

GEORG EBERS

THE EMPEROR.
VOLUME 02

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CHAPTER V

Pontius had gone to the steward's room, with a frowning brow, but it was with a smile on his strongly-marked lips, and a brisk step that he returned to his work-people. The foreman came to meet him with looks of enquiry as he said. "The steward was a little offended and with reason; but now we are capital friends and he will do what he can in the matter of lighting."

In the hall of the Muses he paused outside the screen, behind which Pollux was working, and called out:

"Friend sculptor, listen to me, it is high time to have supper."

"It is, indeed," replied Pollux, "else it will be breakfast."

"Then lay aside your tools for a quarter of an hour and help me and the palace-steward to demolish the food that has been sent me."

"You will need no second assistant if Keraunus is there. Food melts before him like ice before the sun."

"Then come and save him from an overloaded stomach."

"Impossible, for I am just now dealing most unmercifully with a bowl full of cabbage and sausages. My mother had cooked that food of the gods and my father has brought it in to his first-born

son."

"Cabbage and sausages!" repeated the architect, and its tone betrayed that his hungry stomach would fain have made closer acquaintance with the savory mess.

"Come in here," continued Pollux, "and be my guest. The cabbage has experienced the process which is impending over this palace—it has been warmed up."

"Warmed-up cabbage is better than freshly-cooked, but the fire over which we must try to make this palace enjoyable again, burns too hotly and must be too vigorously stirred. The best things have been all taken out, and cannot be replaced."

"Like the sausages, I have fished out of my cabbages," laughed the sculptor. "After all I cannot invite you to be my guest, for it would be a compliment to this dish if I were now to call it cabbage with sausages. I have worked it like a mine, and now that the vein of sausages is nearly exhausted, little remains but the native soil in which two or three miserable fragments remain as memorials of past wealth. But my mother shall cook you a mess of it before long, and she prepares it with incomparable skill."

"A good idea, but you are my guest."

"I am replete."

"Then come and spice our meal with your good company."

"Excuse me, sir; leave me rather here behind my screen. In the first place, I am in a happy vein, and on the right track; I feel that something good will come of this night's work."

"And tomorrow—"

"Hear me out."

"Well."

"You would be doing your other guest an ill-service by inviting me."

"Do you know the steward then?"

"From my earliest youth, I am the son of the gatekeeper of the palace."

"Oh, ho! then you came from that pretty little lodge with the ivy and the birds, and the jolly old lady."

"She is my mother—and the first time the butcher kills she will concoct for you and me a dish of sausages and cabbage without an equal."

"A very pleasing prospect."

"Here comes a hippopotamus—on closer inspection Keraunus, the steward."

"Are you his enemy?"

"I, no; but he is mine—yes," replied Pollux. "It is a foolish story. When we sup together don't ask me about it if you care to have a jolly companion And do not tell Keraunus that I am here, it will lead to no good."

"As you wish, and here are our lamps too."

"Enough to light the nether world," exclaimed Pollux, and waving his hand to the architect in farewell he vanished behind the screens to devote himself entirely to his model.

It was long past midnight, and the slaves who had set to work with much zeal had finished their labors in the hall of the

Muses. They were now allowed to rest for some hours on straw that had been spread for them in another wing of the building. The architect himself wished to take advantage of this time to refresh himself by a short sleep, for the exertions of the morrow, but between this intention and its fulfilment an obstacle was interposed, the preposterous dimensions namely of his guest. He had invited the steward on purpose to give him his fill of meat, and Keraunus had shown himself amenable to encouragement in this respect. But after the last dish had been removed the steward thought that good manners demanded that he should honor his entertainer by his illustrious presence, and at the same time the prefect's good wine loosened the tongue of the man, who was not usually communicative.

First he spoke of the manifold infirmities which tormented him and endangered his life, and when Pontius, to divert his talk into other channels, was so imprudent as to allude to the Council of Citizens, Keraunus gave full play to his eloquence, and, while he emptied cup after cup of wine, tried to lay down the reasons which had made him and his friends decide on staking everything in order to deprive the members of the extensive community of Jews in the city of their rights as citizens, and to expel them, if possible, from Alexandria. So warm was his zeal that he totally forgot the presence of the architect, and his humble origin, and declared to be indispensable, that even the descendants of freed-slaves should be disenfranchised.

Pontius saw in the steward's inflamed eyes and cheeks that

it was the wine which spoke within him, and he made no answer; and determined that the rest he needed should not be thus abridged, he rose from table and briefly excusing himself he retired to the room in which the couch had been prepared for him. After he had undressed he desired his slave to see what Keraunus was about, and soon received the reassuring information that the steward was fast asleep and snoring.

"Only listen," said the slave, to confirm his report. "You can hear him grunting and snuffing as far as this. I pushed a cushion under his head, for otherwise, so full as he is, the stout gentleman might come to some harm."

Love is a plant which springs up for many who have never sown it, and grows into a spreading tree for many who have neither fostered nor tended it. How little had Keraunus ever done to win the heart of his daughter, how much on the contrary which could not fail to overshadow and trouble her young life. And yet Selene, whose youth—for she was but nineteen—needed repose and to whom the evening with the reprieve of sleep brought more pleasure than the morning with its load of cares and labor, sat by the three-branched lamp and watched, and tormented herself more and more as it grew later and later, at her father's long absence. About a week before the strong man had suddenly lost consciousness; only, it is true, for a few minutes, and the physician had told her that though he appeared to be in superabundant health, the attack indicated that he must follow his prescriptions strictly and avoid all kinds of excess. A single

indiscretion, he had declared, might swiftly and suddenly cut the thread of his existence. After her father had gone out in obedience to the architect's invitation, Selene had brought out her youngest brothers' and sisters' garments, in order to mend them. Her sister Arsinoe, who was her junior by two years, and whose fingers were as nimble as her own, might indeed have helped her, but she had gone to bed early and was sleeping by the children who could not be left untended at night. Her female slave, who had been in her grandmother's service, ought to have assisted her; but the old half-blind negress saw even worse by lamp-light than by daylight, and after a few stitches could do no more. Selene sent her to bed and sat down alone to her work.

For the first hour she sewed away without looking up, considering, meanwhile, how she could best contrive to support the family till the end of the month on the few drachmae she could dispose of. As it got later she grew wearier and wearier, but still she sat at the work, though her pretty head often sank upon her breast. She must await her father's return, for a potion prepared by the physician stood waiting for him, and she feared he would forget it if she did not remind him.

By the end of the second hour sleep overcame her, and she felt as if the chair she was sitting on was giving way under her, and as if it was sinking at first slowly and then quicker and quicker, into a deep abyss that opened beneath her. Looking up for help in her dream, she could see nothing but her father's face, which looked aside with indifference. As her dream went on she called

him and called him again, but for a long time he did not seem to hear her. At last he looked down at her and when he perceived her he smiled, but instead of helping her he picked up stones and clods from the edge of the gulf and threw them on her hands with which she had clutched the brambles and roots that grew out of the rift of the rocks. She entreated him to cease, implored him, shrieked to him to spare her, but not a muscle moved in the face above her; it seemed set in a vacant smile, and even his heart was dead too, for he ruthlessly flung down now a pebble, now a clod, one after the other, till her hands were losing their last feeble hold and she was on the point of falling into the fatal gulf below. Her own cry of terror aroused her, but during the brief process of returning from her dream to actuality, she saw through swiftly parting mists—only for an instant, and yet quite plainly—the tall grass of a meadow, spangled with ox-eye daisies, white and gold, with violet-hued blue bells and scarlet poppies, among which she was lying—as in a soft green bed, while near the sward lay a sparkling blue lake and behind it rose beautiful swelling hills, with red cliffs, and green groves, and meadows bright in the clear sunshine. A clear sky, across which a soft breeze gently blew light silvery flakes of cloud, bent over the lovely but fleeting picture, which she could not compare with anything she had ever seen near her own home.

She had only slept for a short time, but when, once more thoroughly awake, she rubbed her eyes, she thought her dream must have lasted for hours.

One flame of the three-branched lamp had flickered into extinction and the wick of another was beginning to waste. She hastily put it out with a pair of tongs that hung by a chain, and then after pouring fresh oil into the lamp that was still burning she carried the light into her father's sleeping room.

He had not yet returned. She was seized with a mortal terror. Had the architect's wine bereft him of his senses? Had he on his way back to his rooms been seized with a fresh attack of giddiness? In spirit she saw the heavy man incapable of raising himself, dying perhaps where he had fallen.

No choice remained to her; she must go at once to the hall of the Muses and see what had happened to her father, pick him up, give him help or— if he still were feasting—endeavor to tempt him back by any excuse she could find. Everything was at stake; her father's life and with it maintenance and shelter for eight helpless creatures.

The December night was stormy, a keen and bitter wind blew through the ill-closed opening in the roof of the room as Selene, before she began her expedition, tied a handkerchief over her head and threw over her shoulders a white mantle which had been worn by her dead mother. In the long corridor which lay between her father's rooms and the front portion of the palace, she had to screen the flickering light of the little lamp with her left hand, carrying it in her right; the flame blown about by the draught and her own figure were mirrored here and there in the polished surface of the dark marble. The thick sandals she had tied on to

her feet roused loud echoes in the empty rooms as they fell on the stone pavements, and terror possessed Selene's anxious soul. Her fingers trembled as they held the lamp and her heart beat audibly as, with bated breath, she went through the cupolaed hall in which Ptolemy Euergetes 'the fat' was said, some years ago, to have murdered his own son, and in which even a deep breath roused an echo.

But even in this room she did not forget to look to the right and left for her father. She breathed a sigh of relief when she perceived a streak of light which shone through the gaping rift of a cracked side- door of the hall of the Muses and fell in a broken reflection on the floor and the wall of the last room through which she had to pass. She now entered the large hall which was dimly lighted by the lamps behind the sculptor's screen, and by several tapers, now burnt down low. These were standing on a table knocked together out of blocks of wood and planks at the extreme end of the hall, and behind this her father was sound asleep.

The deep notes brought out of the sleeper's broad chest, were echoed in a very uncanny way from the bare walls of the vast empty room, and she was frightened by them and still more by the long black shadows of the pillars, that lay, like barriers, across her path. She stood listening in the middle of the hall and soon recognized in the alarming tones a sound that was only too familiar. Without a moment's hesitation she started to run, and hastened to the sleeper, shook him, pushed him, called him,

sprinkled his forehead with water, and appealed to him by the tenderest names with which her sister Arsinoe was wont to coax him. When, in spite of all this, he neither spoke nor stirred, she flung the full light of the lamp on his face. Then she thought she perceived that a bluish tinge had overspread his bloated features, and she broke into the deep, agonized, weeping which, a few hours previously had touched the architect's heart.

There was a sudden stir behind the screens which enclosed the sculptor and the work in progress. Pollux had been working for a long time with zeal and pleasure, but at last the steward's snoring had begun to disturb him. The body of the Muse had already taken a definite form and he could begin to work out the head with the earliest dawn of day. He now dropped his arms wearily, for as soon as he ceased to create with his whole heart and mind he felt tired, and saw plainly that without a model he could do nothing satisfactory with the drapery of his Urania. So he pulled his stool up to a great chest full of gypsum to get a little repose by leaning against it.

But sleep avoided the artist who was too much excited by his rapid night's work, and as soon as Selene opened the door he sat upright and peeped through an opening between the frames of his place of retirement. When he saw the tall draped figure in whose hand a lamp was trembling, when he watched her cross the spacious hall, and then suddenly stand still, he was not a little startled, but this did not hinder him from noting every step of the nocturnal spectre with far more curiosity than alarm. Then, when

Selene looked round her, and the lamp illuminated her face, be recognized the steward's daughter, and immediately knew what she must be seeking.

Her vain attempts to rouse the sleeper, though somewhat pathetic, had in them at the same time something irresistibly ludicrous, and Pollux felt sorely tempted to laugh. But as soon as Selene began to weep so bitterly he hastily pushed apart two of the laths of the screen, went up and called her name, at first softly not to frighten her, and then more loudly. When she turned her head he begged her warmly not to be alarmed for he was no ghost, only a very humble and ordinary mortal, in fact—as she might see—nothing more, alas! than the son of Euphorian, the gate-keeper, good for nothing as yet, but treading the path to something better.

"You, Pollux?" asked the girl with surprise.

"The very man. But you—can I help you?"

"My poor father," sobbed Selene. "He does not stir, he is immovable—and his face—oh! merciful gods."

"A man who snores is not dead," said the sculptor. "But the doctor told him—"

"He is not even ill! Pontius only gave him stronger wine to drink than he is used to. Let him be; he is sleeping with the pillow under his neck, as comfortably as a child. When he began just now to trumpet a little too loud I whistled as loud as a plover, for that often silences a snorer; but I could more easily have made those stone Muses dance than have roused him."

"If only we could get him to bed."

"Well, if you have four horses at hand."

"You are as bad as you ever were!"

"A little less so, Selene, only you must become accustomed again to my way of speaking. This time I only mean that we two together are not strong enough to carry him away."

"But what can I do, then? The doctor said—"

"Never mind the doctor. The complaint your father is suffering from is one I know well. It will be gone to-morrow, perhaps by sundown, and the only pain it will leave behind, he will feel under his wig. Only leave him to sleep."

"But it is so cold here."

"Take my cloak and cover him with that."

"Then you will be frozen."

"I am used to it. How long has Keraunus had dealings with the doctor?"

Selene related the accident that had befallen her father and how justified were her fears. The sculptor listened to her in silence and then said in a quite altered tone:

"I am truly sorry to hear it. Let us put some cold water on his forehead, and until the slaves come back again I will change the wet cloth every quarter of an hour. Here is a jar and a handkerchief—good, they might have been left on purpose. Perhaps, too, it will wake him, and if not the people shall carry him to his own rooms."

"Disgraceful, disgraceful!" sighed the girl.

"Not at all; the high-priest of Serapis even is sometimes unwell. Only let me see to it."

"It will excite him afresh if he sees you. He is so angry with you—so very angry."

"Omnipotent Zeus, what harm have I done you, fat father! The gods forgive the sins of the wise, and a man will not forgive the fault committed by a stupid lad in a moment of imprudence."

"You mocked at him."

"I set a clay head that was like him on the shoulders of the fat Silenus near the gate, that had lost its own head. It was my first piece of independent work."

"But you did it to vex my father."

"Certainly not, Selene; I was delighted with the joke and nothing more."

"But you knew how touchy he is."

"And does a wild boy of fifteen ever reflect on the consequences of his audacity? If he had but given me a thrashing his annoyance would have discharged itself like thunder and lightning, and the air would have been clear again. But, as it was, he cut the face off the work with a knife, and deliberately trod the pieces under foot as they lay on the ground. He gave me one single blow—with his thumb—which I still feel, it is true, and then he treated me and my parents with such scorn, so coldly and hardly, with such bitter contempt—"

"He never is really violent, but wrath seems to eat him inwardly, and I have rarely seen him so angry as he was that

time."

"But if he had only settled the account with me on the spot! but my father was by, and hot words fell like rain, and my mother added her share, and from that time there has been utter hostility between our little house and you up here. What hurt me most was that you and your sister were forbidden to come to see us and to play with me."

"That has spoilt many pleasant hours for me, too."

"It was nice when we used to dress up in my father's theatrical finery and cloaks."

"And when you made us dolls out of clay."

"Or when we performed the Olympian games."

"I was always the teacher when we played at school with our little brothers and sisters."

"Arsinoe gave you most trouble."

"Oh! and what fun when we went fishing!"

"And when we brought home the fishes and mother gave us meal and raisins to cook them."

"Do you remember the festival of Adonis, and how I stopped the runaway horse of that Numidian officer?"

"The horse had knocked over Arsinoe, and when we got home mother gave you an almond-cake."

"And your ungrateful sister bit a great piece out of it and left me only a tiny morsel. Is Arsinoe as pretty as she promised to become? It is two years since I last saw her; at our place we never have time to leave work till it is dark. For eight months I had to

work for the master at Ptolemais, and often saw the old folks but once in the month."

"We go out very little, too, and we are not allowed to go into your parents' house. My sister—"

"Is she pretty?"

"Yes, I think she is. Whenever she can get hold of a piece of ribbon she plaits it in her hair, and the men in the street turn round to look at her. She is sixteen now."

"Sixteen! What, little Arsinoe! Why, how long then is it since your mother died?"

"Four years and eight months."

"You remember the date very exactly; such a mother is not easily forgotten, indeed. She was a good woman and a kinder I never met. I know, too, that she tried to mollify your father's feeling, but she could not succeed, and then she need must die!"

"Yes," said Selene gloomily. "How could the gods decree it! They are often more cruel than the hardest hearted man."

"Your poor little brothers and sisters!"

The girl bowed her head sadly and Pollux stood for some time with his eyes fixed on the ground. Then he raised his head and exclaimed:

"I have something for you that will please you."

"Nothing ever pleases me now she is dead."

"Yes, yes indeed," replied the young sculptor eagerly. "I could not forget the good soul, and once in my idle moments I modelled her bust from memory. To-morrow I will bring it to you."

"Oh!" cried Selene, and her large heavy eyes brightened with a sunny gleam.

"Now, is not it true, you are pleased?"

"Yes indeed, very much. But when my father learns that it is you who have given me the portrait—"

"Is he capable of destroying it?"

"If he does not destroy it, he will not suffer it in the house as soon as he knows that you made it." Pollux took the handkerchief from the steward's head, moistened it afresh, and exclaimed as he rearranged it on the forehead of the sleeping man:

"I have an idea. All that matters is that my bust should serve to remind you often of your mother; the bust need not stand in your rooms. The busts of the women of the house of Ptolemy stand on the rotunda, which you can see from your balcony, and which you can pass whenever you please; some of them are badly mutilated and must be got rid of. I will undertake to restore the Berenice and put your mother's head on her shoulders. Then you have only to go out and look at her. Will that do?"

"Yes, Pollux; you are a good man."

"So I told you just now. I am beginning to improve. But time—time! if I am to undertake to repair Berenice I must begin by saving the minutes."

"Go back to your work now; I know how to apply a wet compress only too well."

With these words Selene threw back her mantle over her shoulders so as to leave her hands free for use, and stood with her

slender figure, her pale face, and the fine broadly-flowing folds of rich stuff, like a statue in the eyes of the young sculptor.

"Stop—stay so—just so," cried Pollux to the astonished girl, so loudly and eagerly that she was startled.

"Your cloak hangs with a wonderfully-free flow from your shoulders—in the name of all the gods do not touch it. If only I might model from it I should in a few minutes gain a whole day for our Berenice. I will wet the handkerchief at intervals in the pauses." Without waiting for Selene's answer the sculptor hastened into his nook and returned first with one of the lamps he worked by in each hand, and some small tools in his mouth, and then fetched his wax model which he placed on the outer side of the table, behind which the steward was sleeping. The tapers were put out, the lamps pushed aside, and raised or lowered, and when at last a tolerably suitable light was procured Pollux threw himself on a stool, straddled his legs, craned his head forward as far as his neck would allow, looking, with his hooked nose, like a vulture that strives to descry his distant prey—cast his eyes down, raised them again to take in something fresh, and after a long gaze looked down again while his fingers and nails moved over the surface of the wax-figure, sinking into the plastic material, applying new pieces to apparently complete portions, removing others with a decided nip and rounding them off with bewildering rapidity to use them for a fresh purpose.

He seemed to be seized with cramp in his hands, but still under his knotted brow his eye shone earnest, resolute and calm,

and yet full of profound and speechless inspiration. Selene had said not a word that permitted his using her as a model; but, as if his enthusiasm was infectious, she remained motionless, and when, as he worked, his gaze met hers she could detect the stern earnestness which at this moment possessed her eager companion.

Neither of them opened their lips for some time. At last he stood back from his work, stooping low to look first at Selene and then at his statuette with keen examination from head to foot; and then, drawing a deep breath, and rubbing the wax over with his finger, he said:

"There, that is how it must go! Now I will wet your father's handkerchief and then we can go on again. If you are tired you can rest."

She availed herself but little of this permission and presently he began work again. As he proceeded carefully to replace some folds of her drapery which had fallen out of place, she moved her foot as if to draw back, but he begged her earnestly to stand still and she obeyed his request.

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