

GEORG EBERS

A THORNY

PATH, VOLUME

04

Georg Ebers

A Thorny Path. Volume 04

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CHAPTER XI

Melissa, too, would probably have found herself a prisoner, but that Zminis, seeing himself balked of a triumph, and beside himself with rage, rushed after the fugitive with the rest. She had no further occasion to seek the house where her lover was lying, for Agatha knew it well. Its owner, Proterius, was an illustrious member of the Christian community, and she had often been to see him with her father.

On their way the girls confided to each other what had brought them out into the streets at so unusual an hour; and when Melissa spoke of her companion's extraordinary resemblance to the dead daughter of Seleukus— which, no doubt, had been Alexander's inducement to follow her—Agatha told her that she had constantly been mistaken for her uncle's daughter, so early lost. She herself had not seen her cousin for some few years, for Seleukus had quarreled with his brother's family when they had embraced Christianity. The third brother, Timotheus, the high-priest of Serapis, had proved more placable, and his wife Euryale was of all women the one she loved best. And presently it appeared that Agatha, too, had lost her mother, and this drew the girls so closely together, that they clasped hands and walked on like sisters or old and dear friends.

They were not kept long waiting outside the house of Proterius, for Andreas was in the vestibule arranging the litter for the conveyance of Diodoros, with the willing help of Ptolemaeus. The freedman was indeed amazed when he heard Melissa's voice, and blamed her for this fresh adventure. However, he was glad to see her, for, although it seemed almost beyond the bounds of possibility, he had already fancied more than once, as steps had approached and passed, that she must surely be coming to lend him a helping hand.

It was easy to hear in his tone of voice that her bold venture was at least as praiseworthy as it was blameworthy in his eyes, and the grave man was as cheerful as he commonly was only when among his flowers. Never before had Melissa heard a word of compliment from his lips, but as Agatha stood with one arm round Melissa's shoulders, he said to the physician, as he pointed to the pair, "Like two roses on one stem!"

He had good reason, indeed, to be content. Diodoros was no worse, and Galen was certainly expected to visit the sick in the Serapeum. He regarded it, too, as a dispensation from Heaven that Agatha and Melissa should have happened to meet, and Alexander's happy escape had taken a weight from his mind. He willingly acceded to Melissa's request that he would take her and Agatha to see the sick man; but he granted them only a short time to gaze at the sleeper, and then requested the deaconess to find a room for the two damsels, who needed rest.

The worthy woman rose at once; but Melissa urgently entreated to be allowed to remain by her lover's side, and glanced anxiously at the keys in the matron's hand.

At this Andreas whispered to her: "You are afraid lest I should prevent your coming with us? But it is not so; and, indeed, of what use would it be? You made your way past the guards to the senator's coach; you came across the lake, and through the darkness and the drunken rabble in the streets; if I were to lock you in, you would be brave enough to jump out of the window. No, no; I confess you have conquered my objections— indeed, if you should now refuse your assistance, I should be obliged to crave it. But Ptolemaeus wishes to leave Diodoros quite undisturbed till daybreak. He is now gone to the Serapeum to find a good place for him. You, too, need rest, and you shall be waked in good time. Go, now, with Dame Katharine.—As to your relations," he added, to Agatha, "do not be uneasy. A boy is already on his way to your father, to tell him where you are for the night."

The deaconess led the two girls to a room where there was a large double bed. Here the new friends stretched their weary limbs; but, tired as they were, neither of them seemed disposed to sleep; they were so happy to have found each other, and had so much to ask and tell each other! As soon as Katharine had lighted a three-branched lamp she left them to themselves, and then their talk began.

Agatha, clinging to her new friend, laid her head on Melissa's shoulder; and as Melissa looked on the beautiful face, and remembered the fond passion which her heedless brother had conceived for its twin image, or as now and again the Christian girl's loving words appealed to her more especially, she stroked the long, flowing tresses of her brown hair.

It needed, indeed, no more than a common feeling, an experience gone through together, an hour of confidential solitude, to join the hearts of the two maidens; and as they awaited the day, shoulder to shoulder in uninterrupted chat, they felt as though they had shared every joy and sorrow from the cradle. Agatha's weaker nature found a support in the calm strength of will which was evident in many things Melissa said; and when the Christian opened her tender and pitying heart to Melissa with touching candor, it was like a view into a new but most inviting world.

Agatha's extreme beauty, too, struck the artist's daughter as something divine, and her eye often rested admiringly on her new friend's pure and regular features.

When Agatha inquired of her about her father, Melissa briefly replied, that since her mother's death he was often moody and rough, but that he had a good, kind heart. The Christian girl, on the contrary, spoke with enthusiasm of the warm, human loving-kindness of the man to whom she owed her being; and the picture she drew of her home life was so fair, that the little heathen could hardly believe in its truth. Her father, Agatha said, lived in constant warfare with the misery and suffering of his fellow-creatures, and he was, in fact, able to make those about him happy and prosperous. The poorest were dearest to his loving heart, and on his estate across the lake he had collected none but the sick and wretched. The care of the children was left to her, and the little ones clung to her as if she were their mother. She had neither brother nor sister.— And so the conversation turned on Alexander, of whom Agatha could never hear enough.

And how proud was Melissa to speak of the bright young artist, who till now had been the sun of her joyless life! There was much that was good to be said about him: for the best masters rated his talent highly in spite of his youth; his comrades were faithful; and none knew so well as he how to cheer his father's dark moods. Then, there were many amiable and generous traits of which she had been told, or had herself known. With his very first savings, he had had the Genius with a reversed torch cast in bronze to grace his mother's grave, and give his father pleasure. Once he had been brought home half dead after saving a woman and child from drowning, and vainly endeavoring to rescue another child. He might be wild and reckless, but he had always been faithful to his art and to his love for his family.

Agatha's eyes opened widely when Melissa told her anything good about her brother, and she clung in terror to her new friend as she heard of her excited orgy with her lover.

Scared as though some imminent horror threatened herself, she clasped Melissa's hand as she listened to the tale of the dangers Alexander had so narrowly escaped.

Such things had never before reached the ears of the girl in her retired Christian home beyond the lake; they sounded to her as the tales of some bold seafarer to the peaceful husbandman on whose shores the storm has wrecked him.

"And do you know," she exclaimed, "all this seems delightful to me, though my father, I am sure, would judge it hardly! When your brother risks his life, it is always for others, and that is right—that is the highest life. I think of him as an angel with a flaming sword. But you do not know our sacred scriptures."

Then Melissa would hear more of this book, of which Andreas had frequently spoken; but there was a knock at the door, and she sprang out of bed.

Agatha did the same; and when a slave-girl had brought in fresh, cold water, she insisted on handing her friend the towels, on plaiting her long hair, pinning her peplos in its place, and arranging its folds. She had so often longed for a sister, and she felt as though she had found one in Melissa! While she helped her to dress she kissed her preserver's sister on the eyes and lips, and entreated her with affectionate urgency to come to see her, as soon as she had done all she could for her lover. She must be made acquainted with her father, and Agatha longed to show her her poor children, her dogs, and her pigeons. And she would go to see Melissa, when she was staying with Polybius.

"And there," Melissa put in, "you will see my brother, too."

On which the Christian girl exclaimed: You must bring him to our house.

My father will be glad to thank him—" Here she paused, and then added,

"Only he must not again risk his life so rashly."

"He will be well hidden at the house of Polybius," replied Melissa, consolingly. "And Andreas has him fast by this time."

She once more kissed Agatha, and went to the door, but her friend held her back, and whispered "In my father's grounds there is a famous hiding place, where no one would ever find him. It has often been a refuge for weeks and months for persecuted members of our faith. When he is seriously threatened, bring him to us. We will gladly provide for his safety, and all else. Only think, if they should catch him! It would be for my sake, and I should never be happy again. Promise me that you will bring him."

"Yes, certainly," cried Melissa, as she hurried out into the vestibule, where Andreas and the leech were waiting for her.

They had done well to enlist the girl's services, for, since nursing her mother, she knew, as few did, how to handle the sick. It was not till they had fairly set out that Melissa observed that Dame Katharine was of the party; she had no doubt become reconciled to the idea of the sick man's removal to the Serapeum, for she had the same look of kindly calm which had so much attracted the girl at their first meeting.

The streets along which they passed in the pale morning light were now deserted, and a film of mist, behind which glowed the golden light of the newly risen sun, shrouded the horizon. The fresh air of morning was delicious, and at this early hour there was no one to avoid—only the peasants and their wives carrying the produce of their gardens and fields to market on asses, or wagons drawn by oxen. The black slaves of the town were sweeping the roadway. Here there were parties of men, women, and children on their way to work in factories, which were at rest but for a few hours in the bustling town. The bakers and other provision-dealers were opening their shops; the cobblers and metalworkers were already busy or lighting fires in their open stalls; and Andreas nodded to a file of slave-girls who had come across from the farm and gardens of Polybius, and who now walked up the street with large milk-jars and baskets of vegetables poised on their heads and supported with one gracefully raised arm.

They presently crossed the Aspendia Canal, where the fog hung over the water like white smoke, hiding the figure of the tutelary goddess of the town on the parapet of the bridge from those who crossed by the roadway. The leaves of the mimosa-trees by the quay—nay, the very stones of the houses and the statues, wet with the morning dew—looked revived and newly washed; and a light breeze brought up from the Serapeum broken tones of the chant, sung there every morning by a choir of priests, to hail the triumph of light over darkness.

The crisp morning air was as invigorating to Melissa as her cold bath had been, after a night which had brought her so little rest. She felt as though she, and all Nature with her, had just crossed the threshold of a new day, bidding her to fresh life and labor. Now and then a flame from Lucifer's torch swallowed up a stretch of morning mist, while the Hours escorted Phoebus Apollo, whose radiant diadem of beams was just rising above the haze; Melissa could have declared she saw them dancing forth before him and strewing the path of the sun with flowers. All this was beautiful—as beautiful

as the priest's chant, the aromatic sweetness of the air, and the works of art in cast bronze or hewn marble which were to be seen on the bridge, on the temple to Isis and Anubis to the right of the street, under the colonnades of the handsomest houses, on the public fountains—in short, wherever the eye might turn. Her lover, borne before her in a litter, was on the way to the physician in whose hands lay the power to cure him. She felt as though Hope led the way.

Since love had blossomed in her breast her quiet life had become an eventful one. Most of what she had gone through had indeed filled her with alarms. Serious questions to which she had never given a thought had been brought before her; and yet, in this brief period of anxiety she had gained the precious sense of youthfulness and of capacity for action when she had to depend on herself. The last few hours had revealed to her the possession of powers which only yesterday she had never suspected. She, who had willingly yielded to every caprice of her father's, and who, for love of her brothers, had always unresistingly done their bidding, now knew that she had a will of her own and strength enough to assert it; and this, again, added to her contentment this morning.

Alexander had told her, and old Dido, and Diodoros, that she was fair to look upon—but these all saw her with the eyes of affection; so she had always believed that she was a well-looking girl enough, but by no means highly gifted in any respect—a girl whose future would be to bloom and fade unknown in her father's service. But now she knew that she was indeed beautiful; not only because she had heard it repeatedly in the crowd of yesterday, or even because Agatha had declared it while braiding her hair—an inward voice affirmed it, and for her lover's sake she was happy to believe it.

As a rule, she would have been ready to drop with fatigue after so many sleepless hours and such severe exertions; but to-day she felt as fresh as the birds in the trees by the roadside, which greeted the sun with cheerful twitterings.

"Yes, the world is indeed fair!" thought she; but at that very moment Andreas's grave voice was heard ordering the bearers to turn down a dark side alley which led into the street of Hermes, a few hundred paces from the Rhakotis Canal.

How anxious the good man looked! Her world was not the world of the Christian freedman; that she plainly understood when the litter in which Diodoros lay was carried into one of the houses in the side street.

It was a large, plain building, with only a few windows, and those high up—in fact, as Melissa was presently informed, it was a Christian church. Before she could express her surprise, Andreas begged her to have a few minutes' patience; the daemons of sickness were here to be exorcised and driven out of the sufferer. He pointed to a seat in the vestibule to the church, a wide but shallow room. Then, at a sign from Andreas, the slaves carried the litter into a long, low hall with a flat roof.

From where she sat, Melissa could now see that a Christian in priest's robes, whom they called the exorcist, spoke various invocations over the sick man, the others listening so attentively that even she began to hope for some good effect from these incomprehensible formulas; and at the same time she remembered that her old slave-woman Dido, who worshiped many gods, wore round her neck, besides a variety of heathen amulets, a little cross which had been given her by a Christian woman. To her question why she, a heathen, wore this about her, the old woman replied, "You can never tell what may help you some day." So perhaps these exorcisms might not be without some effect on her lover, particularly as the God of the Christians must be powerful and good.

She herself strove to uplift her soul in prayer to the manes of her lost mother; but the scene going on around her in the vestibule distracted her mind with horror. Men, young and old, were slashing themselves with vehement scourgings on their backs. One white-haired old man, indeed, handed his whip of hippopotamus-hide to a stalwart lad whose shoulders were streaming with blood, and begged him as a brother, as fervently as though it were the greatest favor, to let him feel the lash. But the younger man refused, and she saw the weak old fellow trying to apply it to his own back.

All this was quite beyond her comprehension, and struck her as, disgusting; and how haggard and hideous were the limbs of these people who thus sinned against their own bodies—the noble temples of the Divine Spirit!

When, a few minutes later, the litter was borne out of the church again, the sun had triumphed over the mists and was rising with blinding splendor in the cloudless sky. Everything was bathed in light; but the dreadful sight of the penitents had cast a gloom over the clear gladness she had been so full of but just now. It was with a sense of oppression that she took leave of the deaconess, who left her with cheerful contentment in the street of Hermes, and followed the litter to the open square in front of the Serapeum.

Here every thought of gloom vanished from her mind as at the touch of a magician, for before her stood the vast Temple of Serapis, founded, as it were, for eternity, on a substructure of rock and closely fitted masonry, the noblest building on earth of any dedicated to the gods. The great cupola rose to the blue sky as though it fain would greet the sister vault above with its own splendor, and the copper-plating which covered it shone as dazzling as a second sun. From the wide front of the temple, every being to whom the prayers and worship of mortals could be offered looked down on her, hewn in marble or cast in bronze; for on the roof, on brackets or on pedestals; in niches or as supporting the parapets and balconies, were statues of all the guests at the Olympian banquet, with images or busts of every hero or king, philosopher, poet, or artist whose deeds or works had earned him immortality.

From infancy Melissa had looked up at this temple with admiration and pride, for here every art had done its utmost to make it without parallel on earth. It was the work of her beloved native city, and her mother had often taken her into the Serapeum, where she herself had found comfort in many a sorrow and disappointment, and had taught the child to love it. That it had afterward been spoiled for her she forgot in her present mood.

Never had she seen the great temple surrounded by so much gay and busy life. The front of the building, toward the square, had in the early hours of the morning been decked with garlands and heavy wreaths of flowers, by a swarm of slaves standing on ladders and planks and benches let down from the roof by ropes. The inclined ways, by which vehicles drove up to the great door, were still deserted, and on the broad steps in the middle no one was to be seen as yet but a few priests in gala robes, and court officials; but the immense open space in front of the sanctuary was one great camp, where, among the hastily pitched canvas tents, horses were being dressed and weapons polished. Several maniples of the praetorians and of the Macedonian phalanx were already drawn up in compact ranks, to relieve guard at the gate of the imperial residence, and stand at Caesar's orders.

But more attractive to the girl than all this display were a number of altars which had been erected at the extreme edge of the great square, and on each of which a fire was burning. Heavy clouds of smoke went up from them in the still, pure atmosphere, like aerial columns, while the flames, paling in the beams of the morning sun, flew up through the reek as though striving to rise above it, with wan and changeful gleams of red and yellow, now curling down, and now writhing upward like snakes. Of all these fires there was not one from which the smoke did not mount straight to heaven, though each burned to a different god; and Melissa regarded it as a happy sign that none spread or failed to rise. The embers were stirred from time to time by the priests and augurs of every god of the East and West, who also superintended the sacrifices, while warriors of every province of the empire stood round in prayer.

Melissa passed by all these unwonted and soul-stirring sights without a regret; her hope for the cure soon to be wrought on her lover cast all else into the shade. Still, while she looked around at the thousands who were encamped here, and gazed up at the temple where so many men were busied, like ants, it struck her that in fact all this belonged to one and was done for one alone. Those legions followed him as the dust follows the wind, the whole world trembled at his nod, and in his hand lay the life and happiness of the millions he governed. And it was at this omnipotent being, this god in human form, that her brother had mocked; and the pursuers were at his heels. This recollection

troubled her joy, and when she looked in the freedman's grave and anxious face her heart began to beat heavily again.

CHAPTER XII

Melissa had supposed that, according to custom, the litter would be carried up the incline or the steps, and into the Serapeum by the great door; but in consequence of the emperor's visit this could not be. The sick man was borne round the eastern side of the huge building, which covered a space on which a whole village might have stood. The door at the back, to the south, through which he was finally admitted, opened into a gallery passing by the great quadrangle where sacrifice was made, and leading to the inner rooms of the temple, to the cubicles among others.

In these it was revealed to the sick in dreams by what means or remedies they might hope to be healed: and there was no lack of priests to interpret the visions, nor of physicians who came hither to watch peculiar cases, to explain to the sufferers the purport of the counsel of the gods—often very dark—or to give them the benefit of their own.

One of these, a friend of Ptolemaeus, who, though he had been secretly baptized, still was one of the pastophori of the temple, was awaiting the little party, and led the way as guide.

The bellowing of beasts met them on the very threshold. These were to be slaughtered at this early hour by the special command of Caracalla; and, as Caesar himself had promised to be present at the sacrificial rites, none but the priests or "Caesar's friends" were admitted to the court-yard. The litter was therefore carried up a staircase and through a long hall forming part of the library, with large windows looking down on the open place where the beasts were killed and the entrails examined. Diodoros saw and heard nothing, for the injury to the skull had deprived him of all consciousness; Ptolemaeus, however, to soothe Melissa, assured her that he was sleeping soundly.

As they mounted the stairs she had kept close to her lover's side; but on this assurance she lingered behind and looked about her.

As the little procession entered the gallery, in which the rolls of manuscript lay in stone or wooden cases on long rows of shelves, the shout was heard of "Hail, Caesar!" mingling with a solemn chant, and announcing the sovereign's approach.

At this the physician pointed to the court-yard, and said to the girl, whose beauty had greatly attracted him: "Look down there if you want to see Caesar. We must wait here, at any rate, till the crowd has gone past in the corridor beyond that door." And Melissa, whose feminine curiosity had already tempted her to the window, looked down into the quadrangle and on to the steps down which a maniple of the praetorian guard were marching, with noble Romans in togas or the uniform of legates, augurs wearing wreaths, and priests of various orders. Then for a few minutes the steps were deserted, and Melissa thought she could hear her own heart beating, when suddenly the cry: "Hail, Caesar!" was again heard, loud trumpets rang out and echoed from the high stone walls which surrounded the inclosure, and Caracalla appeared on the broad marble steps which led down into the court of sacrifice.

Melissa's eyes were riveted as if spell-bound on this figure, which was neither handsome nor dignified, and which nevertheless had a strange attraction for her, she knew not why. What was it in this man, who was short rather than tall, and feeble rather than majestic, which so imperatively forbade all confident advances? The noble lion which walked by his side, and in whose mane his left hand was buried, was not more unapproachable than he. He called this terrible creature, which he treated with as much familiarity as if it were a lapdog, his "Persian sword"; and as Melissa looked she remembered what fate might be in store for her brother through this man, and all the crimes of which he was accused by the world—the murders of his brother, of his wife, and of thousands besides.

For the first time in her life she felt that she could hate; she longed to bring down every evil on that man's head. The blood mounted to her cheeks, and her little fists were clinched, but she never took her eyes off him; for everything in his person impressed her, if not as fine, still as exceptional—if not as great, still as noteworthy.

She knew that he was not yet thirty, but yesterday, as he drove past her, he had looked like a surly misanthropist of more than middle age. To-day how young he seemed! Did he owe it to the laurel crown which rested on his head, or to the white toga which fell about him in ample folds, leaving only the sinewy arm bare by which he led the lion?

From where she stood she could only see his side-face as he came down the steps, and indeed it was not ill-favored; brow, nose, and chin were finely and nobly formed; his beard was thin, and a mustache curled over his lips. His eyes, deeply set under the brows, were not visible to her, but she had not forgotten since yesterday their sinister and terrible scowl.

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