

GEORG EBERS

HOMO SUM.

VOLUME 01

Georg Ebers

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PREFACE

In the course of my labors preparatory to writing a history of the Sinaitic peninsula, the study of the first centuries of Christianity for a long time claimed my attention; and in the mass of martyrology, of ascetic writings, and of histories of saints and monks, which it was necessary to work through and sift for my strictly limited object, I came upon a narrative (in Cotelierius Ecclesiae Graecae Monumenta) which seemed to me peculiar and touching notwithstanding its improbability. Sinai and the oasis of Pharan which lies at its foot were the scene of action.

When, in my journey through Arabia Petraea, I saw the caves of the anchorites of Sinai with my own eyes and trod their soil with my own feet, that story recurred to my mind and did not cease to haunt me while I travelled on farther in the desert.

A soul's problem of the most exceptional type seemed to me to be offered by the simple course of this little history.

An anchorite, falsely accused instead of another, takes his punishment of expulsion on himself without exculpating himself, and his innocence becomes known only through the confession of the real culprit.

There was a peculiar fascination in imagining what the emotions of a soul might be which could lead to such apathy, to such an annihilation of all sensibility; and while the very deeds and thoughts of the strange cave-dweller grew more and more vivid in my mind the figure of Paulus took form, as it were as an example, and soon a crowd of ideas gathered round it, growing at last to a distinct entity, which excited and urged me on till I ventured to give it artistic expression in the form of a narrative. I was prompted to elaborate this subject—which had long been shaping itself to perfect conception in my mind as ripe material for a romance—by my readings in Coptic monkish annals, to which I was led by Abel's Coptic studies; and I afterwards received a further stimulus from the small but weighty essay by H. Weingarten on the origin of monasticism, in which I still study the early centuries of Christianity, especially in Egypt.

This is not the place in which to indicate the points on which I feel myself obliged to differ from Weingarten. My acute fellow-laborer at Breslau clears away much which does not deserve to remain, but in many parts of his book he seems to me to sweep with too hard a broom.

Easy as it would have been to lay the date of my story in the beginning of the fortieth year of the fourth century instead of the thirtieth, I have forborne from doing so because I feel able to prove with certainty that at the time which I have chosen there were not only heathen recluses in the temples of Serapis but also Christian anchorites; I fully agree with him that the beginnings of organized Christian monasticism can in no case be dated earlier than the year 350.

The Paulus of my story must not be confounded with the "first hermit," Paulus of Thebes, whom Weingarten has with good reason struck out of the category of historical personages. He, with all the figures in this narrative is a purely fictitious person, the vehicle for an idea, neither more nor less. I selected no particular model for my hero, and I claim for him no attribute but that of his having been possible at the period; least of all did I think of Saint Anthony, who is now deprived even of his distinguished biographer Athanasius, and who is represented as a man of very sound judgment but of so scant an education that he was master only of Egyptian.

The dogmatic controversies which were already kindled at the time of my story I have, on careful consideration, avoided mentioning. The dwellers on Sinai and in the oasis took an eager part in them at a later date.

That Mount Sinai to which I desire to transport the reader must not be confounded with the mountain which lies at a long day's journey to the south of it. It is this that has borne the name, at any rate since the time of Justinian; the celebrated convent of the Transfiguration lies at its foot, and it has been commonly accepted as the Sinai of Scripture. In the description of my journey through Arabia Petraea I have endeavored to bring fresh proof of the view, first introduced by Lepsius, that the giant-mountain, now called Serbal, must be regarded as the mount on which the law was given—and was indeed so regarded before the time of Justinian—and not the Sinai of the monks.

As regards the stone house of the Senator Petrus, with its windows opening on the street—contrary to eastern custom—I may remark, in anticipation of well founded doubts, that to this day wonderfully well- preserved fire-proof walls stand in the oasis of Pharan, the remains of a pretty large number of similar buildings.

But these and such external details hold a quite secondary place in this study of a soul. While in my earlier romances the scholar was compelled to make concessions to the poet and the poet to the scholar, in this one I have not attempted to instruct, nor sought to clothe the outcome of my studies in forms of flesh and blood; I have aimed at absolutely nothing but to give artistic expression to the vivid realization of an idea that had deeply stirred my soul. The simple figures whose inmost being I have endeavored to reveal to the reader fill the canvas of a picture where, in the dark background, rolls the flowing ocean of the world's history.

The Latin title was suggested to me by an often used motto which exactly agrees with the fundamental view to which I have been led by my meditations on the mind and being of man; even of those men who deem that they have climbed the very highest steps of that stair which leads into the Heavens.

In the *Heautontimorumenos* of Terence, Chremes answers his neighbor Menedemus (Act I, SC. I, v. 25) "Homo sum; humani nil a me alienum puto," which Donner translates literally:

"I am human, nothing that is human can I regard as alien to me."

But Cicero and Seneca already used this line as a proverb, and in a sense which far transcends that which it would seem to convey in context with the passage whence it is taken; and as I coincide with them, I have transferred it to the title-page of this book with this meaning:

"I am a man; and I feel that I am above all else a man."

Leipzig, November 11, 1877.

GEORG EBERS.

CHAPTER I

Rocks-naked, hard, red-brown rocks all round; not a bush, not a blade, not a clinging moss such as elsewhere nature has lightly flung on the rocky surface of the heights, as if a breath of her creative life had softly touched the barren stone. Nothing but smooth granite, and above it a sky as bare of cloud as the rocks are of shrubs and herbs.

And yet in every cave of the mountain wall there moves a human life; two small grey birds too float softly in the pure, light air of the desert that glows in the noonday sun, and then they vanish behind a range of cliffs, which shuts in the deep gorge as though it were a wall built by man.

There it is pleasant enough, for a spring bedews the stony soil and there, as wherever any moisture touches the desert, aromatic plants thrive, and umbrageous bushes grow. When Osiris embraced the goddess of the desert—so runs the Egyptian myth—he left his green wreath on her couch.

But at the time and in the sphere where our history moves the old legends are no longer known or are ignored. We must carry the reader back to the beginning of the thirtieth year of the fourth century after the birth of the Saviour, and away to the mountains of Sinai on whose sacred ground solitary anchorites have for some few years been dwelling—men weary of the world, and vowed to penitence, but as yet without connection or rule among themselves.

Near the spring in the little ravine of which we have spoken grows a many-branched feathery palm, but it does not shelter it from the piercing rays of the sun of those latitudes; it seems only to protect the roots of the tree itself; still the feathered boughs are strong enough to support a small thread-bare blue cloth, which projects like a penthouse, screening the face of a girl who lies dreaming, stretched at full-length on the glowing stones, while a few yellowish mountain-goats spring from stone to stone in search of pasture as gaily as though they found the midday heat pleasant and exhilarating. From time to time the girl seizes the herdsman's crook that lies beside her, and calls the goats with a hissing cry that is audible at a considerable distance. A young kid comes dancing up to her. Few beasts can give expression to their feelings of delight; but young goats can.

The girl puts out her bare slim foot, and playfully pushes back the little kid who attacks her in fun, pushes it again and again each time it skips forward, and in so doing the shepherdess bends her toes as gracefully as if she wished some looker-on to admire their slender form. Once more the kid springs forward, and this time with its head down. Its brow touches the sole of her foot, but as it rubs its little hooked nose tenderly against the girl's foot, she pushes it back so violently that the little beast starts away, and ceases its game with loud bleating.

It was just as if the girl had been waiting for the right moment to hit the kid sharply; for the kick was a hard one—almost a cruel one. The blue cloth hid the face of the maiden, but her eyes must surely have sparkled brightly when she so roughly stopped the game. For a minute she remained motionless; but the cloth, which had fallen low over her face, waved gently to and fro, moved by her fluttering breath. She was listening with eager attention, with passionate expectation; her convulsively clenched toes betrayed her.

Then a noise became audible; it came from the direction of the rough stair of unhewn blocks, which led from the steep wall of the ravine down to the spring. A shudder of terror passed through the tender, and not yet fully developed limbs of the shepherdess; still she did not move; the grey birds which were now sitting on a thorn-bush near her flew up, but they had merely heard a noise, and could not distinguish who it was that it announced.

The shepherdess's ear was sharper than theirs. She heard that a man was approaching, and well knew that one only trod with such a step. She put out her hand for a stone that lay near her, and flung it into the spring so that the waters immediately became troubled; then she turned on her side, and lay as if asleep with her head on her arm. The heavy steps became more and more distinctly audible.

A tall youth was descending the rocky stair; by his dress he was seen to be one of the anchorites of Sinai, for he wore nothing but a shirt-shaped garment of coarse linen, which he seemed to have outgrown, and raw leather sandals, which were tied on to his feet with fibrous palm-bast.

No slave could be more poorly clothed by his owner and yet no one would have taken him for a bondman, for he walked erect and self-possessed. He could not be more than twenty years of age; that was evident in the young soft hair on his upper lip, chin, and cheeks; but in his large blue eyes there shone no light of youth, only discontent, and his lips were firmly closed as if in defiance.

He now stood still, and pushed back from his forehead the superabundant and unkempt brown hair that flowed round his head like a lion's mane; then he approached the well, and as he stooped to draw the water in the large dried gourd-shell which he held, he observed first that the spring was muddy, and then perceived the goats, and at last their sleeping mistress.

He impatiently set down the vessel and called the girl loudly, but she did not move till he touched her somewhat roughly with his foot. Then she sprang up as if stung by an asp, and two eyes as black as night flashed at him out of her dark young face; the delicate nostrils of her aquiline nose quivered, and her white teeth gleamed as she cried:

"Am I a dog that you wake me in this fashion?" He colored, pointed sullenly to the well and said sharply: "Your cattle have troubled the water again; I shall have to wait here till it is clear and I can draw some."

"The day is long," answered the shepherdess, and while she rose she pushed, as if by chance, another stone into the water.

Her triumphant, flashing glance as she looked down into the troubled spring did not escape the young man, and he exclaimed angrily:

"He is right! You are a venomous snake—a demon of hell."

She raised herself and made a face at him, as if she wished to show him that she really was some horrible fiend; the unusual sharpness of her mobile and youthful features gave her a particular facility for doing so. And she fully attained her end, for he drew back with a look of horror, stretched out his arms to repel her, and exclaimed as he saw her uncontrollable laughter,

"Back, demon, back! In the name of the Lord! I ask thee, who art thou?"

"I am Miriam—who else should I be?" she answered haughtily.

He had expected a different reply, her vivacity annoyed him, and he said angrily, "Whatever your name is you are a fiend, and I will ask Paulus to forbid you to water your beasts at our well."

"You might run to your nurse, and complain of me to her if you had one," she answered, pouting her lips contemptuously at him.

He colored; she went on boldly, and with eager play of gesture.

"You ought to be a man, for you are strong and big, but you let yourself be kept like a child or a miserable girl; your only business is to hunt for roots and berries, and fetch water in that wretched thing there. I have learned to do that ever since I was as big as that!" and she indicated a contemptibly little measure, with the outstretched pointed fingers of her two hands, which were not less expressively mobile than her features. "Phoh! you are stronger and taller than all the Amalekite lads down there, but you never try to measure yourself with them in shooting with a bow and arrows or in throwing a spear!"

"If I only dared as much as I wish!" he interrupted, and flaming scarlet mounted to his face, "I would be a match for ten of those lean rascals."

"I believe you," replied the girl, and her eager glance measured the youth's broad breast and muscular arms with an expression of pride. "I believe you, but why do you not dare? Are you the slave of that man up there?"

"He is my father and besides—"

"What besides?" she cried, waving her hand as if to wave away a bat. "If no bird ever flew away from the nest there would be a pretty swarm in it. Look at my kids there—as long as they need their

mother they run about after her, but as soon as they can find their food alone they seek it wherever they can find it, and I can tell you the yearlings there have quite forgotten whether they sucked the yellow dam or the brown one. And what great things does your father do for you?"

"Silence!" interrupted the youth with excited indignation. "The evil one speaks through thee. Get thee from me, for I dare not hear that which I dare not utter."

"Dare, dare, dare!" she sneered. "What do you dare then? not even to listen!"

"At any rate not to what you have to say, you goblin!" he exclaimed vehemently. "Your voice is hateful to me, and if I meet you again by the well I will drive you away with stones."

While he spoke thus she stared speechless at him, the blood had left her lips, and she clenched her small hands. He was about to pass her to fetch some water, but she stepped into his path, and held him spell-bound with the fixed gaze of her eyes. A cold chill ran through him when she asked him with trembling lips and a smothered voice, "What harm have I done you?"

"Leave me!" said he, and he raised his hand to push her away from the water.

"You shall not touch me," she cried beside herself. "What harm have I done you?"

"You know nothing of God," he answered, "and he who is not of God is of the Devil."

"You do not say that of yourself," answered she, and her voice recovered its tone of light mockery. "What they let you believe pulls the wires of your tongue just as a hand pulls the strings of a puppet. Who told you that I was of the Devil?"

"Why should I conceal it from you?" he answered proudly. "Our pious Paulus, warned me against you and I will thank him for it. 'The evil one,' he says, 'looks out of your eyes,' and he is right, a thousand times right. When you look at me I feel as if I could tread every thing that is holy under foot; only last night again I dreamed I was whirling in a dance with you—"

At these words all gravity and spite vanished from Miriam's eyes; she clapped her hands and cried, "If it had only been the fact and not a dream! Only do not be frightened again, you fool! Do you know then what it is when the pipes sound, and the lutes tinkle, and our feet fly round in circles as if they had wings?"

"The wings of Satan," Hermas interrupted sternly. "You are a demon, a hardened heathen."

"So says our pious Paulus," laughed the girl.

"So say I too," cried the young man. "Who ever saw you in the assemblies of the just? Do you pray? Do you ever praise the Lord and our Saviour?"

"And what should I praise them for?" asked Miriam. "Because I am regarded as a foul fiend by the most pious among you perhaps?"

"But it is because you are a sinner that Heaven denies you its blessing."

"No—no, a thousand times no!" cried Miriam. "No god has ever troubled himself about me. And if I am not good, why should I be when nothing but evil ever has fallen to my share? Do you know who I am and how I became so? I was wicked, perhaps, when both my parents were slain in their pilgrimage hither? Why, I was then no more than six years old, and what is a child of that age? But still I very well remember that there were many camels grazing near our house, and horses too that belonged to us, and that on a hand that often caressed me—it was my mother's hand—a large jewel shone. I had a black slave too that obeyed me; when she and I did not agree I used to hang on to her grey woolly hair and beat her. Who knows what may have become of her? I did not love her, but if I had her now, how kind I would be to her. And now for twelve years I myself have eaten the bread of servitude, and have kept Senator Petrus's goats, and if I ventured to show myself at a festival among the free maidens, they would turn me out and pull the wreath out of my hair. And am I to be thankful? What for, I wonder? And pious? What god has taken any care of me? Call me an evil demon—call me so! But if Petrus and your Paulus there say that He who is up above us and who let me grow up to such a lot is good, they tell a lie. God is cruel, and it is just like Him to put it into your heart to throw stones and scare me away from your well."

With these words she burst out into bitter sobs, and her features worked with various and passionate distortion.

Hermas felt compassion for the weeping Miriam. He had met her a hundred times and she had shown herself now haughty, now discontented, now exacting and now wrathful, but never before soft or sad. To-day, for the first time, she had opened her heart to him; the tears which disfigured her countenance gave her character a value which it had never before had in his eyes, and when he saw her weak and unhappy he felt ashamed of his hardness. He went up to her kindly and said: "You need not cry; come to the well again always, I will not prevent you."

His deep voice sounded soft and kind as he spoke, but she sobbed more passionately than before, almost convulsively, and she tried to speak but she could not. Trembling in every slender limb, shaken with grief, and overwhelmed with sorrow, the slight shepherdess stood before him, and he felt as if he must help her. His passionate pity cut him to the heart and fettered his by no means ready tongue.

As he could find no word of comfort, he took the water-gourd in his left hand and laid his right, in which he had hitherto held it, gently on her shoulder. She started, but she let him do it; he felt her warm breath; he would have drawn back, but he felt as if he could not; he hardly knew whether she was crying or laughing while she let his hand rest on her black waving hair.

She did not move. At last she raised her head, her eyes flashed into his, and at the same instant he felt two slender arms clasped round his neck. He felt as if a sea were roaring in his ears, and fire blazing in his eyes. A nameless anguish seized him; he tore himself violently free, and with a loud cry as if all the spirits of hell were after him he fled up the steps that led from the well, and heeded not that his water-jar was shattered into a thousand pieces against the rocky wall.

She stood looking after him as if spell-bound. Then she struck her slender hand against her forehead, threw herself down by the spring again and stared into space; there she lay motionless, only her mouth continued to twitch.

When the shadow of the palm-tree grew longer she sprang up, called her goats, and looked up, listening, to the rock-steps by which he had vanished; the twilight is short in the neighborhood of the tropics, and she knew that she would be overtaken by the darkness on the stony and fissured road down the valley if she lingered any longer. She feared the terrors of the night, the spirits and demons, and a thousand vague dangers whose nature she could not have explained even to herself; and yet she did not stir from the spot nor cease listening and waiting for his return till the sun had disappeared behind the sacred mountain, and the glow in the west had paled.

All around was as still as death, she could hear herself breathe, and as the evening chill fell she shuddered with cold.

She now heard a loud noise above her head. A flock of wild mountain goats, accustomed to come at this hour to quench their thirst at the spring, came nearer and nearer, but drew back as they detected the presence of a human being. Only the leader of the herd remained standing on the brink of the ravine, and she knew that he was only awaiting her departure to lead the others down to drink. Following a kindly impulse, she was on the point of leaving to make way for the animals, when she suddenly recollected Hermas's threat to drive her from the well, and she angrily picked up a stone and flung it at the buck, which started and hastily fled. The whole herd followed him. Miriam listened to them as they scampered away, and then, with her head sunk, she led her flock home, feeling her way in the darkness with her bare feet.

CHAPTER II

High above the ravine where the spring was lay a level plateau of moderate extent, and behind it rose a fissured cliff of bare, red-brown porphyry. A vein of diorite of iron-hardness lay at its foot like a green ribbon, and below this there opened a small round cavern, hollowed and arched by the cunning hand of nature. In former times wild beasts, panthers or wolves, had made it their home; it now served as a dwelling for young Hermas and his father.

Many similar caves were to be found in the holy Fountain, and other anchorites had taken possession of the larger ones among them.

That of Stephanus was exceptionally high and deep, and yet the space was but small which divided the two beds of dried mountain herbs where, on one, slept the father, and on the other, the son.

It was long past midnight, but neither the younger nor the elder cave-dweller seemed to be sleeping. Hermas groaned aloud and threw himself vehemently from one side to the other without any consideration for the old man who, tormented with pain and weakness, sorely needed sleep. Stephanus meanwhile denied himself the relief of turning over or of sighing, when he thought he perceived that his more vigorous son had found rest.

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