

GEORG EBERS

A THORNY

PATH, VOLUME

09

Georg Ebers

A Thorny Path. Volume 09

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CHAPTER XXVI

The lady Euryale's silent prayer was interrupted by the return of Alexander. He brought the clothes which Seleukus's wife had given him for Melissa. He was already dressed in his best, and crowned like all those who occupied the first seats in the Circus; but his festal garb accorded ill with the pained look on his features, from which every trace had vanished of the overflowing joy in life which had embellished them only this morning.

He had seen and heard things which made him feel that it would no longer be a sacrifice to give his life to save his sister.

Sad thoughts had flitted across his cheerful spirit like dark bats, even while he was talking with Melissa and her protectress, for he knew well how infinitely hard his father would find it to have to quit Alexandria; and if he himself fled with Melissa he would be obliged to give up the winning of fair Agatha. The girl's Christian father had indeed received him kindly, but had given him to understand plainly enough that he would never allow a professed heathen to sue for his daughter's hand. Besides this, he had met with other humiliations which placed themselves like a wall between him and his beloved, the only child of a rich and respected man. He had forfeited the right of appearing before Zeus as a suitor; for indeed he was no longer such as he had been only yesterday.

The news that Caracalla proposed to marry Melissa had been echoed by insolent tongues, with the addition that he, Alexander, had ingratiated himself with Caesar by serving him as a spy. No one had expressly said this to him; but, while he was hurrying through the city in Caesar's chariot, on the ladies' message, it had been made very plain to his apprehension. Honest men had avoided him—him to whom hitherto every one for whose regard he cared had held out a friendly hand; and much else that he had experienced in the course of this drive had been unpleasant enough to give rise to a change of his whole inner being.

The feeling that every one was pointing at him the finger of scorn, or of wrath, had never ceased to pursue him. And he had been under no illusion; for when he met the old sculptor Lysander, who only yesterday had so kindly told him and Melissa about Caesar's mother, as he nodded from the chariot his greeting was not returned; and the honest artist had waved his hand with a gesture which no Alexandrian could fail to understand as meaning, "I no longer know you, and do not wish to be recognized by you."

He had from his childhood loved Diodoros as a brother, and in one of the side streets, down which the chariot had turned to avoid the tumult in the Kanopic way, Alexander had seen his old friend. He had desired the charioteer to stop, and had leaped out on the road to speak to Diodoros and give him at once Melissa's message; but the young man had turned his back with evident displeasure, and to the painter's pathetic appeal, "But, at any rate, hear me!" he answered, sharply: "The less I hear of you and yours the better for me. Go on—go on, in Caesar's chariot!"

With this he had turned away and knocked at the door of an architect who was known to them both; and Alexander, tortured with painful feelings, had gone on, and for the first time the idea had taken possession of him that he had indeed descended to the part of spy when he had betrayed to Caesar what Alexandrian wit had to say about him. He could, of course, tell himself that he would rather have faced death or imprisonment than have betrayed to Caracalla the name of one of the gibbers; still, he had to admit to himself that, but for the hope of saving his father and brother from death and imprisonment, he would hardly have done Caesar such service. The mercy shown to them was certainly too like payment, and his own part in the matter struck him as hateful and base. His

fellow-townsmen had a right to bear him a grudge, and his friends to keep out of his way. A feeling came over him of bitter self-contempt, hitherto strange to him; and he understood for the first time how Philip could regard life as a burden and call it a malicious Danaus-gift of the gods. When, finally, in the Kanopic way, close in front of Seleukus's house, a youth unknown to him cried, scornfully, as the chariot was slowly making its way through the throng, "The brother-in-law of Tarautas!" he had great difficulty in restraining himself from leaping down and letting the rascal feel the weight of his fists. He knew, too, that Tarautas was the name of a hateful and bloodthirsty gladiator which had been given as a nickname to Caesar in Rome; and when he heard the insolent fellow's cry taken up by the mob, who shouted after him, "Tarautas's brother-in-law!" wherever he went, he felt as though he were being pelted with mire and stones.

It would have been a real comfort to him if the earth would have opened to swallow him with the chariot, to hide him from the sight of men. He could have burst out crying like a child that has been beaten. When at last he was safe inside Seleukus's house, he was easier; for here he was known; here he would be understood. Berenike must know what he thought of Caesar's suit, and seeing her wholesome and honest hatred, he had sworn to himself that he would snatch his sister from the hands of the tyrant, if it were to lead him to the most agonizing death.

While she was engaged in selecting a dress for her protegee, he related to the lady Euryale what had happened to him in the street and in the house of Seleukus. He had been conducted past the soldiers in the vestibule and impluvium to the lady's private rooms, and there he had been witness to a violent matrimonial dispute. Seleukus had previously delivered to his wife Caesar's command that she should appear in the Amphitheater with the other noble dames of the city. Her answer was a bitter laugh, and a declaration that she would mingle with the spectators in none but mourning robes. Thereupon her husband, pointing out to her the danger to which such conduct would expose them, had raised objections, and she at last had seemed to yield. When Alexander joined her he had found her in a splendid dress of shining purple brocade, her black hair crowned with a wreath of roses, and a splendid diadem; a garland of roses hung across her bosom, and precious stones sparkled round her throat and arms. In short, she was arrayed like a happy mother for her daughter's wedding-day.

Soon after Alexander's arrival Seleukus had come in, and this conspicuously handsome dress, so unbecoming to the matron's age, and so unlike her usual attire—chosen, evidently, to put the monstrosity of Caesar's demand in the strongest light—had roused her husband's wrath. He had expressed his dissatisfaction in strong terms, and again pointed out to her the danger in which such a daring demonstration might involve them; but this time there was no moving the lady; she would not despoil herself of a single rose. After she had solemnly declared that she would appear in the Circus either as she thought fit or not at all, her husband had left her in anger.

"What a fool she is!" Euryale exclaimed.

Then she showed him a white robe of beautiful bombyx, woven in the isle of Kos, which she had decided on for Melissa, and a peplos with a border of tender sea-green; and Alexander approved of the choice.

Time pressed, and Euryale went at once to Melissa with the new festal raiment. Once more she nodded kindly to the girl, and begged her, as she herself had something to discuss with Alexander, to allow the waiting-woman to dress her. She felt as if she were bringing the robe to a condemned creature, in which she was to be led to execution, and Melissa felt the same.

Euryale then returned to the painter, and bade him end his narrative.

The lady Berenike had forthwith desired Johanna to pack together all the dead Korinna's festal dresses. Alexander had then followed her guidance, accompanying her to a court in the slaves' quarters, where a number of men were awaiting her. These were the captains of Seleukus's ships, which were now in port, and the superintendents of his granaries and offices, altogether above a hundred freedmen in the merchant's service. Each one seemed to know what he was here for.

The matron responded to their hearty greetings with a word of thanks, and added, bitterly:

"You see before you a mourning mother whom a ruthless tyrant compels to go to a festival thus—thus—only look at me—bedizened like a peacock!"

At this the bearded assembly gave loud expression to their dissatisfaction, but Berenike went on "Melapompus has taken care to secure good places; but he has wisely not taken them all together. You are all free men; I have no orders to give you. But, if you are indeed indignant at the scorn and heart-ache inflicted on your lord's wife, make it known in the Circus to him who has brought them on her. You are all past your first youth, and will carefully avoid any rashness which may involve you in ruin. May the avenging gods aid and protect you!"

With this she had turned her back on the multitude; but Johannes, the Christian lawyer, the chief freedman of the household, had hurried into the court-yard, just in time to entreat her to give up this ill-starred demonstration, and to extinguish the fire she had tried to kindle. So long as Caesar wore the purple, rebellion against him, to whom the Divinity had intrusted the sovereignty, was a sin. The scheme she was plotting was meant to punish him who had pained her; but she forgot that it might cost these brave men, husbands and fathers, their life or liberty. The vengeance she called on them to take might be balm to the wounds of her own heart; but if Caesar in his wrath brought destruction down on these, her innocent instruments, that balm would turn to burning poison.

These words, whispered to her with entire conviction, had not been without their effect. For some minutes Berenike had stared gloomily at the ground; but then she had again approached the assembly, to repeat the warning given her by the Christian, whom all respected, and by whom some indeed had been persuaded to be baptized.

"Johannes is right," she ended. "This ill-used heart did wrong when it sent up its cry of anguish before you. Rather will I be trodden under foot by the enemy, as is the manner of the Christians, than bring such misfortune on innocent men, who are so faithful to our house. Be cautious, then. Give no overt expression to your feelings. Let each one who feels too weak to control his wrath, avoid the Circus; and those who go, keep still if they feel moved to act in my behalf. One thing only you may do. Tell every one, far and wide, what I had purposed. What others may do, they themselves must answer for."

The Christian had strongly disapproved of this last clause; but Berenike had paid no heed, and had left the court-yard, followed by Alexander.

The shouts of the indignant multitude had rung in their ears, and, in spite of her warning, they had sounded like a terrible threat. Johannes, to be sure, had remained, to move them to moderation by further remonstrances.

"What were the mad creatures plotting?" Euryale anxiously broke in; and he hastily went on "They call Caesar by no name but Tarautas; every mouth is full of gibes and rage at the new and monstrous taxes, the billeting of the troops, and the intolerable insolence of the soldiery, which Caracalla wickedly encourages. His contemptuous indifference has deeply offended the heads of the town. And then his suit to my sister! Young and old are wagging their tongues over it."

"It would be more like them to triumph in it," said the matron, interrupting him. "An Alexandrian in the purple, on the throne of the Caesars!"

"I too had hoped that," cried Alexander, "and it seemed so likely. But who can understand the populace? Every woman in the place, I should have thought, would hold her head higher, at the thought that an Alexandrian girl was empress; but it was from the women that I heard the most vindictive and shameless abuse. I heard more than enough; for, as we got closer to the Serapeum, the more slowly was the chariot obliged to proceed, to make its way through the crowd. And the things I heard! I clench my fists now as I only think of them.—And what will it be in the Circus? What will not Melissa have to endure!"

"It is envy," the matron murmured to herself; but she was immediately silent, for the young girl came toward them, out of the bedroom. Her toilet was complete; the beautiful white dress became her well. The wreath of roses, with diamond dewdrops, lay lightly on her hair, the snake-shaped bracelet

which her imperial suitor had sent her clasped her white arm, and her small head, somewhat bent, her pale, sweet face, and large, bashful, inquiring, drooping eyes formed such an engaging, modest, and unspeakably touching picture, that Euryale dared to hope that even in the Circus none but hardened hearts could harbor a hostile feeling against this gentle, pure blossom, slightly drooping with silent sorrow. She could not resist the impulse to kiss Melissa, and the half-formed purpose ripened within her to venture the utmost for the child's protection. The pity in her heart had turned to love; and when she saw that to this sweet creature, at the mere sight of whom her heart went forth, the most splendid jewels, in which any other girl would have been glad to deck herself, were as a heavy burden to be borne but sadly, she felt it a sacred duty to comfort her and lighten this trial, and shelter Melissa, so far as was in her power, from insult and humiliation.

It was many years since she had visited the Amphitheater, where the horrible butchery was an abomination to her; but to-day her heart bade her conquer her old aversion, and accompany the girl to the Circus.

Had not Melissa taken the place in her heart of her lost daughter? Was not she, Euryale, the only person who, by showing herself with Melissa and declaring herself her friend, could give the people assurance that the girl, who was exposed to misapprehension and odium by the favor she had met with from the ruthless and hated sovereign, was in truth pure and lovable? Under her guardianship, by her side, the girl, as she knew, would be protected from misapprehension and insult; and she, an old woman and a Christian, should she evade the first opportunity of taking up a cross in imitation of the Divine Master, among whose followers she joyfully counted herself—though secretly, for fear of men? All this flashed through her mind with the swiftness of lightning, and her call, "Doris!" addressed to her waiting-woman, was so clear and unexpected that Melissa's overstrung nerves were startled. She looked up at the lady in amazement, as, without a word of explanation, she said to the woman who had hurried in:

"The blue robe I wore at the festival of Adonis, my mother's diadem, and a large gem with the head of Serapis for my shoulder. My hair—oh, a veil will cover it! What does it matter for an old woman?—You, child, why do you look at me in such amazement? What mother would allow a pretty young daughter to appear alone in the Circus? Besides, I may surely hope that it will confirm your courage to feel that I am at your side. Perhaps the populace may be moved a little in your favor if the wife of the high-priest of their greatest god is your companion."

But she could scarcely end her speech, for Melissa had flown into her arms, exclaiming, "And you will do this for me?" while Alexander, deeply touched by gratitude and joy, kissed her thin arm and the hem of her peplos.

While Melissa helped the matron to change her dress—in the next room Alexander paced to and fro in great unrest. He knew the Alexandrians, and there was not the slightest doubt but that the presence of this universally revered lady would make them look with kindlier eyes on his sister. Nothing else could so effectually impress them with the entire propriety of her appearance in the Circus. The more seriously he had feared that Melissa might be deeply insulted and offended by the rough demonstrations of the mob, the more gratefully did his heart beat; nay, his facile nature saw in this kind act the first smile of returning good fortune.

He only longed to be hopeful once more, to enjoy the present—as so many philosophers and poets advised—and especially the show in the Circus, his last pleasure, perhaps; to forget the imminent future.

The old bright look came back to his face; but it soon vanished, for even while he pictured himself in the amphitheatre, he remembered that there, too, his former acquaintances might refuse to speak to him; that the odious names of "Tarautas' brother-in-law" or of "traitor" might be shouted after him on the road. A cold chill came over him, and the image of pretty Ino rose up before him—Ino, who had trusted in his love; and to whom, of all others, he had given cause to accuse him of false-heartedness. An unpleasant sense came over him of dissatisfaction with himself, such as

he, who always regarded self-accusation, repentance, and atonement as a foolish waste of life, had never before experienced.

The fine, sunny autumn day had turned to a sultry, dull evening, and Alexander went to the window to let the sea-breeze fan his dewy brow; but he soon heard voices behind him, for Euryale and Melissa had re-entered the room, followed by the house-steward, who presented to his mistress a sealed tablet which a slave had just brought from Philostratus. The women had been talking of Melissa's vow; and Euryale had promised her that, if Fate should decide against Caesar, she would convey the girl to a place of safety, where she could certainly not be discovered, and might look forward in peace to the future. Then she had impressed on her that, if things should be otherwise ordered, she must endure even the unendurable with patience, as an obedient wife, as empress, but still ever conscious of the solemn and beneficent power she might wield in her new position.

The tablets would now settle the question; and side by side the two women hastily read the missive which Philostratus had written on the wax, in his fine, legible hand. It was as follows:

"The condemned have ceased to live. Your efforts had no effect but to hasten their end. Caesar's desire was to rid you of adversaries even against your will. Vindex and his nephew are no more; but I embarked soon enough to escape the rage of him who might have attained the highest favors of fortune if he had but known how to be merciful."

"God be praised!—but alas, poor Vindex!" cried Euryale, as she laid down the tablets. But Melissa kissed her, and then exclaimed to her brother:

"Now all doubts are at an end. I may fly. He himself has settled the matter!"

Then she added, more gently, but still urgently "Do you take care of my father, and Philip, and of yourself. The lady Euryale will protect me. Oh, how thankful am I!"

She looked up to heaven with fervent devotion Euryale whispered to them: "My plan is laid. As soon as the performance is over, Alexander shall take you home, child, to your father's house; you must go in one of Caesar's chariots. Afterward come back here with your brother; I will wait for you below. But now we will go together to the Circus, and can discuss the details on our way. You, my young friend, go now and order away the imperial litter; bid my steward to have the horses put to my covered harmamaxa. There is room in it for us all three."

By the time Alexander returned, the daylight was waning, and the clatter of the chariots began to be audible which conveyed Caesar's court to the Circus.

CHAPTER XXVII

The great Amphitheatre of Dionysus was in the Bruchium, the splendid palatial quarter of the city, close to the large harbor between the Choma and the peninsula of Lochias. Hard by the spacious and lofty rotunda, in which ten thousand spectators could be seated, stood the most fashionable gymnasia and riding-schools. These buildings, which had been founded long since by the Ptolemiac kings, and had been repeatedly extended and beautified, formed, with the adjoining schools for gladiators and beast- fighters, and the stables for wild beasts from every part of the world, a little town by themselves.

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