

GEORG EBERS

A THORNY

PATH, VOLUME

06

Georg Ebers

A Thorny Path. Volume 06

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Georg Ebers

A Thorny Path – Volume 06

CHAPTER XVII

The philosopher announced the visitor to Caesar, and as some little time elapsed before Melissa came in, Caracalla forgot his theatrical assumption, and sat with a drooping head; for, in consequence, no doubt, of the sunshine which beat on the top of his head, the pain had suddenly become almost unendurably violent.

Without vouchsafing a glance at Melissa, he swallowed one of the alleviating pills left him by Galenus, and hid his face in his hands. The girl came forward, fearless of the lion, for Philostratos had assured her that he was tamed, and most animals were willing to let her touch them. Nor was she afraid of Caesar himself, for she saw that he was in pain, and the alarm with which she had crossed the threshold gave way to pity. Philostratos kept at her side, and anxiously watched Caracalla.

The courage the simple girl showed in the presence of the ferocious brute, and the not less terrible man, struck him favorably, and his hopes rose as a sunbeam fell on her shining hair, which the lady Berenike had arranged with her own hand, twining it with strands of white Bombyx. She must appear, even to this ruthless profligate, as the very type of pure and innocent grace.

Her long robe and peplos, of the finest white wool, also gave her an air of distinction which suited the circumstances. It was a costly garment, which Berenike had had made for Korinna, and she had chosen it from among many instead of the plainer robe in which old Dido had dressed her young mistress. With admirable taste the matron had aimed at giving Melissa a simple, dignified aspect, unadorned and almost priestess-like in its severity. Nothing should suggest the desire to attract, and everything must exclude the idea of a petitioner of the poorer and commoner sort.

Philostratos saw that her appearance had been judiciously cared for; but Caesar's long silence, of which he knew the reason, began to cause him some uneasiness: for, though pain sometimes softened the despot's mood, it more often prompted him to revenge himself, as it were, for his own sufferings, by brutal attacks on the comfort and happiness of others. And, at last, even Melissa seemed to be losing the presence of mind he had admired, for he saw her bosom heave faster and higher, her lips quivered, and her large eyes sparkled through tears.

Caesar's countenance presently cleared a little. He raised his head, and as his eye met Melissa's she pronounced in a low, sweet voice the pleasant Greek greeting, "Rejoice!"

At this moment the philosopher was seized with a panic of anxiety; he felt for the first time the weight of responsibility he had taken on himself. Never had he thought her so lovely, so enchantingly bewitching as now, when she looked up at Caracalla in sweet confusion and timidity, but wholly possessed by her desire to win the favor of the man who, with a word, could make her so happy or so wretched. If this slave of his passions, whom a mere whim perhaps had moved to insist on the strictest morality in his court, should take a fancy to this delightful young creature, she was doomed to ruin. He turned pale, and his heart throbbed painfully as he watched the development of the catastrophe for which he had himself prepared the way.

But, once more, the unexpected upset the philosopher's anticipations. Caracalla gazed at the girl in amazement, utterly discomposed, as though some miracle had happened, or a ghost had started from the ground before him. Springing up, while he clutched the back of his chair, he exclaimed:

"What is this? Do my senses deceive me, or is it some base trickery?"

No, no! My eyes and my memory are good. This girl—"

"What ails thee, Caesar?" Philostratos broke in, with increasing anxiety.

"Something—something which will silence your foolish doubts—" Caesar panted out. "Patience—wait. Only a minute, and you shall see.—But, first"—and he turned to Melissa—"what is your name, girl?"

"Melissa," she replied, in a low and tremulous voice.

"And your father's and your mother's?"

"Heron is my father's name, and my mother—she is dead—was called Olympias, the daughter of Philip."

"And you are of Macedonian race?"

"Yes, my lord. My father and mother both were of pure Macedonian descent."

The emperor glanced triumphantly at Philostratus, and briefly exclaiming, "That will do, I think," he clapped his hands, and instantly his old chamberlain, Adventus, hurried in from the adjoining room, followed by the whole band of "Caesar's friends." Caracalla, however, only said to them:

"You can wait till I call you.—You, Adventus! I want the gem with the marriage of Alexander." The freedman took the gem out of an ebony casket standing on Caesar's writing-table, and Caracalla, holding the philosopher by the arm, said, with excited emphasis:

"That gem I inherited from my father, the divine Severus. It was engraved before that child came into the world. Now you shall see it, and if you then say that it is an illusion—But why should you doubt it? Pythagoras and your hero Apollonius both knew whose body their souls had inhabited in a former existence. Mine—though my mother has laughed at my belief, and others have dared to do the same—mine, five hundred years ago, dwelt in the greatest of heroes, Alexander the Macedonian—a right royal tabernacle!"

He snatched the gem from the chamberlain's hand, and while he devoured it with his eyes, looking from time to time into Melissa's face, he eagerly ran on:

"It is she. None but a blind man, a fool, a malignant idiot, could doubt it! Any who henceforth shall dare mock at my conviction that I was brought into the world to fulfill the life-span of that great hero, will learn to rue it! Here—it is but natural—here, in the city he founded and which bears his name, I have found positive proof that the bond which unites the son of Philip with the son of Severus is something more than a mere fancy. This maiden—look at her closely—is the re-embodiment of the soul of Roxana, as I am of that of her husband. Even you must see now how naturally it came about that she should uplift her heart and hands in prayer for me. Her soul, when it once dwelt in Roxana, was fondly linked with that of the hero; and now, in the bosom of this simple maiden, it is drawn to the unforgotten fellow-soul which has found its home in my breast."

He spoke with enthusiastic and firm conviction of the truth of his strange imagining, as though he were delivering a revelation from the gods. He bade Philostratus approach and compare the features of Roxana, as carved in the onyx, with those of the young supplicant.

The fair Persian stood facing Alexander; they were clasping each other's hands in pledge of marriage, and a winged Hymen fluttered above their heads with his flaming torch.

Philostratus was, in fact, startled as he looked at the gem, and expressed his surprise in the liveliest terms, for the features of Roxana as carved in the cameo, no larger than a man's palm, were, line for line, those of the daughter of Heron. And this sport of chance could not but be amazing to any one who did not know—as neither of the three who were examining the gem knew—that it was a work of Heron's youth, and that he had given Roxana the features of his bride Olympias, whose living image her daughter Melissa had grown to be.

"And how long have you had this work of art?" asked Philostratus.

"I inherited it, as I tell you, from my father," replied Caracalla. "Severus sometimes wore it.—But wait. After the battle of Issos, in his triumph over Pescennius Niger—I can see him now—he wore it on his shoulder, and that was—"

"Two-and-twenty years ago," the philosopher put in; and Caracalla, turning to Melissa, asked her:

"How old are you, child?"

"Eighteen, my lord." And the reply delighted Caesar; he laughed aloud, and looked triumphantly at Philostratus.

The philosopher willingly admitted that there was something strange in the incident, and he congratulated Caesar on having met with such strong confirmation of his inward conviction. The soul of Alexander might now do great things through him.

During this conversation the alarm which had come over Melissa at Caesar's silence had entirely disappeared. The despot whose suffering had appealed to her sympathetic soul, now struck her as singular rather than terrible. The idea that she, the humble artist's daughter, could harbor the soul of a Persian princess, amused her; and when the lion lifted his head and lashed the floor with his tail at her approach, she felt that she had won his approbation. Moved by a sudden impulse, she laid her hand on his head and boldly stroked it. The light, warm touch soothed the fettered prince of the desert, and, rubbing his brow against Melissa's round arm, he muttered a low, contented growl.

At this Caesar was enchanted; it was to him a further proof of his strange fancy. The "Sword of Persia" was rarely so friendly to any one; and Theocritus owed much of the favor shown him by Caracalla to the fact that at their first meeting the lion had been on particularly good terms with him. Still, the brute had never shown so much liking for any stranger as for this young girl, and never responded with such eager swinging of his tail excepting to Caesar's own endearments. It must be instinct which had revealed to the beast the old and singular bond which linked his master and this new acquaintance. Caracalla, who, in all that happened to him, traced the hand of a superior power, pointed this out to Philostratus, and asked him whether, perhaps, the attack of pain he had just suffered might not have yielded so quickly to the presence of the revived Roxana rather than to Galen's pills.

Philostratus thought it wise not to dispute this assumption, and soon diverted the conversation to the subject of Melissa's imprisoned relations. He quietly represented to Caracalla that his noblest task must be to satisfy the spirit of her who had been so dear to the hero whose life he was to fulfill; and Caesar, who was delighted that the philosopher should recognize as a fact the illusion which flattered him, at once agreed. He questioned Melissa about her brother Alexander with a gentleness of which few would have thought him capable; and the sound of her voice, as she answered him modestly but frankly and with sisterly affection, pleased him so well that he allowed her to speak without interruption longer than was his wont. Finally, he promised her that he would question the painter, and, if possible, be gracious to him.

He again clapped his hands, and ordered a freedman named Epagathos, who was one of his favorite body-servants, to send immediately for Alexander from the prison.

As before, when Adventus had been summoned, a crowd followed Epagathos, and, as Caesar did not dismiss them, Melissa was about to withdraw; the despot, however, desired her to wait.

Blushing, and confused with shyness, she remained standing by Caesar's seat; and though she only ventured to raise her eyes now and then for a stolen look, she felt herself the object of a hundred curious, defiant, bold, or contemptuous glances.

How gladly would she have escaped, or have sunk into the earth! But there she had to stand, her teeth set, while her lips trembled, to check the tears which would rise.

Caesar, meanwhile, took no further notice of her. He was longing to relate at full length, to his friends and companions, the wonderful and important thing that had happened; but he would not approach the subject while they took their places in his presence. Foremost of them, with Theocritus, came the high-priest of Serapis, and Caracalla immediately desired them to introduce the newly appointed head-guardian of the peace. But the election was not yet final. The choice lay, Theocritus explained, between two equally good men. One, Aristides, was a Greek of high repute, and the other

was only an Egyptian, but so distinguished for zealous severity that, for his part, he should vote for him.

At this the high-priest broke in, saying that the man favored by Theocritus did in fact possess the qualities for which he was commended, but in such a measure that he was utterly hated by the Greek population; and in Alexandria more could be achieved by justice and mercy than by defiant severity.

But at this the favorite laughed, and said that he was convinced of the contrary. A populace which could dare to mock at the divine Caesar, the guest of their city, with such gross audacity, must be made to smart under the power of Rome and its ruler. The deposed magistrate had lost his place for the absurd measures he had proposed, and Aristides was in danger of following in his footsteps.

"By no means," the high-priest said, with calm dignity. "The Greek, whom I would propose, is a worthy and determined man. Now, Zminis the Egyptian, the right hand of the man who has been turned out, is, it must be said, a wretch without ruth or conscience."

But here the discussion was interrupted. Melissa, whose ears had tingled as she listened, had started with horror as she heard that Zminis, the in former, was to be appointed to the command of the whole watch of the city. If this should happen, her brothers and father were certainly lost. This must be prevented. As the high-priest ceased speaking, she laid her hand on Caesar's, and, when he looked up at her in surprise, she whispered to him, so low and so quickly that hardly any one observed it "Not Zminis; he is our mortal enemy!"

Caracalla scarcely glanced at the face of the daring girl, but he saw how pale she had turned. The delicate color in her cheeks, and the dimple he had seen while she stroked the lion had struck him as particularly fascinating. This had helped to make her so like the Roxana on the gem, and the change in her roused his pity. She must smile again; and so, accustomed as he was to visit his annoyance on others, he angrily exclaimed to his "Friends":

"Can I be everywhere at once? Can not the simplest matter be settled without me? It was the praetorian prefect's business to report to me concerning the two candidates, if you could not agree; but I have not seen him since last evening. The man who has to be sought when I need him neglects his duty! Macrinus usually knows his. Does any one know what has detained him?"

The question was asked in an angry, nay, in an ominous tone, but the praetorian prefect was a powerful personage, whose importance made him almost invulnerable. Yet the praetor Lucius Priscillianus was ready with an answer. He was the most malicious and ill-natured scandal-monger at court; and he hated the prefect, for he himself had coveted the post, which was the highest in the state next to Caesar's. He had always some slaves set to spy upon Macrinus, and he now said, with a contemptuous shrug:

"It is a marvel to me that so zealous a man—though he is already beginning to break down under his heavy duties—should be so late. However, he here spends his evenings and nights in special occupations, which must of course be far from beneficial to the health and peace of mind which his office demands."

"What can those be?" asked Caracalla; but the praetor added without a pause:

"Merciful gods! Who would not crave to glance into the future?"

"And it is that which makes him late?" said Caesar, with more curiosity than anger.

"Hardly by broad daylight," replied Priscillianus. "The spirits he would fain evoke shun the light of day, it is said. But he may be weary with late watching and painful agitations."

"Then he calls up spirits at night?"

"Undoubtedly, great Caesar. But, in this capital of philosophy, spirits are illogical it would seem. How can Macrinus interpret the prophecy that he, who is already on the highest step attainable to us lower mortals, shall rise yet higher?"

"We will ask him," said Caesar, indifferently. "But you—guard your tongue. It has already cost some men their heads, whom I would gladly see yet among the living. Wishes can not be punished. Who does not wish to stand on the step next above his own? You, my friend, would like that of

Macrinus.—But deeds! You know me! I am safe from them, so long as each of you so sincerely grudges his neighbor every promotion. You, my Lucius, have again proved how keen your sight is, and, if it were not too great an honor for this refractory city to have a Roman in the toga praetexta at the head of its administration, I should like to make you the guardian of the peace here. You see me," he went on, "in an elated mood to-day.—Cilo, you know this gem which came to me from my father. Look at it, and at this maiden.—Come nearer, priest of the divine Alexander; and you too consider the marvel, Theocritus, Antigonus, Dio, Pandion, Paulinus. Compare the face of the female figure with this girl by my side. The master carved this Roxana long before she was born. You are surprised? As Alexander's soul dwells in me, so she is Roxana, restored to life. It has been proved by irrefragable evidence in the presence of Philostratus."

The priest of Alexander here exclaimed, in a tone of firm conviction:

"A marvel indeed! We bow down to the noble vessel of the soul of Alexander. I, the priest of that hero, attest that great Caesar has found that in which Roxana's soul now exists." And as he spoke he pressed his hand to his heart, bowing low before Caesar; the rest imitated his example. Even Julius Paulinus, the satirist, followed the Roman priest's lead; but he whispered in the ear of Cassius Dio "Alexander's soul was inquisitive, and wanted to see how it could live in the body which, of all mortal tenements on earth, least resembles his own."

A mocking word was on the ex-consul's lips as to the amiable frame of mind which had so suddenly come over Caesar; but he preferred to watch and listen, as Caracalla beckoned Theocritus to him and begged him to give up the appointment of Zminis, though, as a rule, he indulged the favorite's every whim. He could not bear, he said, to intrust the defense of his own person and of the city of Alexander to an Egyptian, so long as a Greek could be found capable of the duty. He proposed presently to have the two candidates brought before him, and to decide between them in the presence of the prefect of the praetorians. Then, turning to those of his captains who stood around him, he said:

"Greet my soldiers from me. I could not show myself to them yesterday. I saw just now, with deep regret, how the rain has drenched them in this luxurious city. I will no longer endure it. The praetorians and the Macedonian legion shall be housed in quarters of which they will tell wonders for a long time to come. I would rather see them sleeping in white wool and eating off silver than these vile traders. Tell them that."

He was here interrupted, for Epagathos announced a deputation from the Museum, and, at the same time, the painter Alexander, who had been brought from prison. At this Caracalla exclaimed with disgust:

"Spare me the hair-splitting logicians!—Do you, Philostratus, receive them in my name. If they make any impudent demands, you may tell them my opinion of them and their Museum. Go, but come back quickly. Bring in the painter. I will speak with him alone.—You, my friends, withdraw with our idilogos, the priest of Alexander, who is well known here, and visit the city. I shall not require you at present."

The whole troop hastened to obey. Caracalla now turned to Melissa once more, and his eye brightened as he again discerned the dimple in her cheeks, which had recovered their roses. Her imploring eyes met his, and the happy expectation of seeing her brother lent them a light which brought joy to the friendless sovereign. During his last speech he had looked at her from time to time; but in the presence of so many strangers she had avoided meeting his gaze. Now she thought that she might freely show him that his favor was a happiness to her. Her soul, as Roxana, must of course feel drawn to his; in that he firmly believed. Her prayer and sacrifice for him sufficiently proved it—as he told himself once more.

When Alexander was brought in, it did not anger him to see that the brother, who held out his arms to Melissa in his habitual eager way, had to be reminded by her of the imperial presence. Every homage was due to this fair being, and he was, besides, much struck by Alexander's splendid appearance. It was long since any youthful figure had so vividly reminded him of the marble statues

of the great Athenian masters. Melissa's brother stood before him, the very embodiment of the ideal of Greek strength and manly beauty. His mantle had been taken from him in prison, and he wore only the short chiton, which also left bare his powerful but softly modeled arms. He had been allowed no time to arrange and anoint his hair, and the light-brown curls were tossed in disorderly abundance about his shapely head. This favorite of the gods appeared in Caesar's eyes as an Olympic victor, who had come to claim the wreath with all the traces of the struggle upon him.

No sign of fear, either of Caesar or his lion, marred this impression. His bow, as he approached the potentate, was neither abject nor awkward, and Caesar felt bitter wrath at the thought that this splendid youth, of all men, should have selected him as the butt of his irony. He would have regarded it as a peculiar gift of fortune if this man—such a brother of such a sister—could but love him, and, with the eye of an artist, discern in the despot the great qualities which, in spite of his many crimes, he believed he could detect in himself. And he hoped, with an admixture of anxiety such as he had never known before, that the painter's demeanor would be such as should allow him to show mercy.

When Alexander besought him with a trustful mien to consider his youth, and the Alexandrian manners which he had inherited both from his parents and his grandparents, if indeed his tongue had wagged too boldly in speaking of the all-powerful Caesar, and to remember the fable of the lion and the mouse, the scowl he had put on to impress the youth with his awfulness and power vanished from Caesar's brow. The idea that this great artist, whose sharp eye could so surely distinguish the hideous from the beautiful, should regard him as ill-favored, was odious to him. He had listened to him in silence; but suddenly he inquired of Alexander whether it was indeed he, whom he had never injured, who had written the horrible epigram nailed with the rope to the door of the Serapeum and when the painter emphatically denied it, Caesar breathed as though a burden had fallen from his soul. He nevertheless insisted on hearing from the youth's own lips what it was that he had actually dared to say. After some hesitation, during which Melissa besought Caesar in vain to spare her and her brother this confession, Alexander exclaimed:

"Then the hunted creature must walk into the net, and, unless your clemency interferes, on to death! What I said referred partly to the wonderful strength that you, my lord, have so often displayed in the field and in the circus; and also to another thing, which I myself now truly repent of having alluded to. It is said that my lord killed his brother."

"That—ah! that was it!" said Caesar, and his face, involuntarily this time, grew dark.

"Yes, my lord," Alexander went on, breathing hard. "To deny it would be to add a second crime to the former one, and I am one of those who would rather jump into cold water both feet at once, when it has to be done. All the world knows what your strength is; and I said that it was greater than that of Father Zeus; for that he had cast his son Hephaestos only on the earth, and your strong fist had cast your brother through the earth into the depths of Hades. That was all. I have not added nor concealed anything."

Melissa had listened in terror to this bold confession. Papinian, the brave praetorian prefect, one of the most learned lawyers of his time, had incurred Caracalla's fury by refusing to say that the murder of Geta was not without excuse; and his noble answer, that it was easier to commit fratricide than to defend it, cost him his life.

So long as Caesar had been kind to her, Melissa had felt repelled by him; but now, when he was angry, she was once more attracted to him.

As the wounds of a murdered man are said to bleed afresh when the murderer approaches, Caracalla's irritable soul was wont to break out in a frenzy of rage when any one was so rash as to allude to this, his foulest crime. This reference to his brother's death had as usual stirred his wrath, but he controlled it; for as a torrent of rain extinguishes the fire which a lightning-flash has kindled, the homage to his strength, in Alexander's satire, had modified his indignation. The irony which made the artist's contemptuous words truly witty, would not have escaped Caracalla's notice if they had applied to any one else; but he either did not feel it, or would not remark it, for the sake of leaving

Melissa in the belief that his physical strength was really wonderful. Besides, he thus could indulge his wish to avoid pronouncing sentence of death on this youth; he only measured him with a severe eye, and said in threatening tones, to repay mockery in kind and to remind the criminal of the fate imperial clemency should spare him:

"I might be tempted to try my strength on you, but that it is worse to try a fall with a vapping wag, the sport of the winds, than with the son of Caesar. And if I do not condescend to the struggle, it is because you are too light for such an arm as this." And as he spoke he boastfully grasped the muscles which constant practice had made thick and firm. "But my hand reaches far. Every man-at-arms is one of its fingers, and there are thousands of them. You have made acquaintance already, I fancy, with those which clutched you."

"Not so," replied Alexander, with a faint smile, as he bowed humbly. "I should not dare resist your great strength, but the watch-dogs of the law tried in vain to track me. I gave myself up."

"Of your own accord?"

"To procure my father's release, as he had been put in prison."

"Most magnanimous!" said Caesar, ironically. "Such a deed sounds well, but is apt to cost a man his life. You seem to have overlooked that. "No, great Caesar; I expected to die."

"Then you are a philosopher, a contemner of life."

"Neither. I value life above all else; for, if it is taken from me, there is an end of enjoying its best gifts."

"Best gifts!" echoed Caesar. "I should like to know which you honor with the epithet."

"Love and art."

"Indeed?" said Caracalla, with a swift glance at Melissa. Then, in an altered voice, he added, "And revenge?"

"That," said the artist, boldly, "is a pleasure I have not yet tasted. No one ever did me a real injury till the villain Zminis robbed my guiltless father of his liberty; and he is not worthy to do such mischief, as a finger of your imperial hand."

At this, Caesar looked at him suspiciously, and said in stern tones:

"But you have now the opportunity of trying the fine flavor of vengeance. If I were timid—since the Egyptian acted only as my instrument—I should have cause to protect myself against you."

"By no means," said the painter, with an engaging smile, "it lies in your power to do me the greatest benefit. Do it, Caesar! It would be a joy to me to show that, though I have been reckless beyond measure, I am nevertheless a grateful man."

"Grateful?" repeated Caracalla, with a cruel laugh. Then he rose slowly, and looked keenly at Alexander, exclaiming:

"I should almost like to try you."

"And I will answer for it that you will never regret it!" Melissa put in.

"Greatly as he has erred, he is worthy of your clemency."

"Is he?" said Caesar, looking down at her kindly. "What Roxana's soul affirms by those rosy lips I can not but believe."

Then again he paused, studying Alexander with a searching eye, and added:

"You think me strong; but you will change that opinion—which I value—if I forgive you like a poor-spirited girl. You are in my power. You risked your life. If I give it you, I must have a gift in return, that I may not be cheated."

"Set my father free, and he will do whatever you may require of him," Melissa broke out. But Caracalla stopped her, saying: "No one makes conditions with Caesar. Stand back, girl."

Melissa hung her head and obeyed; but she stood watching the eager discussion between these two dissimilar men, at first with anxiety and then with surprise.

Alexander seemed to resist Caesar's demands; but presently the despot must have proposed something which pleased the artist, for Melissa heard the low, musical laugh which had often cheered

her in moments of sadness. Then the conversation was more serious, and Caracalla said, so loud that Melissa could hear him:

"Do not forget to whom you speak. If my word is not enough, you can go back to prison." Then again she trembled for her brother; but some soft word of his mollified the fury of the terrible man, who was never the same for two minutes together. The lion, too, which lay unchained by his master's seat, gave her a fright now and then; for if Caesar raised his voice in anger, he growled and stood up.

How fearful were this beast and his lord! Rather would she spend her whole life on a ship's deck, tossed to and fro by the surges, than share this man's fate. And yet there was in him something which attracted her; nay, and it nettled her that he should forget her presence.

At last Alexander humbly asked Caracalla whether he might not tell Melissa to what he had pledged his word.

"That shall be my business," replied Caesar. "You think that a mere girl is a better witness than none at all. Perhaps you are right. Then let it be understood: whatever you may have to report to me, my wrath shall not turn against you. This fellow—why should you not be told, child?— is going into the town to collect all the jests and witty epigrams which have been uttered in my honor."

"Alexander!" cried Melissa, clasping her hands and turning pale with horror. But Caracalla laughed to himself, and went on cheerfully:

"Yes, it is dangerous work, no doubt; and for that reason I pledged my word as Caesar not to require him to pay for the sins of others. On the contrary, he is free, if the posy he culls for me is sufficient."

"Ay," said Alexander, on whom his sister's white face and warning looks were having effect. "But you made me another promise on which I lay great stress. You will not compel me to tell you, nor try to discover through any other man, who may have spoken or written any particular satire."

"Enough!" said Caracalla, impatiently; but Alexander was not to be checked. He went on vehemently: "I have not forgotten that you said conditions were not to be made with Caesar; but, in spite of my impotence, I maintain the right of returning to my prison and there awaiting my doom, unless you once more assure me, in this girl's presence, that you will neither inquire as to the names of the authors of any gibes I may happen to have heard, nor compel me by any means whatever to give up the names of the writers of epigrams. Why should I not satisfy your curiosity and your relish of a sharp jest? But rather than do the smallest thing which might savor of treachery—ten times rather the axe or the gallows!"

And Caracalla replied with a dark frown, loudly and briefly:

"I promise."

"And if your rage is too much for you?" wailed Melissa, raising her hands in entreaty; but the despot replied, sternly:

"There is no passion which can betray Caesar into perjury."

At this moment Philostratus came in again, with Epagathos, who announced the praetorian prefect. Melissa, encouraged by the presence of her kind protector, went on:

But, great Caesar, you will release my father and my other brother?"

"Perhaps," replied Caracalla. "First we will see how this one carries out his task."

"You will be satisfied, my lord," said the young man, looking quite happy again, for he was delighted at the prospect of saying audacious things to the face of the tyrant whom all were bent on flattering, and holding up the mirror to him without, as he firmly believed, bringing any danger on himself or others.

He bowed to go. Melissa did the same, saying, as airily as though she were free to come and go here:

"Accept my thanks, great Caesar. Oh, how fervently will I pray for you all my life, if only you show mercy to my father and brothers!"

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