

GEORG EBERS

THE EMPEROR.

VOLUME 05

Georg Ebers

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The Emperor – Volume 05

CHAPTER XIX

Plutarch was one of the richest citizens of Alexandria, and the owner of the papyrus manufactory where Selene and Arsinoe worked; and he had of his own free will offered to provide for the "suitable" entertainment of the wives and daughters of his fellow-citizens, who were, this very day, to assemble in one of the smaller theatres of the city. Every one that knew him, knew too that "suitable" with him meant as much as to say imperial splendor.

The ship-builder's daughter had prepared Arsinoe for grand doings, but by the time she had reached the entrance only of the theatre her expectations were exceeded, for as soon as she gave her father's name and her own, a boy, who looked out from an arbor of flowers gave her a magnificent bunch of flowers, and another, who sat perched on a dolphin, handed her, as a ticket of admission, a finely-cut ornament of ivory mounted in gold, with a pin, by which the invited owner was intended to fix it like a brooch in her peplum; and at each entrance to the theatre, the ladies, as they came in, had a similar present made them.

The passage leading to the auditorium was full of perfume, and Arsinoe, who had already visited this theatre two or three times, hardly recognized it, it was so gaily decorated with colored scarfs. And who had ever seen ladies and young girls filling the best places instead of men, as was the case to-day? Indeed the citizens' daughters were in general not permitted to see a theatrical performance at all, unless on very special and exceptional occasions. She looked up with a smile at the empty topmost rows of the cheapest seats of the semicircular auditorium, as one looks at an old playfellow one had outgrown by a head, for it was there—when she had occasionally been permitted to dip into their scanty common purse—that she had almost fainted many a time, with pleasure, fear, or sympathy, though the draught so high up and under the open heaven which was the only roof, was incessantly blowing; and in summer the discomforts were even greater from the awning which shaded the amphitheatre on the sunny side. The wide breadths of canvas were managed by means of stout ropes, and when these were pulled through the rings they rode in, they made a screech which compelled the bearer to stop his ears; and often it was necessary to duck his head not to be hit by the heavy ropes or by the awning itself. But Arsinoe only remembered these things to-day as a butterfly sporting in the sun may remember the hideous pupa-case that it has burst and left behind it.

Radiant with happy excitement, she was led to her seat with her young companion, the black-haired daughter of the shipwright. She perceived indeed that numerous eyes turned upon her, but that only added to her pleasure, for she knew that she could well bear looking at, and there could be no greater pleasure, as she thought, than to give pleasure to a multitude.

To-day at any rate! For those who were looking at her were the chief citizens of Alexandria; they stood on the stage, and among them stood kind tall Pollux, waving his hand to her. She could not keep her feet quiet, but she did contrive to keep her arms still by crossing them in front of her, so that they might not betray how excited she was.

This distribution of parts had already begun, for, by waiting for Selene, she had come in almost half an hour too late. As soon as she saw that the eyes that had been attracted to herself as she entered the theatre had turned to other objects she herself looked round her. She was sitting on a bench at the lowest and narrowest end of one of the wedge-shaped sections of seats, which grew wider at the upper end, and which were divided from each other by gangways for those who came and went, thus forming the semicircular area of the auditorium.

Here she was surrounded only by young girls and women who were to have a part or place in the performances. The places for these interested persons were divided from the stage by a space for the orchestra, whence the stage was easily reached by steps up which the chorus were wont to mount to it.

Behind Arsinoe, in the larger circular rows, sat the parents and husbands of the performers, among whom Keraunus, in his saffron robe, had taken a place, besides a considerable number of sight-loving matrons and older citizens who had accepted Plutarch's invitation.

Among the young women and girls Arsinoe saw several whose beauty struck her, but she admired them ungrudgingly, and it never came into her head to compare herself with them, for she knew very accurately that she was pretty, and that even here she had nothing to conceal, and this was enough for her.

The many-voiced hum which incessantly buzzed in her ears, and the perfume which rose from the attar in the orchestra had something intoxicating in them. Her gaze round the assembled multitude could not disturb any one, and her companion had found some friends with whom she was chattering and laughing. Other ladies and young girls sat staring silently in front of them, or studying the appearance of the rest of the audience, male and female; while others again concentrated their whole attention on the stage. Arsinoe soon followed this example, nor was this solely on account of Pollux who, by the prefect's orders, had been enlisted among the artists to whom the arrangement of the display was entrusted, in spite of the objections of his master Papias. More than once before had she seen the afternoon sun shine as brightly into the theatre as it did to-day, and the blue sky overarching it without a cloud, but with what different feelings did she now direct her gaze to the raised level behind the orchestra. The background, it is true, was the same as usual, the pillared front of a palace built entirely of colored marbles, and ornamented with gold; but on this occasion fresh garlands of fragrant flowers hung gracefully between the pilasters and across from column to column. Several artists, the first of the city, with tablets and styla in their hands were moving about among fifty girls and ladies, and Plutarch himself, and the gentlemen with him, composed, as it were a grand chorus which sometimes divided, and sometimes stood all together.

On the right side of the stage were three purple-covered couches. On one of them sat Titianus, the prefect, who, like the artists, used his pencil; with him was his wife Julia. On another reclined Verus, at full length, and as usual, crowned with roses; the third was for Plutarch, but was unoccupied. The praetor did not hesitate to interrupt any speaker, as though he were the host of the entertainment, and many of his remarks were followed by loud applause, or approving laughter.

The face and figure of the wealthy Plutarch, which could never be forgotten, were not altogether strange to Arsinoe, for, a few days previously he had shown himself for the first time in many years in his papyrus factory, with an architect to settle with him how the courts and rooms could best be cleaned and decorated for the reception of the Emperor; and on this occasion he had gone into the room where she worked and had pinched her cheek with a few roguish and flattering words.

There he was, walking across the stage. He was an old man, said to be about seventy years of age, his legs were half-paralyzed, and they nevertheless moved with a series of incessant and rapid but involuntary jerks under his heavy bowed body, and he was supported on either hand by a tall young fellow. His nobly-formed head, must have been in his youth, of extraordinary beauty. Now his head was covered by a wig of long brown hair, his eyebrows and lashes were darkly dyed, his cheeks daubed with red and white paint, which gave his countenance a fixed expression, as if he had been stricken in the very act of smiling. On his curls he wore a wreath of rare flowers in long racemes. An abundance of red and white roses stuck out from the front folds of his ample toga, and were held in their place by gold brooches, sparkling with precious stones of large size. The hems of his mantle were all edged with rose-buds, and each was fastened in with an emerald that shone like some bright insect. The young men who supported him seemed like a portion of himself; he took no more heed of them than if they had been crutches, and they needed not command to tell them where he wished to go, where to stand still, and where to rest.

At a distance his face was like that of a youth, but seen close it looked like a painted plaster mask, with regular features and large movable eyes.

Favorinus, the sophist, had said of him that one might cry over his handsome locomotive corpse, if one were not obliged to laugh at it, and it was said that he had himself declared that he would force his faithless youth to remain with him. The Alexandrians called him the Adonis with six legs, on account of the lads who supported him, and without whom no one ever saw him and who always accompanied him when he went out. The first time he heard this nickname he remarked: "They had better have called me sixhanded;" and in fact he had a thoroughly good heart, he was liberal and benevolent, took fatherly care of his work- people, treated his slaves well, enriched those whom he set free, and from time to time distributed large sums among the people in money and in grain.

Arsinoe looked compassionately on the poor old man who could not buy back his youth with all his money and all his art.

In the supercilious man who at once came up to Plutarch she recognized the art-dealer Gabinius to whom her father had shown the door, on account of the mosaic picture in their sitting-room, but their conversation was interrupted, for the distribution of the women's part for the group of Alexander's entry into Babylon, was now about to take place; about fifty girls and young women were sent away from the stage and went down into the orchestra. The Exegetes, the highest official in the town, now came forward and took a new list out of the hand of Papias the sculptor. After rapidly casting an eye on this, he handed it to a herald who followed him, who proclaimed to all the assembly:

"In the name of the most noble Exegetes I request your attention, all you ladies here assembled, the wives and daughters of Macedonians and of Roman citizens. We now come to a distribution of the characters in our representation of the life and history of the great Macedonian, of the 'Marriage of Alexander and Roxana,' and I hereby request those among you to come upon the stage whom our artists have selected to take part in this scene in the procession." After this exordium he shouted in a deep and resonant voice a long list of names, and while this was going on every other sound was hushed in the wide amphitheatre.

Even on the stage all was still; only Verus whispered a few remarks to Titianus, and the curiosity-dealer spoke into Plutarch's ear, long sentences with the stringent emphasis which was peculiar to him; and the old man answered sometimes with an assenting nod, and sometimes with a deprecatory motion of his hands.

Arsinoe listened with suspended breath to the herald's proclamation; she started and colored all over, with her eyes fixed on the bunch of flowers in her hand, when she heard from the stage loudly uttered and plain to be heard by all present:

"Arsinoe, the second daughter of Keraunus, the Macedonian and a Roman citizen."

The ship-builder's daughter had already been called before her, and had immediately left her seat, but Arsinoe waited modestly till some older ladies rose. She then joined them and went among the last members of the little procession which went down to the orchestra and from thence up the steps for the chorus, on to the stage.

There the ladies and young girls were placed in two ranks, and looked at with amiable consideration by the artists. Arsinoe was not long in perceiving that these gentlemen looked at her longer and more often than at the others; and then, after the masters of the festival had gone aside in groups to discuss the matter they looked at her constantly and were talking, she felt sure, about her. Nor did it escape her that she had become the centre of many glances from the lookers-on who were sitting in the theatre, and it occurred to her that on several sides people were pointing at her with their fingers. She did not know which way she should look and began to feel bashful; still she was pleased at being remarked by so many people, and as she stood looking at the ground out of sheer embarrassment to hide the delight she felt, Verus, who had gone up to the group of artists, called out, putting his hand on the prefect's arm.

"Charming-charming! a Roxana that might have sprung straight out of the picture."

Arsinoe heard these words, and guessing that they referred to her she became more confused than ever, while her awkward smile gradually changed to an expression of joyful but anxious expectation of a delight which was almost painful in its magnitude.

Now one of the artists pronounced her name, and as she ventured to raise her eyes to see if it were not Pollux who had spoken, she observed the wealthy Plutarch who, with his two living crutches and Gabinius, the lean curiosity-dealer, was inspecting the ranks of her companions. Presently he had come quite close to her, and as he was helped towards her with tottering steps, he dug the dealer in the ribs and said, kissing the back of his hand, and winking his great eyes: "I know—I know! It is not easily forgotten. Ivory and red coral!"

Arsinoe started, the blood left her cheeks, and all satisfaction fled from her heart when the old man came to a stand-still in front of her, and said kindly:

"Ah! ah! a bud out of the papyrus factory among all these proud roses and lilies. Ah! ah! out of my work-rooms to join my assembly! Never mind- never mind, beauty is everywhere welcome. I do not ask how you got here. I am only glad that you are here."

Arsinoe covered part of her face with her hand, but he tapped her white arm three times with his middle finger, and then tottered on laughing to himself. The dealer had caught Plutarch's words, and asked him, when they had gone a few steps from Arsinoe, with eager indignation:

"Did I hear you rightly? a work-woman in your factory, and here among our daughters?"

"So it is—two busy hands among so many idle ones," said the old man, gaily.

"Then she must have forced her way in, and must be turned out."

"Certainly she shall not—Why, she is charming."

"It is revolting! here, in this assembly!"

"Revolting?" interrupted Plutarch. "Oh dear, no! we must not be too particular. And how are we to obtain mere children from you antiquity- mongers?" Then he added pleasantly:

"This lovely creature must I should think, delight your fine sense of beauty; or are you afraid that she may seem better suited to the part of Roxana than your own charming daughter? Only listen to the men up there! Let us see what is going on."

These words referred to a loud discussion which had arisen close by the couches of the prefect and Verus, the praetor. They, and with them most of the painters and sculptors present, were of opinion that Arsinoe would be a wonderfully effective Roxana; they maintained that her face and figure answered perfectly to those of the Bactrian princes as they were represented by Action, whose picture was, to a certain extent, to serve as the basis of the living group. Only Papias and two of his fellow- artists, declared against this choice, and eagerly asserted that among all the damsels present one, and one alone, was worthy to appear before the Emperor as Alexander's bride, and that one was Praxilla, the daughter of Gabinius. All three were in close business relations with the father of the young girl, who was tall, and slim, and certainly very lovely, and they wanted to do a pleasure to the rich and knowing purchaser. Their zeal even assumed a tone of vehemence, when the dealer, following in the wake of Plutarch, joined the group of disputants, and they were certain of being heard by him.

"And who is this girl yonder?" asked Papias, pointing to Arsinoe, as the two came up. "Nothing can be said against her beauty, but she is dressed less than simply, and wears no kind of ornament worth speaking of—it is a thousand to one against her parents being in a position to provide her with such a rich dress, and such costly jewels as Roxana certainly ought to display when about to be married to Alexander. The Asiatic princess must appear in silk, gold and precious stones. Now my friend here will be able so to dress his Praxilla that the splendor of her attire might have astonished the great Macedonian himself, but who is the father of that pretty child who is satisfied with the blue ribbon in her hair, her two roses, and her little white frock?"

"Your reflections are just, Papias," interrupted the dealer, with dry incisiveness. "The girl you are speaking of is quite out of the question. I do not say so for my daughter's sake, but because everything in bad taste is odious to me; it is hardly conceivable how such a young thing could have

had the audacity to force herself in here. A pretty face, to be sure, opens locks and bars. She is—do not be too much startled—she is nothing more than a work-girl in the papyrus factory of our excellent host, Plutarch."

"That is not the truth," Pollux interrupted, indignantly, as he heard this assertion.

"Moderate your tongue, young man," replied the dealer. "I can call you to witness, noble Plutarch."

"Let her be whom she may," answered the old man, with annoyance. "She is very one of my workwomen, but even if she had come straight here from the gumming-table with such a face and such a figure, she is perfectly in place here and everywhere. That is my opinion."

"Bravo! my fine friend!" cried Verus, nodding to the old man. "Caesar will be far better pleased with such a paragon of charmers as that sweet creature, than with all your old writs of citizenship and heavy purses."

"That is true," the prefect said, confirming this statement. "And I dare swear she is a free maiden, and not a slave. But you stood up for her friend Pollux—what do you know about her?"

"That she is the daughter of Keraunus, the palace-steward, and that I have known her from her childhood," answered the youthful artist emphatically. "He is a Roman citizen, and of an old Macedonian house as well."

"Perhaps even of royal descent," added Titianus, laughing.

"I know the man," answered the dealer hastily. "He is an impecunious insolent old fool."

"I should think," interrupted Verus with lofty composure, but rather as being bored, than as reproving the irritated speaker, "it seems to me that this is hardly the place to conduct a discussion as to the nature and disposition of the fathers of all those ladies and young girls."

"But he is poor," cried the dealer angrily. "A few days since he offered to sell me his few miserable curiosities, but really I could not—"

"We are sorry for your sake if the transaction was unsuccessful," Verus again interposed, this time with excessive politeness. "Now, first let us decide on the persons and afterwards on the costumes. The father of the girl is a Roman citizen then?"

"A member of the council, and in his way a man of position," replied Titianus.

"And I," added his wife Julia, "have taken a great fancy to the sweet little maid, and if the principal part is given to her, and her noble father is without adequate means, as you assert my friend, I will undertake to provide for her costume. Caesar will be charmed with such a Roxana."

The dealer's clients were silent, he himself was trembling with disappointment and vexation, and his fury rose to the utmost when Plutarch, whom till then he thought he had won over to his daughter's side, tried to bow his bent old body before dame Julia, and said with a graceful gesture of regret:

"My old eyes have deceived me again on this occasion. The little girl is very like one of my workwomen; very like—but I see now that there is a certain something which the other lacks. I have done her an injustice and remain her debtor. Permit, me, noble lady to add the ornaments to the dress you provide for our Roxana. I may be lucky enough to find something pretty for her. A sweet child! I shall go at once and beg her forgiveness and tell her what we propose. May I do so noble Julia? Have I your permission gentlemen?"

In a very few minutes it was known all over the stage, and soon after all through the amphitheatre, that Arsinoe, the daughter of Keraunus, had been selected to represent the character of Roxana.

"But who was Keraunus?"

"How was it that the children of the most illustrious and wealthy citizens had been overlooked in assigning this most prominent part?"

"This was just what might be expected when every thing was left to those reckless artists!"

"And where was a poor little girl like that to find the talents which it would cost to procure the costume of an Asiatic princess, Alexander's bride?"

"Plutarch, and the prefect's wife had undertaken that."

"A mere beggar."

"How well the family jewels would have suited our daughters!"

"Do we want to show Caesar nothing but a few silly pretty faces?—and not something of our wealth and taste?"

"Supposing Hadrian asks who this Roxana is, and had to be told that a collection had to be made to get her a proper costume."

"Such things never could happen anywhere but in Alexandria."

"Every one wants to know whether she worked in Plutarch's factory. They say it is not true—but the painted old villain still loves a pretty face. He smuggled her in, you may be sure; where there is smoke there is fire, and it is beyond a doubt that she gets money from the old man."

"What for?"

"Ah! you had better enquire of a priest of Aphrodite. It is nothing to laugh at, it is scandalous, audacious!"

Thus and on this wise ran the comments with which the announcement of Arsinoe's preferment to the part of Roxana was received, and hatred and bitter animosity had grown up in the souls of the dealer and his daughter. Praxilla was selected as a companion to Alexander's bride, and she yielded without objecting, but on her way homewards she nodded assent when her father said:

"Let things go on now as they may, but a few hours before the performance begins, I will send them word that you are ill."

The selection of Arsinoe had however, on the other hand, given pleasure as well as pain. Up in the middle places in the amphitheatre sat Keraunus, his legs far apart, his face glowing, panting and choking with sheer delight, and too haughty to draw in his feet even when the brother of the archidikastes tried to squeeze by his bulky person which filled two seats at once. Arsinoe, whose sharp ears had not failed to catch the dealer's remonstrances, and the words in which brave Pollux had taken her part, had, at first, felt dying of shame and terror, but now she felt as though she could fly on the wings of her delight. She had never been so happy in her life, and when she got out with her father, in the first dark street she threw her arms round his neck, kissed both his cheeks, and then told him how kind the lady Julia, the prefect's wife had been to her, and that she had undertaken, with the warmest friendliness, to have her costly dress made for her.

Keraunus had no objection to offer, and, strange to say, he did not consider it beneath his dignity to allow Arsinoe to be supplied with jewels by the wealthy manufacturer.

"People have seen," he said, pathetically, "that we need not shrink from doing as much as other citizens do, but to dress a Roxana as befits a bride would cost millions, and I am very willing to confess to my friends that I have not millions. Where the costume comes from is all the same, be that as it may you will still stand the first of all the maidens in the city, and I am pleased with you for that, my child. To-morrow will be the last meeting, and then perhaps Selene too, may have a prominent part given to her. Happily we are able to dress her as befits. When will the prefect's wife fetch you?"

"To-morrow about noon."

"Then early to-morrow buy a nice new dress."

"Will there not be enough for a new bracelet too?" asked Arsinoe, coaxingly. "This one of mine is too narrow and trumpery."

"You shall have one, for you have deserved it," replied Keraunus, with dignity. "But you must have patience till the day after to-morrow; to-morrow the goldsmiths will be closed on account of the festival."

Arsinoe had never seen her father so cheerful and talkative as he was to-day, and yet the walk from the theatre to Lochias was not a very short one, and it was long past the early hour at which he was accustomed to retire to bed.

By the time the father and daughter reached the palace it was already tolerably late, for, after Arsinoe had quitted the stage, suitable representatives of parts had been selected for three other scenes from the life of Alexander, by the light of torches, lamps and tapers; and before the assemblage broke up, Plutarch's guests were entertained with wine, fruit, syrups, sweet cakes, oyster pasties, and other delicacies. The steward had fallen with good will on the noble drink and excellent food, and when he was replete, he was wont to be in a better humor, and after a modicum of wine, in a more cheerful mood than usual. Just now he was content and kind, for although he had done all that lay in his power, the entertainment had not lasted long enough, for him to arrive at a state of intoxication which could make him surly, or to overload his digestion. Towards the end of their walk, he turned thoughtful and said:

"To-morrow the council does not sit on account of the festival, and that is well; all the world will congratulate me, question me, and notice me, and the gilding on my circlet is quite shabby; and in some places the silver shines through. Your outfit will now cost nothing, and it is quite necessary that before the next meeting I should go to a goldsmith and exchange that wretched thing for one of real gold. A man should show what he is."

He spoke the words pompously, and Arsinoe eagerly acquiesced, and only begged him, as they went in at the open door, to leave enough for Selene's costume; he laughed quietly to himself, and said:

"We need no longer be so very cautious. I should like to know who the Alexander will be who will be the first to ask for my Roxana as his wife. Rich old Plutarch's only son already has a seat in the council, and has not yet taken a wife. He is no longer very young, but he is a fine man still."

The radiant father's dream of the future was interrupted by Doris, who came out of the gate-house and called him by his name. Keraunus stood still. When the old woman went on:

"I must speak with you."

He answered, repellently: "But I shall not listen to you—neither now nor at any time."

"It was certainly not for my pleasure," retorted Doris, "that I called to you; I have only to tell you that you will not find your daughter Selene at home."

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