted very positively on their returning home and, notwithstanding the lateness of the hour, taking a bath and putting on fresh garments.

With trembling knees they found their way back to the chariot; but even before it could start Heliodora had broken down in tears, while Katharina, throwing herself back on the cushions, thought, as she glanced

at her weeping companion: "This is the beginning of the wonderful happiness she was promised! It is to be hoped it may continue!"

It seemed indeed as though Katharina's guardian spirit had overheard this amiable wish; for, as the chariot drove past the guard-house into the court-yard of the governor's house, it was stopped by armed men with brown, warlike faces, and they had to wait some minutes till an Arab officer appeared to enquire who they were, and what they wanted. This they explained in fear and trembling, and they then learnt that the Arab government had that very evening taken possession of the residence. Orion was accused of serious crimes, and his guests were to depart on the following day.

Katharina, who was known to the interpreter, was allowed to go with Heliodora to the senator's wife; she might also use the chariot to return home in, and if she pleased, take the Byzantines with her, for the palace would be in the hands of the soldiery for the next few days.

The two young women held council. Katharina pressed her friend to come at once to her mother's house, for she felt certain that they were plague-stricken, and how could they procure a bath in a house full of soldiers? Heliodora could not and must not remain with Martina in this condition, and the senator's wife could follow her next day. Her mother, she added, would be delighted to welcome so dear a guest.

The widow was passive, and when Martina had gladly consented to accept the invitation of her "delivering angel," the chariot carried them to Susannah's house. The widow had long been in bed, firmly convinced that her daughter was asleep and dreaming in her own pretty room.

Katharina would not have her disturbed, and the bath-room was so far from Susannah's apartment that she slept on quietly while Katharina and her guest purified themselves.

CHAPTER XI.

The inhabitants of the governor's residence passed a fearful night. Martina asked herself what sin she had committed that she, of all people, should be picked out to witness such a disaster.

And where were her schemes of marriage now? Any movement in such heat was indeed scarcely endurable; but she would have moved from one part of the house to another a dozen times, and allowed herself to be tossed hither and thither like a ball, if it could have enabled her to save her dear "great Sesostris" from such hideous peril. And at the bottom of all this was, no doubt, this wild, senseless business of the nuns.

And these Arabs! They simply helped themselves to whatever they fancied, and were, of course, in a position to strip the son of the great Mukaukas of all he possessed and reduce him to beggary. A pretty business this!

Heliodora, to be sure, had enough for both, and she and her husband would not forget them in their will; but there was more than this in the balance now: it was a matter of life and death.

A cold shudder ran through her at the thought; and her fears were only

too well founded: the black Arab who had come to parley with her, and had finally allowed her to remain under this roof till next day, had told her as much through the interpreter. A fearful, horrible, nameless catastrophe! And that she should be in the midst of it and have to see it all!

Then her husband, her poor Justinus! How hard this would fall on him! She could not cease weeping; and before she fell asleep she prayed fervently indeed, to the saints and the dear Mother of God, that they would bring all to a happy issue. She closed her eyes on the thought: "What a misfortune!" and she woke to it again early in the morning.

She, however, had known nothing of the worst horrors of that fatal night.

A troop of Arab soldiers had crossed the Nile at nightfall, some on foot or on horseback and some in boats, led by Obada the Vekeel, and had invested the governor's residence. When they had fully assured themselves that Orion was indeed absent they took Nilus prisoner. It was then Obada's business to inform the Mukaukas' widow of what had happened, and to tell her that she must quit the house next day. This must be done, because he had views of his own as to what was to become of the venerable house of the oldest family in the country.

Neforis was still up, and when the interpreter was announced as Obada's forerunner, she was in the fountain-room. He found her a good deal excited; for, although she was incapable of any consecutive train of thought and, when her mind was required to exert itself, her ideas only came like lightning-flashes through her brain, she had observed that something unusual was going on. Sebek and her maid had evaded her enquiries, and would say no more than that Amru's representative had come to speak with the young master. It seemed to be something important, perhaps some false accusation.

The interpreter now explained that Orion himself was accused of having planned and aided an enterprise which had cost the lives of twelve Arab soldiers; and, as she knew, any injury inflicted even on a single Moslem by an Egyptian was punished by death and the confiscation of his goods. Besides this, her son was accused of a robbery.

At the close of this communication, to which Neforis listened with a vacant stare, horrified and at last almost crushed, the interpreter begged that she would grant the Vekeel an audience.

"Not just yet--give me a few minutes," said the widow, bringing out the words with difficulty: first she must have recourse to her secret specific. When she had done so, she expressed her readiness to see Obada. Her son's swarthy foe was anxious to appear a mild and magnanimous man in her eyes, so it was with flattering servility and many smirking grins that he communicated to her the necessity for her quitting the house in which she had passed the longest and happiest half of her life, and no later than next day.

To his announcement that her private fortune would remain untouched, and that she would be at liberty to reside in Memphis or to go to her own house in Alexandria, she indifferently replied that "she should see."

She then enquired whether the Arabs had yet succeeded in capturing her son.

"Not actually," replied the Vekeel. "But we know where he is hiding, and by to-morrow or the next day we shall lay hands on the unhappy young man."

But, as he spoke, the widow detected a malicious gleam in his eyes to which, so far, he had tried to give a sympathetic expression, and she went on with a slight shake of the bead: "Then it is a case of life and death?"

"Compose yourself, noble lady," was the reply. "Of death alone."

Neforis looked up to heaven and for some minutes did not speak; then she asked:

"And who has accused him of robbery?" "The head of his own Church....."

"Benjamin?" she murmured with a peculiar smile. Only yesterday she had made her will in favor of the patriarch and the Church. "If Benjamin could see that," said she to herself, "he would change his views of you and your people, and have prayers constantly said for us."

As she spoke no more the Vekeel sat looking at her inquisitively and somewhat at a loss, till at length she rose, and with no little dignity dismissed him, remarking that now their business was at an end and she had nothing further to say to him.

This closed the interview; and as the Vekeel quitted the fountain-room he muttered to himself: "What a woman! Either she is possessed and her brain is crazed, or she is of a rarely heroic pattern."

Neforis was supported to her own room; when she was in bed she desired her maid to bring a small box out of her chest and place it on the little table containing medicines by the head of the couch.

As soon as she was alone she took out two letters which George had written to her before their marriage, and a poem which Orion had once addressed to her; she tried to read them, but the words danced before her eyes, and she was forced to lay them aside. She took up a little packet containing hair cut from the heads of her sons after death, and a lock of her husband's. She gazed on these dear memorials with rapt tenderness, and now the poppy juice began to take effect: the images of those departed ones rose clear in her mind, and she was as near to them as though they were standing in living actuality by her side.

Still holding the curls in her hand, she looked up into vacancy, trying to apprehend clearly what had occurred within the last few hours and what lay before her: She must leave this room, this ample couch, this house--all, in short, that was bound up with the dearest memories of those she had loved. She was to be forced to this--but did it beseem her to submit to this Negro, this stranger in the house where she was mistress? She shook her head with a scornful smile; then opening a glass phial, which was still half-full of opium pillules, she placed a few on her tongue and again gazed sky-wards.--Another face now looked down on her; she saw the husband from whom not even death could divide her, and at his feet their two murdered sons. Presently Orion seemed to rise out of the clouds, as a diver comes up from the water, and make for the shore of the island on which George and the other two seemed to be standing. His father opened his arms to receive him and clasped him to his heart, while she herself --or was it only her wraith--went to the others, who hurried forward to

greet her tenderly; and then her husband, too, met her, and she found rest on his bosom.

For hours, and long before the incursion of the Arabs, she had been feeling half stunned and her mind clouded; but now a delicious, slumberous lethargy came over her, to which her whole being urged her to yield. But every time her eyes closed, the thought of the morrow shot through her brain, and finally, with a great effort, she sat up, took some water--which was always close at hand--shook into it the remaining pillules in the bottle, and drank it off to the very last drop.

Her hand was steady; the happy smile on her lips, and the eager expression of her eyes, might have led a spectator to believe that she was thirsty and had mixed herself a refreshing draught. She had no look of a desperate creature laying violent hands on her own life; she felt no hesitancy, no fear of death, no burthen of the guilt she was incurring--nothing but ecstatic weariness and hope; blissful hope of a life without end, united to those she loved.

Hardly had she swallowed the deadly draught when she shivered with a sudden chill. Raising herself a little she called her maid, who was sitting up in the adjoining room; and as the woman looked alarmed at her mistress's fixed stare, she stammered out: "A priest--quick--I am dying."

The woman flew off to the viridarium to call Sebek, who was standing in front of the tablinum with the Vekeel; she told him what had happened, and the Negro gave him leave to obey his dying mistress, escorting him as far as the gate. Just outside, the steward met a deacon who had been giving the blessing of the Church to a poor creature dying of the pestilence, and in a few minutes they were standing by the widow's bed.

The locks of her sons' hair lay by her side; her hands were folded over a crucifix; but her eyes, which had been fixed on the features of the Saviour, had wandered from it and again gazed up to Heaven.

The priest spoke her name, but she mistook him for her son and murmured in loving accents:

"Orion, poor, poor child! And you, Mary, my darling, my sweet little pet! Your father--yes, dear boy, only come with me.--Your father is kind again and forgives you. All those I loved are together now, and no one--Who can part us? Husband--George, listen. . ."

The priest performed his office, but she paid no heed, still staring upwards; her smiling lips continued to move, but no articulate sound came from them. At last they were still, her eyelids fell, her hands dropped the crucifix, a slight shiver ran through her limbs, which then relaxed, and she opened her mouth as though to draw a deeper breath. But it closed no more, and when the faithful steward pressed her lips together her face was rigid and her heart had ceased to beat.

The honest man sobbed aloud; when he carried the melancholy news to the Vekeel, Obada growled out a curse, and said to a subaltern officer who was super-intending the loading of his camels with the treasures from the tablinum:

"I meant to have treated that cursed old woman with conspicuous generosity, and now she has played me this trick; and in Medina they will lay her death at my door, unless. . ."

But here he broke off; and as he once more watched the loading of the camels, he only thought to himself: "In playing for such high stake's, a few gold pieces more or less do not count. A few more heads must fall yet--the handsome Egyptian first and foremost.--If the conspirators at Medina only play their part! The fall of Omar means that of Amru, and that will set everything right."

CHAPTER XII.

Katharina slept little and rose very early, as was her habit, while Heliadora was glad to sleep away the morning hours. In this scorching season they were, to be sure, the pleasantest of the twenty-four, and the water-wagtail usually found them so; but to-day, though a splendid Indian flower had bloomed for the first time, and the head gardener pointed it out to her with just pride, she could not enjoy it and be glad. It might perish for aught she cared, and the whole world with it!

There was no one stirring yet in the next garden, but the tall leech Philippus might be seen coming along the road to pay a visit to the women.

A few swift steps carried her to the gate, whence she called him. She must entreat him to say nothing of her last night's expedition; but before she had time to prefer her request he had paused to tell her that the widow of the Mukaukas, overcome by alarm and horror, had followed her husband to the next world.

There had been a time when Katharina had been devoted to Neforis, regarding her as a second mother; when the governor's residence had seemed to her the epitome of all that was great, venerable, and illustrious; and when she had been proud and happy to be allowed to run in and out, and to be loved like a child of the family. The tears that started to her eyes were sincere, and it was a relief to her, too, to lay aside the gay and defiantly happy mien which she wore as a mask, while all in her soul was dark, wild, and desperate.

The physician understood her grief; he readily promised not to betray her to any one, and did not blame her, though he again pointed out the danger she had incurred and earnestly insisted that every article of clothing, which she or Heliadora had worn, must be destroyed. The subtle germ of the malady, he said, clung to everything; every fragment of stuff which had been touched by the plague-stricken was especially fitted to carry the infection and disseminate the disease. She listened to him in deep alarm, but she could satisfy him on this point; everything she or her companion had worn had been burnt in the bath-room furnace.

The physician went on; and she, heedless of the growing heat, wandered restlessly about the grounds. Her heart beat with short, quick, painful jerks; an invisible burthen weighed upon her and prevented her breathing freely. A host of torturing thoughts haunted her unbidden; they were not to be exorcised, and added to her misery: Neforis dead; the residence in the hands of the Arabs; Orion bereft of his possessions and held guilty of a capital crime.

And the peaceful house beyond the

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