GEORG EBERS

THE EMPEROR. VOLUME 03

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The Emperor – Volume 03:

Содержание

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CHAPTER X

While anxiety and trouble were brooding over the steward's dwelling, while dismay and disappointment were clouding the souls of its inhabitants, the hall of the Muses was merry with feasting and laughter.

Julia, the prefect's wife, had supplied the architect at Lochias with a carefully-prepared meal,—sufficient to fill six hungry maws, and Pontius' slave—who had received it on its arrival and had unpacked it dish after dish, and set them out on the humblest possible table had then hastened to fetch his master to inspect all these marvels of the cook's art. The architect shook his head as he contemplated the superabundant blessing, and muttered to himself:

"Titianus must take me for a crocodile, or rather for two crocodiles," and he went to the sculptor's little tabernacle, where Papias the master was also, to invite the two men to share his supper.

Besides them he asked two painters, and the chief mosaic worker of the city, who all day long had been busied in restoring the old and faded pictures on the ceilings and pavements, and

under the influence of good wine and cheerful chat they soon emptied the dishes and bowls and trenchers. A man who for several hours has been using his hands or his mind, or both together, waxes hungry, and all the artists whom Pontius had brought together at Lochias had now been working for several days almost to the verge of exhaustion. Each had done his best, in the first place, no doubt, to give satisfaction to Pontius, whom all esteemed, and to himself; but also in the hope of giving proof of his powers to the Emperor and of showing him how things could be done in Alexandria. When the dishes had been removed and the replete feasters had washed and dried their hands, they filled their cups out of a jar of mixed wine, of which the dimensions answered worthily to the meal they had eaten. One of the painters then proposed that they should hold a regular drinking-bout, and elect Papias, who was as well known as a good table orator as he was as an artist, to be the leader of the feast. However, the master declared that he could not accept the honor, for that it was due to the worthiest of their company; to the man namely, who, only a few days since, had entered this empty palace and like a second Deucalion had raised up illustrious artists, such as he then saw around him in great numbers, and skilled workmen by hundreds, not out of plastic stone but out of nothing. And then—while declaring that he understood the use of the hammer and chisel better than that of the tongue, and that he had never studied the art of making speeches—he expressed his wish that Pontius would lead the revel, in the most approved form.

But he was not allowed to get to the end of this evidence of his skill, for Euphorion the door-keeper of the palace, Euphorion the father of Pollux, ran hastily into the hall of the Muses with a letter in his hand which he gave to the architect.

"To be read without an instant's delay," he added, bowing with theatrical dignity to the assembled artists. "One of the prefect's lictors brought this letter, which, if my wishes be granted, brings nothing that is unwelcome. Hold your noise you little blackguards or I will be the death of you."

These words, which so far as the tone was concerned, formed a somewhat inharmonious termination to a speech intended for the ears of great artists, were addressed to his wife's four-footed Graces who had followed him against his wish, and were leaping round the table barking for the slender remains of the consumed food.

Pontius was fond of animals and had made friends with the old woman's pets, so, as he opened the prefect's letter, he said:

"I invite the three little guests to the remains of our feast. Give them anything that is fit for them, Euphorion, and whatever seems to you most suitable to your own stomach you may put into it."

While the architect first rapidly glanced through the letter and then read it carefully, the singer had collected a variety of good morsels for his wife's favorites on a plate, and finally carried the last remaining pasty, with the dish on which it reposed, to the vicinity of his own hooked nose.

"For men or for dogs?" he asked his son, as he pointed to it with a rigid finger.

"For the gods!" replied Pollux. "Take it to mother; she will like to eat ambrosia for once."

"A jolly evening to you!" cried the singer, bowing to the artists who were emptying their cups, and he quitted the hall with his pasty and his dogs. Before he had fairly left the hall with his long strides, Papias, whose speech had been interrupted, once more raised his wine-cup and began again:

"Our Deucalion, our more than Deucalion—"

"Pardon me," interrupted Pontius. "If I once more stop your discourse which began so promisingly; this letter contains important news and our revels must be over for the night. We must postpone our symposium and your drinking-speech."

"It was not a drinking-speech, for if ever there was a moderate man—" Papias began. But Pontius stopped him again, saying:

"Titianus writes me word that he proposes coming to Lochias this evening. He may arrive at any moment; and not alone, but with my fellow-artist, Claudius Venator from Rome, who is to assist me with his advice."

"I never even heard his name," said Papias, who was wont to trouble himself as little about the persons as about the works of other artists.

"I wonder at that," said Pontius, closing the double tablets which announced the Emperor's advent.

"Can he do anything?" asked Pollux.

"More than any one of us," replied Pontius. "He is a mighty man."

"That is splendid!" exclaimed Pollux. "I like to see great men. When one looks me in the eye I always feel as if some of his superabundance overflowed into me, and irresistibly I draw myself up and think how fine it would be if one day I might reach as high as that man's chin."

"Beware of morbid ambition," said Papias to his pupil in a warning voice. "It is not the man who stands on tiptoe, but he who does his duty diligently, that can attain anything great."

"He honestly does his," said the architect rising, and he laid his hand on the young sculptor's shoulder. "We all do; to-morrow by sunrise each must be at his post again. For my colleague's sake it will be well that you should all be there in good time."

The artists rose, expressing their thanks and regrets. "You will not escape the continuation of this evening's entertainment," cried one of the painters, and Papias, as he parted from Pontius, said:

"When we next meet I will show you what I understand by a drinking- speech. It will do perhaps for your Roman guest. I am curious to hear what he will say about our Urania. Pollux has done his share of the work very well, and I have already devoted an hour's work to it, which has improved it. The more humble our material, the better I shall be pleased if the work satisfies Caesar; he himself has tried his hand at sculpture."

"If only Hadrian could hear that!" cried one of the painters.

"He likes to think himself a great artist—one of the foremost of our time. It is said that he caused the life of the great architect, Apollodorus—who carried out such noble works for Trajan—to be extinguished—and why? because formerly that illustrious man had treated the imperial bungler as a mere dabbler, and would not accept his plan for the temple of Venus at Rome."

"Mere talk!" answered Pontius to this accusation. "Apollodorus died in prison, but his incarceration had little enough to do with the Emperor's productions—excuse me, gentlemen, I must once more look through the sketches and plans."

The architect went away, but Pollux continued the conversation that had been begun by saying:

"Only I cannot understand how a man who practises so many arts at once as Hadrian does, and at the same time looks after the state and its government, who is a passionate huntsman and who dabbles in every kind of miscellaneous learning, contrives, when he wants to practise one particular form of art, to recall all his five senses into the nest from which he has let them fly, here, there, and everywhere. The inside of his head must be like that salad-bowl—which we have reduced to emptiness—in which Papias discovered three sorts of fish, brown and white meat, oysters and five other substances."

"And who can deny," added Papias, "that if talent is the father, and meat the mother of all productiveness, practice must be the artist's teacher! Since Hadrian took to sculpture and painting it

has become the universal fashion here to practise these arts, and among the wealthier youth who come to my workroom, many have very good abilities; but not one of them brings anything to any good issue, because so much of their time is taken up by the gymnasium, the bath, the quail-fights, the suppers, and I know not what besides, so that they do nothing by way of practice."

"True," said a painter. "Without the restraint and worry of apprenticeship no one can ever rise to happy and independent creativeness; and in the schools of rhetoric or in hunting or fighting no one can study drawing. It is not till a pupil has learned to sit steady and worry himself over his work for six hours on end that I begin to believe he will ever do any good work. Have you any of you seen the Emperor's work?"

"I have," answered a mosaic worker. "Many years ago Hadrian sent a picture to me that he had painted; I was to make a mosaic from it. It was a fruit piece. Melons, gourds, apples, and green leaves. The drawing was but so-so, and the color impossibly vivid, still the composition was pleasing from its solidity and richness. And after all, when one sees it, one cannot but feel that such superfluity is better than meagreness and feebleness. The larger fruits, especially under the exuberant sappy foliage, were so huge that they might have been grown in the garden of luxury itself, still the whole had a look of reality. I mitigated the colors somewhat in my transcript; you may still see a copy of the picture at my house, it hangs in the studio where my men draw. Nealkes, the rich hanging-maker, has had a tapestry woven from it which

Pontius proposes to use as a hanging for a wall of the work-room, but I have made a fine frame on purpose for it."

"Say rather for its designer."

"Or yet rather," added the most loquacious of the painters, "for the visit he may possibly pay your workshops."

"I only wish the Emperor may come to ours too! I should like to sell him my picture of Alexander saluted by the priests in the temple of Jupiter Ammon."

"I hope that when you agree about the price you will remember we are partners," said his fellow-artist smugly.

"I will follow your example strictly," replied the other.

"Then you will certainly not be a loser," cried Papias, "for Eustorgius is fully aware of the worth of his works. And if Hadrian is to order works from every master whose art he dabbles in, he will require a fleet on purpose to carry his purchases to Rome."

"It is said," continued Eustorgius, laughing, "that he is a painter among poets, a sculptor among painters, an astronomer among musicians, and a sophist among artists—that is to say, that he pursues every art and science with some success as his secondary occupation."

As he spoke the last words Pontius returned to the table where the artists were standing round the winejar; he had heard the painter's last remark and interrupted him by saying:

"But my friend you forget that he is a monarch among monarchs—and not merely among those of today—in the fullest

meaning of the word. Each of us separately can produce something better and more perfect in his own line; but how great is the man who by earnestness and skill can even apprehend everything that the mind has ever been able to conceive of, or the creative spirit of the artist to embody! I know him, and I know that he loves a really thorough master, and tries to encourage him with princely liberality. But his ears are everywhere, and he promptly becomes the implacable enemy of those who provoke his resentment. So bridle your restive Alexandrian tongues, and let me tell you that my colleague from Rome is in the closest intimacy with Hadrian. He is of the same age, resembles him greatly, and repeats to him everything that he hears said about him. So cease talking about Caesar and pass no severer judgments on dilettanti in the purple than on your wealthy pupils, who paint and chisel for the mere love of it, and for whom you find it so easy to lisp out 'charming,' or 'wonderfully pretty,' or 'remarkably nice.' Take my warning in good part, you know I mean it well."

He spoke the last words with a cordial, manly feeling, of which his voice was peculiarly capable, and which was always certain to secure him the confidence even of the recalcitrant.

The artists exchanged greetings and hand-shakings and left the hall; a slave carried away the wine-jar and wiped the table, on which Pontius proceeded to lay out his sketches and plans. But he was not alone, for Pollux was soon at his side, and with a comical expression of pathos and laying his finger on his nose, he said:

"I have come out of my cage to say something more to you."

"Well?"

"The hour is approaching when I may hope to repay the beneficent deeds, which, at various times, you have done to my interior. My mother will to-morrow morning, set before you that dish of cabbage. It could not be done sooner, because the only perfect sausage-maker, the very king of his trade, prepares these savory cylinders only once a week. A few hours ago he completed the making of the sausages, and to-morrow morning my mother will warm up for our breakfasts the noble mess, which she is preparing for us this evening—for, as I have told you, it is in its warmed-up state that it is the ideal of its kind. What will follow by way of sweets we shall owe again to my mother's art; but the cheering and invigorating element—I mean the wine that I drives dull care away, we owe to my sister."

"I will come," said Pontius, "if my guest leaves me an hour free, and I shall enjoy the excellent dish. But what does a gay bird like you know of dull care?"

"The words fit into the metre," replied Pollux. "I inherit from my father—who, when he is not gate-keeping, sings and recites — a troublesome tendency whenever anything incites me to drift into rhythm."

"But to-day you have been more silent than usual, and yet you seemed to me to be extraordinarily content. Not your face only, but your whole length—a good measure—from the sole of your foot to the crown of your head was like a brimming cask

of satisfaction."

"Well, there is much that is lovely in this world!" cried Pollux, stretching himself comfortably and lifting his arms with his hands clasped far above his head towards heaven.

"Has anything specially pleasant happened to you?"

"There is no need for that! Here I live in excellent company, the work progresses, and—well, why should I deny it? There was something specially to mark to-day; I met an old acquaintance again."

"An old one?"

"I have already known her sixteen years; but when I first saw her she was in swaddling clothes."

"Then this venerable damsel friend is more than sixteen, perhaps seventeen! Is Eros the friend of the happy, or does happiness only follow in his train?" As the architect thoughtfully said these words to himself, Pollux listened attentively to a noise outside, and said:

"Who can be passing out there at this hour? Do you not hear the bark of a big dog mingle with the snapping of the three Graces?"

"It is Titianus conducting the architect from Rome," replied Pontius excitedly.

"I will go to meet him. But one thing more my friend, you too have an Alexandrian tongue. Beware of laughing at the Emperor's artistic efforts in the presence of this Roman. I repeat it: the man who is now coming is superior to us all, and there is

nothing more repellant to me than when a small man assumes a strutting air of importance because he fancies he has discovered in some great man a weak spot where his own little body happens to be sound. The artist I am expecting is a grand man, but the Emperor Hadrian is a grander. Now retire behind your screens, and tomorrow morning I will be your guest."

CHAPTER XI

Pontius threw his pallium over the chiton he commonly wore at his work and went forward to meet the sovereign of the world, whose arrival had been announced to him in the prefect's letter. He was perfectly calm, and if his heart beat a little faster than usual, it was only because he was pleased once more to meet the wonderful man whose personality had made a deep impression on him before.

In the happy consciousness of having done all that lay in his power and of deserving no blame, he went through the ante-chambers and chief entrance of the palace into the fore-court, where a crowd of slaves were busied by torch-light in laying new marble slabs. Neither these workmen nor their overseers had paid any heed to the barking of the dogs and the loud talking which had for some little time been audible in the vicinity of the gate-keeper's lodge; for a special rate of payment had been promised to the laborers and their foremen if they should have finished a set piece of the new pavement by a certain hour, to the satisfaction of the architect. No one who heard the deep man's-voice ring through the court from the doorway guessed to whom it belonged.

The Emperor had been delayed by adverse winds and had not run into the harbor till a little before midnight.

Titianus, who was watching for him, he greeted as an old

friend with heartfelt warmth, and with him and Antinous he stepped into the prefect's chariot, while Phlegon the secretary, Hermogenes his physician, and Mastor with the luggage, among which were their campbeds, were to follow in another vehicle. The harbor watchmen hastened to array themselves indignantly to oppose the chariot, as it rolled noisily along the street, and the huge dog that destroyed the peace of the night with its baying; but as soon as they recognized Titianus they respectfully made way. The gate-keeper and his wife, obedient to the prefect's warning, had remained up, and as soon as the singer heard the chariot approaching which bore the Emperor, he hastened to open the palace-gates. The broken-up pavement and the swarms of men engaged in repairing it, obliged Titianus and his companions to quit the chariot here and to pass close to the little gate-house. Hadrian, whose observation nothing ever escaped which came in his way and seemed worth noticing, stood still before Euphorion's door and looked into the comfortable little room, with its decoration of flowers and birds and the statue of Apollo; while dame Doris in her newest garments, stood on the threshold to watch for the prefect. And Titianus greeted her warmly, for he was wont whenever he came to Lochias to exchange a few merry or wise words with her. The little dogs had already crept into their basket, but as soon as they caught sight of a strange dog they rushed past their mistress into the open air, and dame Doris found herself obliged, while she returned the kindly greeting of her patron, to shout at Euphrosyne, Thalia and Aglaia more than

once by their pretty names.

"Splendid, splendid!" cried Hadrian, pointing into the little house. "An idyl, a perfect idyl. Who would have expected to find such a smiling nook of peace in the most restless and busy town in the empire."

"I and Pontius were equally surprised at this little nest, and we therefore left it untouched," said the prefect.

"Intelligent people understand each other, and I owe you thanks for preserving this little home," answered the Emperor. "What an omen, what a favorable, in every way favorable augury, it offers me. The Graces receive me here into these old walls, Aglaia, Thalia and Euphrosyne!"

"Good luck to you, Master," old Doris called out to the prefect.

"We come late," said Hadrian.

"That does not matter," said the old woman. "Here at Lochias for the last week we have quite forgotten to distinguish day from night, and a blessing can never come too late."

"I have brought with me to-day an illustrious guest," said Titianus. "The great Roman architect Claudius Venator. He only disembarked a few minutes since."

"Then a draught of wine will do him good. We have in the house some good white Mareotic from my daughter's garden by the lake. If your friend will do us humble folks so much honor, I beg he will step into our room; it is clean, is it not sir? and the cup I will give him to drink it out of would not disgrace the Emperor

himself. Who knows what you will find up in the midst of all the muddle yonder?"

"I will accept your invitation with pleasure," answered Hadrian. "I can see by your face that you have a pleasure in entertaining us, and any one might envy you your little house."

"When the climbing-rose and the honey-suckle are out it is much prettier," said Doris, as she filled the cup. "Here is some water for mixing."

The Emperor took the cup carved by Pollux, looked at it with admiration, and before putting it to his lips said:

"A masterpiece, dame; what would Caesar find to drink out of here where the gate-keeper uses such a treasure? Who executed this admirable work, pray?"

"My son carved it for me in his spare time."

"He is a highly-skilled sculptor," Titianus explained.

When the Emperor had half emptied the cup with much satisfaction he set it on the table, and said:

"A very noble drink! I thank you, mother."

"And I you, for styling me mother: there is no better title a woman can have who has brought up good children; and I have three who need never be ashamed to be seen."

"I wish you all luck with them, good little mother," replied the Emperor.

"We shall meet again, for I am going to spend some days at Lochias."

"Now, in all this bustle?" asked Doris.

"This great architect," said Titianus, in explanation, "is to advise and help our Pontius."

"He needs no help!" cried the old woman. "He is a man of the best stamp. His foresight and energy, my son says, are incomparable. I have seen him giving his orders myself, and I know a man when I see him!"

"And what particularly pleased you in him?" asked Hadrian, who was much amused with the shrewd old woman's freedom.

"He never for a moment loses his temper in all the hurry, never speaks a word too much or too little; he can be stern when it is necessary, but he is kind to his inferiors. What his merits are as an artist I am not capable of judging, but I am quite certain that he is a just and able man."

"I know him myself," replied Caesar, "and you describe him rightly; but he seemed to me sterner than he has shown himself to you."

"Being a man he must be able to be severe; but he is so only when it is. necessary, and how kind he can be he shows himself every day. A man grows to the mould of his own mind when he is a great deal alone; and this I have noticed, that a man who is repellant and sharp to those beneath him is not in himself anything really great; for it shows that he considers it necessary to guard against the danger of being looked upon as of no more consequence than the poorer folks he deals with. Now, a man of real worth knows that it can be seen in his bearing, even when he treats one of us as an equal. Pontius does so, and Titianus, and

you who are his friend, no less. It is a good thing that you should have come— but, as I said before, the architect up there can do very well without you."

"You do not seem to rate my capacity very highly, and I regret it, for you have lived with your eyes open and have learned to judge men keenly."

Doris looked shrewdly at the Emperor with her kindly glance, as if taking his mental measure, and then answered confidently:

"You—you are a great man too—it is quite possible that you might see things that would escape Pontius. There are a few choice souls whom the Muses particularly love and you are one of them."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.