Zennab, Monsieur Saint-André’s Negress

This text is composed of selections from a book written by Edmond Combes, a young French traveler on his first voyage to Egypt and the Sudan.¹ Combes traveled on two Nile-boats and later by camel from Cairo, Egypt to Dongola, Sudan with the French pharmacist, Saint-André, and his Sudanese female slave companion, Zenneb.

Monsieur Saint-André also had with him a pretty negress of whom he was quite proud: she was a young woman of considerable height, extraordinarily shapely and she could have made the Hottentot Venus jealous. She said that she was from one of the princely families of Darfour, and supported her pretensions with a show of grand airs. Made prisoner by the troops of the viceroy [Muhammad ‘Ali], she was taken to Egypt where M. Saint-André had purchased her in the slave market. But for a long time their roles had been reversed, and the negress had absolute dominion over her master.²

The negress of M. Saint-André who intended to go on shore, dressed herself in her best clothes. I said earlier in speaking of black races that it was false that for blacks perfection consisted of having big lips and a very crushed nose. The pharmacist’s slave, glorious in her brilliant outfit, had remained for long time in front of a small mirror which unfortunately only allowed her a partial view of herself. After having admired with a naïve satisfaction the richness of her attire, she looked at her face, and could not prevent herself from a revealingly wry expression. She pinched her lips, and pressed her nose with her fingers. “Here’s what spoils everything,” she said turning towards us and trying to smile to hide her discontent, “no nose and too much lips. What do you do in your country,” she added to me, “to have such long and soft hair?” One must agree that the world is very extraordinary.

“It is likely”, I told her “that you would not have thought of that if you had always lived among blacks.”

“Maybe,” she said with a worried expression, “but my countrymen know that whites exist, and they speak ill of them, no doubt out of jealousy and to console themselves for being black.”

The negress again ran her eyes over her pretty clothes and refound her gaiety, “No matter what color—white or black – we are all the children of Adam and the servants of God, let’s go ashore and stop talking about ourselves.”³

M. Saint-André’s slave wore the clothes of the great ladies of Cairo. As soon as the Barabra [Nubians]of Dekkeh saw her she became the center of a crowd of men and women whose surprise and admiration must have flattered her

¹ Edmond Combes, *Voyage en Egypte, en Nubie, dans les deserts de Bayouda, des Bischarys, et sur les côtes de la mer Rouge*, (Paris: Desessart, 1846), 2 vols. All the selections are from the first volume. The translation is mine.

² Combes, *Voyage en Egypte*, 127-128.

³ Combes, *Voyage en Egypte*, 292-293.
self-worth. With an envious curiosity the Nubian women examined the various elements of her outfit one by one, and were astonished that a black woman, who in their view occupied the lowest rank of the human hierarchy should have managed such a fate. One of them told her, “you had a happy fate,” her hands touching her silken clothing and gold bracelets, “your master must be very rich or very loving.”

We left Zennab (that was the slave’s name) alone to enjoy her triumph. M. Saint-André sat in the shade of a palm tree, while I went to visit the temple of Dekkeh….

When I returned to the slave woman, the scene had changed. A cruel disdain had replaced the admiration to which she had been subjected. Blacks in general are not fanatics, but like all weak natures, they let themselves be carried along by evil. Among the Barbarins gathered into a mob around her was a hajji (pilgrim) who had brought back from Mecca those narrow ideas and the affected intolerance which distinguish the majority of Muslims. According to him and his co-religionists, all blacks without exception belonged or should belong to Islam. A Christian owner of a black slave encroached on their rights and was in their eyes very guilty. Despite the fact that a slave was everywhere sacred property, the Muslims never neglected to incite those who had infidels as masters to flee. In many provinces under their domination, Christians are prohibited from buying slaves, and those who possess them are obligated to get rid of them. In no country do good Muslims ever see without displeasure a black slave pass into the hands of an infidel, and the seller and buyer have thus an equal share in their scorn. The pilgrim in Dekkeh, like all those who have performed the pious journey to Mecca and Medina, and who live among the blacks enjoyed in his village an enormous consideration and a great influence. Jealous, no doubt to no longer be in this moment the exclusive object of the attention of his compatriots, he wanted to avenge himself for their indifference towards him by trying to trouble the innocent joy of Zennab. He started by insinuating to her that her cohabitation with a European was crime in the eyes of men and of God and that she would be punished for it sooner or later. “If you still have in your heart,” he added loudly to make himself heard by the onlookers, “the feelings of a good Muslim woman hasten to abandon your master, come into our houses, where you will find asylum and protection. We’ll know how to shield you from the pursuit by the infidels, and you will be free like us. No doubt you will not find here the rich clothing and silk garments like those you are now wearing, but you will live in the midst of good Muslims, instead of being the slave of these Christian dogs.” These words were welcomed with a greater favor since the women had viewed the slave woman’s clothes with envy. Grateful towards her master, she had thought it necessary to defend him, and the Nubian women glad to humiliate her, showed no pity. Excited by the pilgrim, they shouted invectives at her and left her alone like a leper. Zennab stunned and saddened had tears in her eyes and when I got close to her, I heard the pilgrim who had been the last to move away from her, say triumphantly, “That’s what happens when you choose infidels over believers.” Seeing the slave’s face, I didn’t even take the time to understand what it was
about, and throwing myself on the insolent pilgrim who had hastened his steps when he saw me, gave him a blow of the whip across his body. I told him, “Here’s what happens to a real believer who insults an infidel’s woman. I took a risk in striking a man that everyone in Dekkeh respected, but in the East an energetic act is rarely compromising, and there is even a high regard for anyone who thinks himself strong enough to obtain justice himself. In the view of the Nubians, I must be a powerful person, since I dared to attack a Muslim who had performed the pilgrimage, and the furious pilgrim although disconcerted, contented himself with throwing me a look full of hate and kept moving away while cursing....

M. Saint-André was asleep where I had left him. When Zenneb told him of the insult that she had just received, the pharmacist wanted to make a complaint to the local shaykh, but I let him know that he could be satisfied with my actions, and we thought of nothing more than continuing our voyage.⁴

⁴ Combes, *Voyage en Egypte*, 1:293-298.