GEORG EBERS

UARDA : A ROMANCE OF ANCIENT EGYPT. VOLUME 07

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Содержание

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CHAPTER XXIX

At last the pioneer's boat got off with his mother and the body of the dog, which he intended to send to be embalmed at Kynopolis, the city in which the dog was held sacred above all animals;

> [Kynopolis, or in old Egyptian Saka, is now Samalut; Anubis was the chief divinity worshipped there. Plutarch relates a quarrel between the inhabitants of this city, and the neighboring one of Oxyrynchos, where the fish called Oxyrynchos was worshipped. It began because the Kynopolitans eat the fish, and in revenge the Oxyrynchites caught and killed dogs, and consumed them in sacrifices. Juvenal relates a similar story of the Ombites—perhaps Koptites—and Pentyrites in the 15th Satire.]

Paaker himself returned to the House of Seti, where, in the night which closed the feast day, there was always a grand banquet for the superior priests of the Necropolis and of the temples of eastern Thebes, for the representatives of other foundations, and for select dignitaries of the state.

His father had never failed to attend this entertainment when he was in Thebes, but he himself had to-day for the first time received the much- coveted honor of an invitation, which—Ameni told him when he gave it—he entirely owed to the Regent.

His mother had tied up his hand, which Rameri had severely hurt; it was extremely painful, but he would not have missed the banquet at any cost, although he felt some alarm of the solemn ceremony. His family was as old as any in Egypt, his blood purer than the king's, and nevertheless he never felt thoroughly at home in the company of superior people. He was no priest, although a scribe; he was a warrior, and yet he did not rank with royal heroes.

He had been brought up to a strict fulfilment of his duty, and he devoted himself zealously to his calling; but his habits of life were widely different from those of the society in which he had been brought up— a society of which his handsome, brave, and magnanimous father had been a chief ornament. He did not cling covetously to his inherited wealth, and the noble attribute of liberality was not strange to him, but the coarseness of his nature showed itself most when he was most lavish, for he was never tired of exacting gratitude from those whom he had attached to him by his gifts, and he thought he had earned the right by his liberality to meet the recipient with roughness or arrogance, according to his humor. Thus it happened that his best actions procured him not friends but enemies.

Paaker's was, in fact, an ignoble, that is to say, a selfish nature; to shorten his road he trod down flowers as readily as he marched over the sand of the desert. This characteristic marked him in all things, even in his outward demeanor; in the sound of his voice, in his broad features, in the swaggering gait of his stumpy figure.

In camp he could conduct himself as he pleased; but this was not permissible in the society of his equals in rank; for this reason, and because those faculties of quick remark and repartee, which distinguished them, had been denied to him, he felt uneasy and out of his element when he mixed with them, and he would hardly have accepted Ameni's invitation, if it had not so greatly flattered his vanity.

It was already late; but the banquet did not begin till midnight, for the guests, before it began, assisted at the play which was performed by lamp and torch-light on the sacred lake in the south of the Necropolis, and which represented the history of Isis and Osiris.

When he entered the decorated hall in which the tables were prepared, he found all the guests assembled. The Regent Ani was present, and sat on Ameni's right at the top of the centre high-table at which several places were unoccupied; for the prophets and the initiated of the temple of Amon had excused themselves from being present. They were faithful to Rameses and his house; their grey-haired Superior disapproved of Ameni's severity towards the prince and princess, and they regarded the miracle of the sacred heart as a malicious trick of the chiefs of the Necropolis against the great temple of the capital for which Rameses had always shown a preference.

The pioneer went up to the table, where sat the general of the troops that had just returned victorious from Ethiopia, and several other officers of high rank, There was a place vacant next to the general. Paaker fixed his eyes upon this, but when he observed that the officer signed to the one next to him to come a little nearer, the pioneer imagined that each would endeavor to avoid having him for his neighbor, and with an angry glance he turned his back on the table where the warriors sat.

The Mohar was not, in fact, a welcome boon-companion. "The wine turns sour when that churl looks at it," said the general.

The eyes of all the guests turned on Paaker, who looked round for a seat, and when no one beckoned him to one he felt his blood begin to boil. He would have liked to leave the banqueting hall at once with a swingeing curse. He had indeed turned towards the door, when the Regent, who had exchanged a few whispered words with Ameni, called to him, requested him to take the place that had been reserved for him, and pointed to the seat by his side, which had in fact been intended for the high-priest of the temple of Amon.

Paaker bowed low, and took the place of honor, hardly daring to look round the table, lest he should encounter looks of surprise or of mockery. And yet he had pictured to himself his grandfather Assa, and his father, as somewhere near this place of honor, which had actually often enough been given up to them. And was he not their descendant and heir? Was not his mother Setchem of royal race? Was not the temple of Seti more indebted to him than to any one?

A servant laid a garland of flowers round his shoulders, and another handed him wine and food. Then he raised his eyes, and met the bright and sparkling glance of Gagabu; he looked quickly down again at the table.

Then the Regent spoke to him, and turning to the other guests mentioned that Paaker was on the point of starting next day for Syria, and resuming his arduous labors as Mohar. It seemed to Paaker that the Regent was excusing himself for having given him so high a place of honor.

Presently Ani raised his wine-cup, and drank to the happy issue of his reconnoitring-expedition, and a victorious conclusion to every struggle in which the Mohar might engage. The high-priest then pledged him, and thanked him emphatically in the name of the brethren of the temple, for the noble tract of arable land which he had that morning given them as a votive offering. A murmur of approbation ran round the tables, and Paaker's timidity began to diminish.

He had kept the wrappings that his mother had applied round his still aching hand.

"Are you wounded?" asked the Regent.

"Nothing of importance," answered the pioneer. "I was helping my mother into the boat, and it happened—"

"It happened," interrupted an old school-fellow of the Mohar's, who himself held a high appointment as officer of the city-watch of Thebes— "It happened that an oar or a stake fell on his fingers."

"Is it possible!" cried the Regent.

"And quite a youngster laid hands on him," continued the officer. "My people told me every detail. First the boy killed his dog—"

"That noble Descher?" asked the master of the hunt in a tone of regret. "Your father was often by my side with that dog at a boar-hunt."

Paaker bowed his head; but the officer of the watch, secure in his position and dignity, and taking no notice of the glow of anger which flushed Paaker's face, began again:

"When the hound lay on the ground, the foolhardy boy struck your dagger out of your hand."

"And did this squabble lead to any disturbance?" asked Ameni earnestly.

"No," replied the officer. "The feast has passed off to-day with unusual quiet. If the unlucky interruption to the procession by that crazy paraschites had not occurred, we should have nothing but praise for the populace. Besides the fighting priest, whom we have handed over to you, only a few thieves have been apprehended, and they belong exclusively to the caste,

> [According to Diodorous (I. 80) there was a cast of thieves in Thebes. All citizens were obliged to enter their names in a register, and state where they lived, and the thieves did the same. The names were enrolled by the "chief of the thieves," and all stolen goods had to be given up to him. The person robbed had to give a written description of the object he had lost, and a declaration as to when and where he had lost it. The stolen property was then easily recovered, and restored to the owner on the payment of one fourth of its value, which was given to the thief. A similar state of things existed at Cairo within a comparatively short time.]

so we simply take their booty from them, and let them go. But say, Paaker, what devil of amiability took possession of you down by the river, that you let the rascal escape unpunished."

"Did you do that?" exclaimed Gagabu. "Revenge is usually your—"

Ameni threw so warning a glance at the old man, that he suddenly broke off, and then asked the pioneer: "How did the struggle begin, and who was the fellow?"

"Some insolent people," said Paaker, "wanted to push in front of the boat that was waiting for my mother, and I asserted my rights. The rascal fell upon me, and killed my dog and—by my Osirian father!—the crocodiles would long since have eaten him if a woman had not come between us, and made herself known to me as Bent-Anat, the daughter of Rameses. It was she herself, and the rascal was the young prince Rameri, who was yesterday forbidden this temple."

"Oho!" cried the old master of the hunt. "Oho! my lord! Is this the way to speak of the children of the king?"

Others of the company who were attached to Pharaoh's family expressed their indignation; but Ameni whispered to Paaker—"Say no more!" then he continued aloud:

"You never were careful in weighing your words, my friend, and now, as it seems to me, you are speaking in the heat of fever. Come here, Gagabu, and examine Paaker's wound, which is no disgrace to him—for it was inflicted by a prince."

The old man loosened the bandage from the pioneer's swollen hand.

"That was a bad blow," he exclaimed; "three fingers are broken, and—do you see?—the emerald too in your signet ring."

Paaker looked down at his aching fingers, and uttered a sigh of rehef, for it was not the oracular ring with the name of Thotmes III., but the valuable one given to his father by the reigning king that had been crushed. Only a few solitary fragments of the splintered stone remained in the setting; the king's name had fallen to pieces, and disappeared. Paaker's bloodless lips moved silently, and an inner voice cried out to him: "The Gods point out the way! The name is gone, the bearer of the name must follow."

"It is a pity about the ring," said Gagabu. "And if the hand is not to follow it—luckily it is your left hand—leave off drinking, let yourself be taken to Nebsecht the surgeon, and get him to set the joints neatly, and bind them up."

Paaker rose, and went away after Ameni had appointed to meet him on the following day at the Temple of Seti, and the Regent at the palace.

When the door had closed behind him, the treasurer of the temple said:

"This has been a bad day for the Mohar, and perhaps it will teach him that here in Thebes he cannot swagger as he does in the field. Another adventure occurred to him to-day; would you like to hear it?"

"Yes; tell it!" cried the guests.

"You all knew old Seni," began the treasurer. "He was a rich man, but he gave away all his goods to the poor, after his seven blooming sons, one after another, had died in the war, or of illness. He only kept a small house with a little garden, and said that as the Gods had taken his children to themselves in the other world he would take pity on the forlorn in this. 'Feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked' says the law; and now that Seni has nothing more to give away, he goes through the city, as you know, hungry and thirsty himself, and scarcely clothed, and begging for his adopted children, the poor. We have all given to him, for we all know for whom he humbles himself, and holds out his hand. To-day he went round with his little bag, and begged, with his kind good eyes, for alms. Paaker has given us a good piece of arable land, and thinks, perhaps with reason, that he has done his part. When Seni addressed him, he told him to go; but the old man did not give up asking him, he followed him persistently to the grave of his father, and a great many people with him. Then the pioneer pushed him angrily back, and when at last the beggar clutched his garment, he raised his whip, and struck him two or three times, crying out: 'There- that is your portion!' The good old man bore it quite patiently, while he untied the bag, and said with tears in his eyes: 'My portion—yes— but not the portion of the poor!'

"I was standing near, and I saw how Paaker hastily withdrew into the tomb, and how his mother Setchem threw her full purse to Seni. Others followed her example, and the old man never had a richer harvest. The poor may thank the Mohar! A crowd of people collected in front of the tomb, and he would have fared badly if it had not been for the police guard who drove them away."

During this narrative, which was heard with much approval—for no one is more secure of his result than he who can tell of the downfall of a man who is disliked for his arrogance—the Regent and the high-priest had been eagerly whispering to each other.

"There can be no doubt," said Ameni, that Bent-Anat did actually come to the festival."

"And had also dealings with the priest whom you so warmly defend," whispered the other.

"Pentaur shall be questioned this very night," returned the high- priest. "The dishes will soon be taken away, and the drinking will begin. Let us go and hear what the poet says."

"But there are now no witnesses," replied Ani.

"We do not need them," said Ameni. "He is incapable of a lie."

"Let us go then," said the Regent smiling, "for I am really curious about this white negro, and how he will come to terms with the truth. You have forgotten that there is a woman in the case."

"That there always is!" answered Ameni; he called Gagabu to him, gave him his seat, begged him to keep up the flow of cheerful conversation, to encourage the guests to drink, and to interrupt all talk of the king, the state, or the war.

"You know," he concluded, "that we are not by ourselves this evening. Wine has, before this, betrayed everything! Remember this—the mother of foresight looks backwards!"

Ani clapped his hand on the old man's shoulder. "There will be a space cleared to-night in your winelofts. It is said of you that you cannot bear to see either a full glass or an empty one; to-night give your aversion to both free play. And when you think it is the right moment, give a sign to my steward, who is sitting there in the corner. He has a few jars of the best liquor from Byblos, that he brought over with him, and he will bring it to you. I will come in again and bid you good- night." Ameni was accustomed to leave the hall at the beginning of the drinking.

When the door was closed behind him and his companion, when fresh rose- garlands had been brought for the necks of the company, when lotus blossoms decorated their heads, and the beakers were refilled, a choir of musicians came in, who played on harps, lutes, flutes, and small drums. The conductor beat the time by clapping his hands, and when the music had raised the spirits of the drinkers, they seconded his efforts by rhythmical clippings. The jolly old Gagabu kept up his character as a stout drinker, and leader of the feast.

The most priestly countenances soon beamed with cheerfulness, and the officers and courtiers outdid each other in audacious jokes. Then the old man signed to a young temple-servant, who wore a costly wreath; he came forward with a small gilt image of a mummy, carried it round the circle and cried:

"Look at this, be merry and drink so long as you are on earth, for soon you must be like this."

[A custom mentioned by Herodotus. Lucian saw such an image brought in at a feast. The Greeks adopted the idea, but beautified it, using a winged Genius of death instead of a mummy. The Romans also had their "larva."]

Gagabu gave another signal, and the Regent's steward brought in the wine from Byblos. Ani was much lauded for the wonderful choiceness of the liquor.

"Such wine," exclaimed the usually grave chief of the pastophori, "is like soap."

[This comparison is genuinely Eastern. Kisra called wine "the soap of sorrow." The Mohammedans, to whom wine is forbidden, have praised it like the guests of the House of Seti. Thus Abdelmalik ibn Salih Haschimi says: "The best thing the world enjoys is wine." Gahiz says: "When wine enters thy bones and flows through thy limbs it bestows truth of feeling, and perfects the soul; it removes sorrow, elevates the mood, etc., etc." When Ibn 'Aischah was told that some one drank no wine, he said: "He has thrice disowned the world." Ibn el Mu'tazz sang:

"Heed not time, how it may linger, or how swiftly take its flight,
Wail thy sorrows only to the wine before thee gleaming bright.
But when thrice thou st drained the beaker watch and ward keep o'er thy heart.
Lest the foam of joy should vanish, and thy soul with anguish smart,
This for every earthly trouble is a sovereign remedy,
Therefore listen to my counsel, knowing what will profit thee,
Heed not time, for ah, how many a man has longed in pain
Tale of evil days to lighten—and found all his longing vain."

—Translated by Mary J. Safford.]

"What a simile!" cried Gagabu. "You must explain it."

"It cleanses the soul of sorrow," answered the other. "Good, friend!" they all exclaimed. "Now every one in turn shall praise the noble juice in some worthy saying."

"You begin—the chief prophet of the temple of Atnenophis."

"Sorrow is a poison," said the priest, "and wine is the antidote."

"Well said!—go on; it is your turn, my lord privy councillor."

"Every thing has its secret spring," said the official, "and wine is the secret of joy."

"Now you, my lord keeper of the seal."

"Wine seals the door on discontent, and locks the gates on sorrow."

"That it does, that it certainly does!—Now the governor of Hermothis, the oldest of all the company."

"Wine ripens especially for us old folks, and not for you young people."

"That you must explain," cried a voice from the table of the military officers.

"It makes young men of the old," laughed the octogenarian, "and children of the young."

"He has you there, you youngsters," cried Gagabu. "What have you to say, Septah?"

"Wine is a poison," said the morose haruspex, "for it makes fools of wise men."

"Then you have little to fear from it, alas!" said Gagabu laughing. "Proceed, my lord of the chase."

"The rim of the beaker," was the answer, "is like the lip of the woman you love. Touch it, and taste it, and it is as good as the kiss of a bride."

"General—the turn is yours."

"I wish the Nile ran with such wine instead of with water," cried the soldier, "and that I were as big as the colossus of Atnenophis, and that the biggest obelisk of Hatasu were my drinking vessel, and that I might drink as much as I would! But now—what have you to say of this noble liquor, excellent Gagabu?"

The second prophet raised his beaker, and gazed lovingly at the golden fluid; he tasted it slowly, and then said with his eyes turned to heaven:

"I only fear that I am unworthy to thank the Gods for such a divine blessing."

"Well said!" exclaimed the Regent Ani, who had re-entered the room unobserved. "If my wine could speak, it would thank you for such a speech."

"Hail to the Regent Ani!" shouted the guests, and they all rose with their cups filled with his noble present.

He pledged them and then rose.

"Those," said he, "who have appreciated this wine, I now invite to dine with me to-morrow. You will then meet with it again, and if you still find it to your liking, you will be heartily welcome any evening. Now, good night, friends."

A thunder of applause followed him, as he quitted the room.

The morning was already grey, when the carousing-party broke up; few of the guests could find their way unassisted through the courtyard; most of them had already been carried away by the slaves, who had waited for them—and who took them on their heads, like bales of goods—and had been borne home in their litters; but for those who remained to the end, couches were prepared in the House of Seti, for a terrific storm was now raging.

While the company were filling and refilling the beakers, which raised their spirits to so wild a pitch, the prisoner Pentaur had been examined in the presence of the Regent. Ameni's messenger had found the poet on his knees, so absorbed in meditation that he did not perceive his approach. All his peace of mind had deserted him, his soul was in a tumult, and he could not succeed in obtaining any calm and clear control over the new life-pulses which were throbbing in his heart.

He had hitherto never gone to rest at night without requiring of himself an account of the past day, and he had always been able to detect the most subtle line that divided right from wrong in his actions. But to-night he looked back on a perplexing confusion of ideas and events, and when he endeavored to sort them and arrange them, he could see nothing clearly but the image of Bent-Anat, which enthralled his heart and intellect.

He had raised his hand against his fellow-men, and dipped it in blood, he desired to convince himself of his sin, and to repent but he could not; for each time he recalled it, to blame and condemn himself, he saw the soldier's hand twisted in Uarda's hair, and the princess's eyes beaming with approbation, nay with admiration, and he said to himself that he had acted rightly, and in the same position would do the same again to-morrow. Still he felt that he had broken through all the conditions with which fate had surrounded his existence, and it seemed to him that he could never succeed in recovering the still, narrow, but peaceful life of the past.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.