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# Aphrodite und Ihr Dichter (English Translation)

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# Aphrodite und Ihr Dichter (English Translation)

## English Translation of Aphrodite und ihr Dichter by Gabriele Reuter

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Aphrodite and her Poet

by

Gabriele Reuter

**Translated by Michelle Stott James**

I heard the beginning of the story while I was still a little girl and with my mother visited her black friend Miss Alison in Kôme ed Dîk. Kôme ed Dîk is the fort that is enthroned on the old hills of debris high above Alexandria: dazzling white ramparts and fortifications, all around them yellow, drifting sand, a couple of white houses in the bright radiance of the sun, and the white gunpowder tower, which later blew up because the Egyptian sentries who leaned against the entrance in their white uniforms didn't understand in the least why they shouldn't smoke and why they shouldn't throw the burning matches around. Ya Mohamed Ras Allula! Therefore, in spite of the great prophet who promised his protection to every good Moslem, it was quite natural that the gunpowder tower at last blew up and with it the cigarette-smoking sentries and all the houses that stood up there -- including the one belonging to Miss Alison. I think that she herself was in England at the time, to present her father's valuable grave artifacts to the Kensington Museum, and in this way she was saved.

But the veranda on which we sat back then and drank tea and ate plum cake, jam, and other English wonders which Miss Alison had saved for me from a party which had taken place there on the previous day -- the veranda has completely vanished from the earth. The broad, airy veranda, from which one could look out over Alexandria to the ocean which reached dark blue and flickering gold around all the white, flat houses, the high minarets with their delicate galleries of stone, the round cupolas of the mosques, and the gray-green flexible feathery tops of the palm gardens, and which sent the sea wind, which was so fresh and salty in spite of the burning glare of the afternoon sun, and which carried along to us, high over the stifling, bad-smelling city, the wonderful scent of the ocean, continually blowing over us so stormily that the tablecloth, as well as our hats, ribbons, and muslin clothing, were kept in constant fluttering motion.

How clearly I see it all before me!

I was still at the age where one still wears short dresses, but already possesses wide open eyes and a bit too eager listening ears. For these eyes and ears there was always a feast when we visited Miss Alison, who was so extraordinarily animated and witty and so surprisingly black -- not only her hair and eyes, although both of these were admittedly the blackest that one could ever see, but also her face, her hands, and probably everywhere else as well. There were plenty of mulattoes in Alexandria, but this Lady who carefully hid her woolly hair under a chenille net and under velvet ribbons, and from whose bulging lips one could hear clever and cultured comments, who had her dresses sent from London and peeped in such a wildly funny way out of the fragrant pink gauze frills and white lace -- she always retained something of the incredible for me, perhaps because I always saw her next to my slender white mother with her calmly parted, brown wavy hair.

Besides, my dull childish astonishment reached its zenith every time when Mr. Alison, a silver-haired, rosy-cheeked old Englishman, came out onto the veranda and had a cup of tea prepared by his daughter's smoke-grey hands before he returned again to his scholarly studies.

Miss Alison was likewise considered to be very learned and original. For this reason she had a repulsive effect on many people. She had deciphered an important papyrus by herself, and when half a year earlier cholera had raged in Alexandria, she had in her own house -- because it was situated in such a healthy location -- set up a cholera hospital and nursed the sick people herself.

Since then her acquaintances didn't want to visit her any more, although the epidemic had long since expired. A general sense of depression still reigned in the European colony, in spite of the fact that the plague had demanded only a few victims there. No one dared visit the others, the winter social circles just couldn't properly get underway.

"...You see, my dear," said Miss Alison with a spark of mockery in her small blueberry eyes, "that's why I arranged my evening of dancing. I was longing for cheeriness. You know, I would give my life for waltzes! Anyway, the people were merry here and danced in the same hall where the sick folks had lain, and no ghost appeared to them... One can drive away every ghost with pleasure! Believe me! It was too bad, that you weren't there! Come, you must see how I arranged things; to be sure, everything is already wilted today. You must let your imagination help you envisage how it looked yesterday. But actually, don't you find that one needs a large portion of imagination every time to believe that one really experienced yesterday?"

We went across to a sort of outbuilding which consisted entirely of one room, not overly high, whitewashed and paved with black and white flagstones. On the walls, many-armed golden candelabras were attached at short intervals, and garlands made of the large red calyx leaves of the Indian flametree stretched from one to the other. This must have been a splendid sight by candlelight against the white walls. Now a couple of servants were busy removing the garlands. They had already piled up part of them in a corner of the hall. This almost looked like a burial mound of purple leaves. With the craving for frightening things which so torments adolescent girls, I suddenly saw a dying person under these purple leaves -- saw a dread-filled face and rigid eyes begging for help. Miss Alison also stared down at the pile, and perhaps her memories, which she had wanted to chase off, returned too intensely, because her black, ugly face contorted itself into a grimace with an expression of pain, of frightening wild Negro pain. Suddenly she was no longer the friendly, funny woman, she was an uncannily foreign creature, separated from us by unknown worlds. In this moment I was afraid of this black woman.

She rushed out of the hall ahead of us, and as we followed her and returned to the veranda she wasn't there, but rather came back only after a long while. By then the mirth, which made her grotesque ugliness so bearable, had returned to her face.

My mother hadn't noticed the incident at all. She asked Miss Alison in a suggestive, teasing tone about a certain Mr. Owen -- whether he had also been invited, and whether she might be thinking of granting his petition? Miss Alison, who had taken a seat in a rocking chair, laughed warmly.

"No, whatever are you thinking! Why shouldn't I keep my money for myself? My dear, I am not the marrying color!"

With that she resignedly folded her short, black, diamond-ring bedecked mole paws on her pink dress.

I had to laugh, and she cried: "What's with the child? Does she understand something of this already? She has such an earnest nose, I think she will write books some day! You--go inside and look at the pictures on the table there! I may not have the right color, but you don't have the right age to bother yourself about the sort of things your mother is asking about."

Obedient to the hint, I retreated into the room. But the English magazines assigned to me didn't appeal to me very much. Then I saw on Miss Alison's large man's desk a little book, expensively bound in red and gold; I opened it. German poetry! Ha, that was something! At once a shudder of awe ran through me, and now the two out there could talk about anything they wanted to; it didn't matter anymore to me.

The small book was called "Aphrodite"; it was about love, but also about very many other things. In solemnly ringing, then again in sweetly singing and cheerfully flirting verses, it celebrated Aphrodite's triumphant advance through the centuries.

I believe I actually understood little of it. It came over me like the intoxication of wine that is too strong, a blessed drunkenness in which I reveled, staggering in incomprehensible beauty.

I don't have much hope that I will ever get hold of the book again. And that is fine, because I would certainly be very disappointed. Doesn't it still seem to me as if no poem which I later read, not even the most wonderful and exquisite poetry, not those acknowledged as exalted and famous, has measured up to the lovely, magical resonance and the fervor of those verses?

"That girl is so anxiously quiet. What has she gotten her hands on?" at length I heard Miss Alison say next to me, and she took the little volume out of my hands.

"Aphrodite!" she said slowly. I don't know whether it was just the dreamy mood in which I was caught up that made her manner seem to me mysteriously woeful.

Perhaps I was mistaken, because she handed the book to my mother and asked indifferently: "Did you know Goedeke? Didn't you meet him at our place?"

"Yes, of course. What ever became of him?"

"Here is his poetry."

"Really? Who would have thought that he would ever finish it!" Mama said, and laughed.

"Yes, no one would have thought it," replied Miss Alison earnestly.

"Is it beautiful?" asked my mother. "Did he send it to you? He really was peculiar! A crazy fellow! But in spite of that I often thought... if he hadn't been so dilapidated... Do you still remember how you once said

that you would marry a German, because only with him could you believe that he --that he had enough Idealism to..."

My mother faltered; it was embarrassing to her to go on.

"In order to forget my exterior in favor of my other, perhaps assessable qualities?" said Miss Alison. "Yes, my dear, I am still of that opinion. Of course, I have never yet met this ideal German."

"But tell me," my mother continued in a private train of thought, "how exactly did Alexander Goedeke come into your home, and what sort of a person was he after all?"

"Do you know Persepolis?"

"The Greek house speculator?"

"Yes. I was close to his family in a peculiar way. My mother was a house slave there."

"Oh! Well! I hadn't ever heard that."

This was discreetly whispered, and, extremely astonished, I stuck my head into one of the magazines on the table. As long as I wasn't sent out!

The two women withdrew from me a little ways and sat down in the open veranda door. But I heard clearly what they said, especially since Miss Alison very often relinquished her subdued tone and recounted her story loudly and expressively. And while doing it she had such strange gestures, and her white eyeballs with the black iris rolled and glittered in the excited mulatto face.

"Mother could never be convinced to leave the people whose parents had purchased her as a small child," said Miss Alison. "She always preferred my Greek milk sister to me. Well, that was lucky, so to say. The relationship would have become a bit difficult if we had had her here at home. One can't get over these things with fine sounding phrases. The best one can do is to speak as little as possible of it. When I came

back from England, where my father had sent me to be educated, my good mother was really embarrassing to me. But papa insisted -- even after he had formally adopted me and taken me in -- that I visit her every week.

Do you know where the Persepholis' live? The garden behind the house borders on the large Arab vegetable plantations which stretch between the city and the Pompeii colonnaded gate. Only a narrow path runs along there, on both sides are stone embankments and cactus hedges, over which one looks out into the sunken palm and vegetable fields. It is a lonely and wild area; I have always loved it. There is nothing modern there at all; this place could have looked exactly the same two thousand years ago. The grey columns in the corner of the stone embankment where the street curves, and the blind beggar in his few rags under it. It all looks so dusty and prehistoric. There -- on the stone embankment, not on the path -- from Persepholis' garden my sister and I once saw a European man sitting, staring at the columns and the beggar, completely lost in dreaming. It was a strange figure that crouched there in a Baroque position, with long, clumsy limbs stuck in a shabby and not entirely clean suit. We came closer, so that we could look at the man, who was still fairly young.

Suddenly he jumped up and, sighing, stretched his arms with a theatrical gesture. At the sound, the blind man at once began a pitiful Arab begging song. The foreigner didn't just answer: "Allah will provide for you," in order to go past in peace, but rather he remained standing before the beggar and said in the German language and with earnest pathos: "My friend, I can give you centuries, I can build temples for you and give you the priestesses of Isis to serve you, but I don't possess a para which I could lay in your outstretched hand. Would you like a song? I know one, a deep, mysterious..."

I can still remember clearly how absurd this scene seemed to us. Of course my sister didn't understand the peculiar speech, but in spite of that she giggled brightly.

The man spun around, stared at her and cried:

"Aphrodite!"

Then she looked at him in astonishment and laughed again. He sprang down from the stone embankment into Persepholis' garden, fell in the process, remained on his knees and, stretching out his arms toward her, cried again: "Aphrodite!"

Majestically she raised the train of her white gown a little, and as she was leaving, she turned her head back over her shoulder toward the dreamer and, offended, asked: "Monsieur?"

Because her given name was Aphrodite, and whatever this name might otherwise mean, my good sister didn't know.

But as her white figure strolled away between the tall myrtle hedges, to me it was very understandable that the man remained on his knees and gazed raptly after her.

After she had disappeared behind the bushes -- naturally she stood still there and observed the strange worshiper through the twigs -- he put his hand over his face. My dear, he was weeping!

I stood close by him; he didn't see me as he got up. His smile was very beautiful, also his passionate look. Already at that moment I understood that this must be a remarkable person. That's how I came to know Alexander Goedeke.

The next day at the same hour he stood in the same place, and Aphrodite strolled toward him through the myrtle corridor, which radiated a fine, bitter fragrance around her. I had informed her that the foreigner held her to be the goddess of beauty and love. Consequently she was in a very merciful mood and even wanted to put on her new parisian chignon in his honor; but fortunately or unfortunately I prevented her from doing that.

Of course I wanted to see the adventure and had likewise turned up.

My sister approached the young man and asked: "What do you want of me, since you were calling my name?"

"I desire to kiss the hem of your dress," answered Goedeke in a very melodious ancient Greek, of which Aphrodite understood nothing. Meanwhile, while she, amused and embarrassed, turned to me for an explanation, he bowed himself to the ground and pressed her white summer dress to his lips.

Well, the rest is the same old story. Every afternoon Goedeke came over the stone embankment into the garden. It suited Aphrodite to be worshiped in such an incredible way. This love was the first sacrificial fragrance offered to her, and she inhaled eagerly, greedy for more and more, and at the same time cool and marble-like in her innermost self, as befits a true goddess. Majestically she granted the poor,



trembling mortal little by little a few tokens of her affection. But I always ensured that a sense of decency and etiquette was preserved! You can believe me, my dear; that is why I received an English education! In my mother's view I didn't have any real confidence in this relationship; that's why I took up the position of sentry. Usually I sat down with my books nearby under a sycamore. During that time I deciphered a large part of the Alison papyrus.

Goedeke could laugh in a wonderful way, like a child, and he laughed in this way the first time he encountered me at my work. We became good friends. He was also very interested in hieroglyphs-- what wasn't the man interested in? He told me that he was working on an Arabic Grammar, and he spoke all the languages that were used in Egypt with astounding mastery.

At that time he began the epic of Aphrodite. He brought us the first canto and read it aloud to us. My sister, who in a mystical-symbolic and somewhat confused way was the heroine of the poem, of course understood no German; she sat in her rocking chair, fanned herself with a black ostrich feather fan, and occasionally demonstrated clear indications of boredom. Goedeke read with a bit too much pathos, but his face was grand while he did it, and his blinking, near-sighted green eyes behind his spectacles became true poet's eyes, which see more, and that which is more beautiful, than the eyes of us ordinary people.

I said a few words to him which pleased him. Poets are so very vain! At this moment Mr. Goedeke loved me and not my sister. Yes, I know that was the case. It was just another type of love. A man loves every woman with a different kind of love, and each is loved with the type of love which corresponds best to her nature. The love for beauty is, if I may say it thus, more brilliant and magnificent than the love for the intellect. This second type can of course become deep and powerful, it just depends on whether in the man the sense and the feeling for intellect or for beauty is more strongly developed. With Goedeke, the second was the case. He wasn't a philosopher, but rather, a poet, and to be sure, a poet of beautiful form.

He was as animated and excited as if he were coming from a fine banquet, his own verses had gone so to his head; in fact, as far as his meals were concerned, I believe that already at that time they consisted chiefly of cooked beans and a little oil.

Can you possibly imagine what results this reading had?

Aphrodite became jealous of me! In order to punish poor Goedeke because he talked too long and too enthusiastically with me about Aphrodite, for several days she didn't appear at the rendezvous. I was annoyed with her and stayed home as well. I can't tell what went on in Goedeke's heart and brain during the hours of lonely waiting. On the third day he appeared before Aphrodite's father in a long, black,

preacher-like coat, his dark hair, which always fell in his face, made smooth and sticky with dreadful pomade -- before Persepholis, this fat, crafty house speculator, and asked unceremoniously for the hand of his daughter in marriage!

As luck would have it, I happened to be there.

By Jove, the man looked wretched! Awkward and pitiable, the German philistine from a small town. It was still surprising that Mr. Persepholis, polite, as people from southern lands are, sought an acceptable manner in which to be rid of such a suitor. He asked very earnestly what sort of profession the man had.

At that Goedeke smiled a little and said: "I am seeking the path to immortality! You can believe me, that takes up an entire life!"

"Yes, but, it is nothing certain, on the basis of which to marry and to establish a household," remarked the Greek, still very polite. "I would prefer another line of work; if you were, for example, a merchant..."

"Fine!" said Goedeke quickly, "Tristan wooed Isolde as a merchant. That's a minor detail! Let's become a merchant!"

With dignity he placed his dreadful antediluvian stove-pipe hat, which he had held in his hand throughout the entire conversation, on his head and withdrew.

For quite some time he wasn't to be seen again. During this year, my beautiful sister began to attend balls. Now the cards of Alexandrian dandies lay on all the tables in Persepholis' home. And now -- unfortunately - - Aphrodite made my mother her confidante...

At that time, incidentally, I received from the old woman the only token of love which I can recall. One evening she asked me to stay until the next morning. When everyone had gone to sleep, she led me into the garden. The moon shone brightly; it was the type of night that my mother felt to be effective for my destiny, for reasons known only to her. She pulled me along under the thick bushes; at the same time she whispered her superstitious secrets to me in her gurgling, passionate, guttural Arabic tones, and showed me all the herbs, berries, and roots, out of which the black women brew their diabolical drinks. She taught me how one can make a man mad with yearning and how one can secretly kill an enemy -- so secretly, that no one will ever discover the culprit. "The whites don't need this," she said solemnly, "but it is good for us Negro folks to know!" The poor soul, she really did want to see me happy too!

My mother was a pristine wild character who had never thought about ideal love. And it is strange! There, in the bright, blue summer night, with the excited whispering and the insane gestures of the old, black woman, you would probably think that I was grateful to my father, that he had adopted me and reared me like a human being? -- No! -- I hated him because I remained so superior, so cool beside my poor mother, was not in the least capable of believing in her love potions and all the other nonsense, and was revolted by it all. Yes, dearest, that is the truth!

I went back into the house. There I saw a male figure standing, lost in dreams, under the large datura bushes with their gigantic white poisonous flowers -- it was Goedeke.

On our narrow, hot mezzanine, Aphrodite lay on the mattress which we had shared as children and which we were also to share tonight. She was asleep and had tossed off her covers. The moon shone on her white limbs.

I looked at her a long time and had many thoughts about slumbering beauty and its great might and power. And you see, in us women thoughts kill the confidence, the blind triumphal feeling which always prevails and through which a few of us can look down with the smile of goddesses of war upon those who are fallen, wound-covered, wretched.

As far as Goedeke is concerned, he really did appear again before Mr. Persepholis one day, with his patched boots and his clerical coat; he explained that he was now a merchant, had established a shop, and desired to have Aphrodite as his wife. The poor fellow had rented a little shop for a couple of thousand francs -- the entire fortune he had to live on -- and had fitted it out with children's toys and imitation jewelry. That's where he wanted to take Aphrodite, who sent for her dresses from Paris, her lace from Brussels and her bracelets from Rome.

This time Persepholis was less polite.

Goedeke apparently begged to be allowed to speak with Aphrodite for just a moment. And Aphrodite came into the room and smiled and said she didn't know this gentleman -- she had never seen him before!

My dear, it was good that I didn't hear that.... I am at times a bit passionate; my dark ancestors are to blame for that.

On that same evening I was driving around in the city and making purchases, not yet having an inkling that Goedeke had shown up again at the Persepholis house. In the process I entered into a shabby street. You know, one of those where predominantly poor Levantine people live, where the houses are painted with the most fantastic tales: with large yellow, leaping lions under trees with lilac leaves and red fruit, and the sun and the moon above them, and uncanny sky-blue dragons with women's faces. The people display a ghastly imagination in the decoration of their sweet home! And dirty children's linen hangs out of all the windows and over the narrow street, whose foot-deep dust teems with black-haired, pale worms of children, hang tin pots or dripping blue cloth, lined up on pieces of rope. Or newly finished coffins are stacked up before a door, and little girls make themselves false curls out of the fallen wood shavings. It is never quiet in these lovely parts of town, because the carpenters and shoemakers and tinware sellers etc. all carry out their business on the street: they tap, saw, rivet, and hammer, and the women cook, mend, cackle, and punish their children, at which these naturally howl and scream. The dreadful odor of the oil-soaked Frittura, which the people fry in pans over coals, will rob one of the last ounce of breath and consciousness.

However, such a terrible din as poured out of one of these streets on that evening when Goedeke got the brush-off at Persepholis' I have seldom heard in Alexandria, the center of all earsplitting noise. My carriage ended up in a throng of people in which it could move forward only inch by inch, in spite of the fact that Zais with his stick and the coachman with his whip thrashed away at women and children. Everyone squealed, but they didn't give way, because in their excitement they felt no pain. I stood up in the coach in order to find out what was going on. Most of the girls had managed to get necklaces and dreadful brass trinkets and were swinging them around high in the air with upraised arms, in order to protect them from the loot-lustful claws of their black-eyed sisters.

Yes, and then I saw the focus of all this uproar. In a shop open to the street, slightly elevated, stood Goedeke: his torn shirt collar hung over his black coat, and his stove-pipe hat sat backwards on his long hair. And in a wild arc he threw the treasures of his newly-established shop into the raging, cheering, screeching crowd. Silk paper and cardboard boxes were piled up around him, the wooden horses and lambs, fine ladies and baby dolls flew willy-nilly through the air, and the Noah's ark came open and scattered its inhabitants on the heads of the swarming, scratching, and biting hordes of children, and countless little hands thrashed upward in order to catch as much as possible.

And then he seized a crate of wax pearls, tore open the cords, in order to hurl them by the handful into the faces of the squealing women. At the same time he laughed insanely and shouted abuse at them. His voice was so shrill and high that it pierced through all the clamour to me.

Never in my life have I seen anything so heartbreaking as this man in his mad pain.

I signalled and called to him, but he didn't notice me. I couldn't get to him; the carriage wheels would have crushed dozens of children before I could push forward that far.

I see that now. At that time I behaved like an animal toward my two Nubians. Yes, he [Goedeke] was like a fool, and I was like an animal! I struck and pushed my poor Ali and almost dragged him down from his coach box, while he, with his Mohammedan equanimity, merely answered: "You can see, Mistress, that we can't get through."

Oh my dear, this is the misfortune of my life. You would never be able to forget yourself to that degree -- never! It is in one's blood, no matter how much thinking and studying one does, it is impossible to advance beyond it. And it always seizes me against black people -- seldom with Europeans.

As if I could even remember today why in the world I wanted to get to Goedeke at all! I certainly couldn't help him, and at such moments all consolation is loathesome!

Suddenly I didn't want to anymore either.

For an hour I rode around the city and had plenty to do in order to find again in myself the lady and the philosopher who had gone astray.

When I returned, all was quiet. Scraps of silk paper and trampled toys lay in the dust, the shop was locked, and in spite of my calling and knocking the poor fellow wouldn't let me in.

Then Goedeke disappeared, and we heard nothing from him for a long time. In the meantime Aphrodite had gotten married to a rich speculator like her father. Now she possessed a charming Cupid, but she herself had become shapelessly corpulent. For that reason she no longer had any interest in love intrigues, but remained quietly and faithfully at home on her sofa, spooned in rose petals preserved in sugar and with them drank sandalwood water. From this she became more and more robust, so that in the end she resembled a mountain almost more than a person. My mother went with her and spoiled her cupid even more than she had spoiled its idolized mother. What would it have accomplished anyway, if she had come to us?

Papa and I were very industrious. Do you know that I have only Papa's mania for research to thank for my education? It interested him to determine how much of his intellect might be hidden in the little black creature that was his daughter. Therefore, I am actually a scholarly experiment! Not a bad one, I believe.

Papa and I work well together. How many trips we have made up the Nile to Upper Egypt, to the ruins of Thebes and Philae, where we led our excavations! We brought many good things back with us from those places.

It was during one of these trips, in Philae. My father had gone ashore to inspect the terrain; I had written letters on the deck of our *dahabiye* and toward evening wanted to bring him back. Then I saw him near the columns of the temple to Isis, talking with a man who wore a felt cap and a blanket of camel's hair around his shoulders like a native Egyptian, but with them a pair of very worn and patched European breeches. In other ways as well he didn't fit in with the landscape. He didn't have in his bearing the calm, noble lines demonstrated by everything there: the columns of the temple with their lotus-flower capitals, the palms, the slender, erect, quiet Egyptian men and women, and the solemn curves of the mysterious river. He turned his back to me and argued enthusiastically with my father, at which my good Papa laughed over his entire, dear, rosy face, and I cried involuntarily: "Mister Goedeke!"

He spun around and stared at me angrily, like a hunted animal whose hiding place has been discovered.

After I had endured his furious look for a while in a friendly manner, he said meekly: "Well, yes, it's you, Miss Alison! How are you? Your father, as I assume?"

He winked at Papa and laughed with his loud, sincere child's laughter as I proudly took Papa's arm.

"I was just explaining to your father how one can get cholera even when absolutely no epidemic is in the area. My method is completely infallible. I tried it twice on myself and it worked every time. It is in fact a miracle that I didn't die," cried Goedeke as animatedly and forcefully as if the main occupation of every reasonable human being must be to attempt such experiments on oneself.

I told him he hadn't changed. At that he smiled wistfully and remarked: "We always remain what we are."

"May I take you to my hermitage?" he asked then. "I serve the mother goddess Isis here in humility and seclusion. The natives honor me as the priest of the great, enigmatic female principle and bring me gifts from which I nourish myself: dates, corn, and bread."

His hermitage was a hut made of Nile mud and rubble from the ruins, like those of the other Fellahs, just as dirty and miserable.

As everywhere else, pigeons had plastered their nests to it, had cast their filth upon it; they cooed over it, crouching together in flocks and fluttering up and down.

"Aphrodite's birds love me," said Goedeke, lured the pigeons and fed them with bread crumbs.

The man had been living for years in this way, in the ruins of the temple, surrounded by the powerful, rigid, dreadful many-colored pictures of Isis, the Egyptian goddess of love. He had a crate of books with him as the only concession to the modern culture on which he had turned his back, since it was the cause of his life's misfortune, as he asserted. Because if Aphrodite had not been corrupted by modern culture, he explained to me, she would have had to realize that the only man to whom she could belong was a poet.

This was his *idée fixe*: Aphrodite without the yearning for Parisian dresses, unadulterated from the hand of nature. As if it were not nonsense to demand that a beautiful girl should have no desire for beautiful clothing! Just such nonsense as his entire worship of this dead love, embalmed with artificial feelings and mad ecstasies!

It is just astonishing that he could write such true and moving verses from this. In Philae he had written a few cantos to his Aphrodite, which concerned the delight of the solitary dream. These were very beautiful. My father, a fine connoisseur of ancient and modern poetry was greatly touched by them.

It has always been a mystery to me how a person who for years can endure absolute seclusion from people of his own kind, when he encounters them again so overflows with the need to communicate as Goedeke did on that evening when we found him. What the man didn't speak about in those few hours! He poured out his heart and his thoughts with absolutely astonishing trust. Yes, there was certainly something of a large child in him.

Harmlessly he told us again and again that the Egyptian women brought him bread and fruit as a god-sent stranger, and he received it gratefully from them because a beautiful purpose lay in the fact that a poet was sustained by the sacrificial gifts of the crowd, for whom he interpreted the secrets of life; and that this should be the case for all poets and singers. My dear, we know of course that the worship of the insane and of cretins is called for by the religion here. Our friend had no scruples about making use of this privilege. He was indeed something like one obsessed by God and a poor fool as well.

He pleased my father greatly. The next day he came onto our Nile boat, and during our stay in Philae the two men had many a scholarly dispute. Both showed themselves to be disciples of classical education; my

father was an Oxford scholar of several degrees, and Goedeke had studied philology in Germany. Thus they understood one another very well when it came to the ancients.

"What an extraordinary person!" said Papa often and discussed extensively with me how we could manage to return Goedeke to a reasonable life befitting a human being.

Today I must say that this was an unfortunate idea of Papa's, to want to gain influence over a nature such as Goedeke's. At that time I was all for it.

Well, the man finally consented to return with us to Alexandria. He received some of Papa's clothing; I teased and pestered him so long that he shaved off his miserable beard. But no one was allowed to touch the hair on his head.

"In my hair lies my poetic power," he asserted loftily and tossed back the long mane, which hung around his ears and over his eyes, from his beautifully finished forehead.

Oh, my dear, what great pains we went to for him! I put my best soap on his washstand for him, and I put out some of Papa's best perfume, in hopes that he would accidentally pour it over himself and finally lose the odor of Philae -- truly the poet of love always smelled of mummies; are you familiar with this stale, alien, repulsive odor?

So that he would feel himself to be a free man, Papa, the dear old man, rented a pretty room for him in the city.

After a short while we met him again as he consumed his noon meal on the street from one of the dirty peddlers. When we took him to task for this, it came out that for a long while he hadn't been staying in the apartment which had been chosen for him; rather he was holding forth at some coachman's place in a corner over a stall, with a cotton sack as his bed. He had spent his money for valuable books which he had ordered from Germany at great cost. He tried to make us comprehend that all the external comforts only blocked his creative power, and that in particular, good food was wasted on him. He knew from experience that hunger even put him into a light, free, and imaginative mood. This assertion seemed not to be exaggerated. Before or after, I have never met a person who was so independent of the requirements of the body as Goedeke. A raw cucumber truly afforded him enough nourishment for an entire day. To be sure, he looked wretchedly gaunt and yellow.

We didn't hold him for long. The old restlessness and desire for solitude took hold of him suddenly he left without a farewell.



After a few weeks, to our surprise he appeared at our place again -- here, on the veranda! Good heavens, what had become of Papa's clothes in the meantime! He had also left Papa's silken umbrella somewhere on Carmel. He had sailed across to the Holy Land on a grain ship; he was very animated on his return. And how he could tell stories! One saw the areas and the people and the light on things while Goedeke talked about them.

He had also brought along some verses for me. Just think -- Goedeke had written a sonnet for me! A proper [regelrecht] sonnet about such an irregular [regelwidrig] creature as I am, only a German poet could accomplish that...!"

Miss Alison paused after this last comment. She didn't repeat to my mother the verses on which she commented so mockingly. The black, intelligent, strange face stiffened into dreaming; only in the small eyes with the uneasy white eyeballs did a restless life of passion show itself.

"We tried it one more time," said Miss Alison hurriedly, as if she wanted to end her story quickly and be finished with it all. "I thought that Goedeke should live with us in the house, but Papa was against that. He rented a room for him again and set up a standing order for him at a small, respectable restaurant. Papa was marvelous in the way he explained to Goedeke that he must finish his Aphrodite, that it was now time for him to become a famous man, that the Aphrodite must be published, etc.

Goedeke agreed entirely with becoming a famous man. He immediately placed before us a finished, richly colored picture of this, his future, blended from satire and pathos, just as he liked to have everything.

We had a delightful talk with him that evening -- and how we laughed!

Once he also saw Aphrodite again. She sat with me on this veranda, enveloped in a mass of lace and silk, when he came up from the city, greeted me, and talked with me, without even noticing her. Then he went inside to father. I believe he didn't recognize her.

Some devil drove me to ask him later: "Didn't you find, Mr. Goedeke, that my sister has changed a great deal?"

"Well -- that was her?" he answered distractedly, "that was her...?"

From that one should believe that his great love had gradually crumbled and vanished. But poets, my dear, are very strange creatures. One may never trust them -- they feel so differently from ordinary people. The more indifferent Miss Aphrodite Persepolis or Madame Menotti, as she now was called, had become to Mr. Alexander Goedeke, the more persistent the cult became which he carried on with his ideal Aphrodite, with this creature of his own fantasy.

It couldn't be helped! I should have realized that. But -- somehow -- I thought it could go hand in hand -- a little bit of ancient Greek idolatry and a good, reasonable life with a woman who understood him and would have been useful to him in various ways, even though she had gone a little wrong in terms of color.

My father thought the world of Goedeke. We would have gone to Germany -- for a couple of years -- in order to introduce him around.

Maybe I should have had more patience..."

Here Miss Alison stopped her narration. She had become quite pale under her black skin. There is something horrible about it when a Negro face grows pale, then it takes on something so wan, gray, dead. She trembled, and her teeth, this splendid, wild set of teeth, chattered with a faint rattle. She went out onto the veranda; there she knocked the chairs violently into each other and then she ran for the bell, rang it loudly and with hurried, contemptuous gestures ordered from the servant ice water, which she drank greedily.

My mother looked very thoughtful.

"But I don't understand. I really don't understand..." she began timidly and sadly, "You describe him as such a sensible man..."

"No, he wasn't sensible -- he was remarkable and witty -- but not sensible!" cried Miss Alison passionately, with flashing eyes. "What did his mad love have to do with me! But he did believe," she said suddenly softly -- so softly, that I could hardly hear her words anymore -- "that I was too valuable to him, and -- that was a lie! He was afraid of me. I saw it. That is the truth!"

What a grimace of pain, rage, and fury! There it stirred itself up again, the wild African blood. The poet of platonic love had been afraid of it!

When now, as a mature woman, I call that scene back into my memory, I am always filled with astonishment at the power of the cool, good English education, which daily forced this nature anew into the delicate bonds of European custom and highly cultivated feeling; the education which allowed the dark girl to continue with flaring nostrils and a breathless voice: "Well, and after that he didn't come back again. I know I should have controlled myself -- I know I should have done it! Really it was the frightful restlessness, this inclination to wandering and to solitude that drove him away. If one forced him to live in a way he didn't want to, even if it happened for his best, and naturally with all consideration, he became coarse and brutal and said the most offensive things, in spite of the fact that he was so good-natured."

There was another pause.

"And now?" asked my mother at last, because that could hardly be the conclusion, "now he has sent you his work?"

"Sent?" asked Miss Alison blankly and stopped, because she had been walking back and forth in the room, obviously busy with her own thoughts.

"Yes, or did he turn up here again?"

"Then you don't know?" said Miss Alison. "Yes, I saw him one more time, when he died out there of cholera.

They brought him in to me from the street -- like the others as well, from the street, in rags, a vagabond. Let's not talk about that. It is all over now. They had carried him in immediately at the first bout. After that he recovered a little and recognized me. I had pulled the ill-fated manuscript out of the inside pocket of his coat because I believed it could hurt him; it looked dirty and worn. With my left arm I held him upright.

"Miss Alison," he said, "O, Miss Alison, what a woman you are...!"

And when he saw the manuscript of Aphrodite in my hand he smiled and said: "Keep it -- the great happiness and the great folly of my life. It will all belong to you now. It is completed."

I had to bend down close to his mouth to understand his words -- he was so very weak, and the other sick people moaned and screamed loudly in their convulsions.

And then our servant came in and called to me that my father was not feeling well. I ran out, out of my mind with fright, and left Goedeke alone. The attendant followed me. He used that moment to drag himself out of the room and to crawl away. I know that he didn't want anyone to see his last agony.

When I had convinced myself that it had just been an empty fear with father, we searched with lanterns in the surroundings here. Over here -- on the white sand hill, he lay dead in the bright moonlight.

I had his Aphrodite published."

We took our leave from Miss Alison then. Still, often afterwards I had to look around me for the white house on the yellow sand and for the figure, wrapped in fluttering rose-red muslin and delicate lace and with the ocean wind wafting around it, the figure with the black, intelligent, strange face, which wasn't the color for marrying.