

GEORG EBERS

A THORNY

PATH, VOLUME

11

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A Thorny Path. Volume 11

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CHAPTER XXX

Scarcely had Macrinus closed the door behind him, when Caracalla threw himself exhausted on the throne, and ordered wine to be brought.

The gloomy gaze he bent upon the ground was not affected this time. The physician noted with anxiety how his master's breast heaved and his eyelids quivered; but when he offered Caesar a soothing potion, he waved him away, and commanded him to cease from troubling him.

For all that, he listened a little later to the legate, who brought the news that the youths of the city assembled on the race-course were beginning to be impatient. They were singing and applauding boisterously, and the songs they so loudly insisted on having repeated would certainly not contain matter flattering to the Romans.

"Leave them alone," answered Caesar, roughly. "Every line is aimed at me and no other. But the condemned are always allowed their favorite meal before the last journey. The food they love is venomous satire. Let them enjoy it to the full once more!—Is it far to Zminis's prison?"

The reply was in the negative; and as Caracalla exclaimed, "So much the better!" a significant smile played on his lips.

The high-priest of Serapis had looked on in much distress of mind. He, as the head of the Museum, had set high hopes on the youth who had come to such a terrible end. If Caesar should carry his threats into execution, there would be an end to that celebrated home of learning which, in his opinion, bore such noble fruits of study. And what could Caracalla mean by his dark saying that the sport and mockery of those youths below was their last meal? The worst might indeed be expected from the fearful tyrant who was at once so deeply wounded and so grievously offended; and the high-priest had already sent messengers—Greeks of good credit—to warn the insurgent youths in the stadium. But, as the chief minister of the divinity, he also esteemed it his duty, at any risk to himself, to warn the despot, whom he saw on the verge of being carried away to deeds of unparalleled horror. He thought the time had come, when Caracalla looked up from the brooding reverie into which he had again sunk, and with an ominous scowl asked Timotheus whether his wife, under whose protection Melissa had been seen the day before, had known that the false-hearted girl had given herself to another man while she feigned love for him.

The high-priest repelled the suspicion with his usual dignity, and went on to adjure Caesar not to visit on an industrious and dutiful community the sins of a light-minded girl's base folly and falsehood.

But Caracalla would not suffer him to finish; he wrathfully inquired who had given him a right to force his advice on Caesar.

On this Timotheus replied, with calm dignity:

"Your own noble words, great Caesar, when, to your honor be it spoken, you reminded the misguided skeptic of the true meaning of the old gods and of what is due to them. The god whom I serve, great Caesar, is second to none: the heavens are his head, the ocean is his body, and the earth his feet; the sunshine is the light of his all-seeing eye, and everything which stirs in the heart or brain of man is an emanation of his divine spirit. Thus he is the all-pervading soul of the universe, and a portion of that soul dwells in you, in me, in all of us. His power is greater than any power on earth, and, though a well-grounded wrath and only too just indignation urge you to exert the power lent you by him—"

"And I will exert it!" Caesar exclaimed with haughty rage. "It reaches far. I need no help, not even that of your god!"

"That I know," replied Timotheus. "And the god will let those fall into your hands who have sinned against your sacred majesty. Any punishment, even the severest, will be pleasing in his sight which you may inflict on those guilty of high-treason, for you wear the purple as his gift and in his name; those who insult you sin also against the god. I myself, with my small power, will help to bring the criminals to justice. But when a whole population is accused, when it is beyond the power of human justice to separate the innocent from the guilty, punishment is the prerogative of the god. He will visit on this city the crimes it has committed against you; and I implore you, in the name of your noble and admirable mother—whom it has been my privilege to entertain under this roof, and who in gratitude for the favors of Serapis—"

"And have I grudged sacrifices?" Caesar broke in. "I have done my utmost to win the graces of your god—and with what success? Everything that can most aggrieve the heart of man has befallen me here under his eyes. I have as much reason to complain of him as to accuse the reprobate natives of your city. He, no doubt, knows how to be avenged; the three-headed monster at his feet does not look like a lap-dog. Why, he would despise me if I should leave the punishment of the criminals to his tender mercies! Nay, I can do that for myself. Though you have seen me in many cases show mercy, it has always been for my mother's sake. You have done well to remind me of her. That lady—she is, I know, a votary of your god. But to me the Alexandrians have dared to violate the laws of hospitality; to her they were cordial hosts. I will remember that in their favor. And if many escape unpunished, I would have the traitors to know that they owe it to the hospitality shown to my mother by their parents, or perhaps by themselves."

He was here interrupted by the arrival of Aristides, who entered in great haste and apparently pleased excitement. His spies had seized a malefactor who had affixed an epigram of malignant purport to the statue of Julia Domna in the Caesareum. The writer was a pupil of the Museum, and had been taken in the stadium, where he was boasting of his exploit. A spy, mingling with the crowd, had laid hands on him, and the captain of the watch had forthwith hurried to the Serapeum to boast of a success which might confirm him in his yet uncertain position. The rough sketch of the lines had been found on the culprit, and Aristides held the tablets on which they were written while Caracalla listened to his report. Aristides was breathless with eagerness, and Caesar, snatching the tablets impatiently from his hand, read the following lines:

"Wanton, I say, is this dam of irreconcilable brothers!"

"Mean you Jocasta?"

"Nay, worse—Julia, the wife of Severus."

"The worst of all—but the last!" Caracalla snarled, as, turning pale, he laid the tablets down. But he almost instantly took them up again, and handing the malignant and lying effusion to the high-priest, he exclaimed, with a laugh:

"This seals the warrant! Here is my mother slandered, too! Now, the man who sues for mercy condemns himself to death!" And, clinching his fist, he muttered, "And this, too, is from the Museum."

Timotheus, meanwhile, had also read the lines. Even paler than Caracalla, and fully aware that any further counsel would be thrown away and only turn the emperor's wrath against himself, he expressed his anger at this calumny directed against the noblest of women, and by a boy hardly free from school!

But Caracalla furiously broke in:

"And woe to you if your god refuses me the only thing I crave in return for so many sacrifices—revenge, complete and sanguinary; atonement from great and small alike!" But he interrupted himself with the exclamation: "He grants it! Now for the tool I need."

The tool was ready—Zminis, the Egyptian, answering in every particular to the image which Caracalla had had in his mind of the instrument who might execute his most bloodthirsty purpose.

With hair in disorder and a blue-black stubble of beard on his haggard yellow cheeks, in a dirty gray prison shirt, barefoot, and treading as silently as Fate when it creeps on a victim, the rascal approached his sovereign. He stood before Caracalla exactly as the prefect, in a swift chariot, had brought him out of prison. The white of his long, narrow eyes, which had so terrified Melissa, had turned yellow, and his glance was as restless and shifting as that of a hyena. His small head on its long neck was never for a moment still; the ruthless wretch had sat waiting day after day in expectation of death, and it was by a miracle that he found himself once more at the height of his ambition. But when at last he inquired of Caracalla, in the husky voice which had gained an added hoarseness from the damp dungeon whence he had been brought, what his commands were, looking up at him like a starving dog which hopes for a titbit from his master's hand, even the fratricide, who himself held the sword sharpened to kill, shuddered at the sight and sound.

But Caesar at once recovered himself, and when he asked the Egyptian:

"Will you undertake to help me, as captain of the night-watch, to punish the traitors of Alexandria?" the answer was confident:

"What man can do, I can do."

"Good!" replied Caracalla. "But this is not a matter of merely capturing one or another. Every one—mark me—every one has merited death who has broken the laws of hospitality, that hospitality which this lying city offered me. Do you understand? Yes? Well, then, how are we to detect the guilty? Where are we to find spies and executioners enough? How can we punish worst those whose wickedness has involved the rest in guilt, especially the epigramatists of the Museum? How are we to discover the ringleaders of those who insulted me yesterday in the Circus, and of those among the youths in the stadium who have dared to express their vile disapproval by whistling in my very face? What steps will you take to hinder a single one from escaping? Consider. How is it to be done so effectually that I may lie down and say 'They have had their deserts. I am content'?"

The Egyptian's eyes wandered round the floor, but he presently drew himself up and answered briefly and positively, as though he were issuing an order to his men:

"Kill them all!"

Caracalla started, and repeated dully, "All?"

"All!" repeated Zminis, with a hideous grin. "The young ones are all there, safe in the stadium. The men in the Museum fear nothing. Those who are in the streets can be cut down. Locked doors can be broken in."

At this, Caesar, who had dropped on to his throne, started to his feet, flung the wine-cup he held across the room, laughed loudly, and exclaimed:

"You are the man for me! To work at once! This will be a day!— Macrinus, Theocritus, Antigonus, we need your troops. Send up the legates. Those who do not like the taste of blood, may sweeten it with plunder."

He looked young again, as if relieved from some burden on his mind, and the thought flashed through his brain whether revenge were not sweeter than love.

No one spoke. Even Theocritus, on whose lips a word of flattery or applause was always ready, looked down in his dismay; but Caracalla, in his frenzy of excitement, heeded nothing.

The hideous suggestion of Zminis seemed to him worthy of his greatness by its mere enormity. It must be carried out. Ever since he had first donned the purple he had made it his aim to be feared. If this tremendous deed were done, he need never frown again at those whom he wished to terrify.

And then, what a revenge! If Melissa should hear of it, what an effect it must have on her!

To work, then!

And he added in a gentler tone, as if he had a delightful surprise in store for some old friend:

"But silence, perfect silence—do you hear?—till all is ready.—You, Zminis, may begin on the pipers in the stadium and the chatters in the Museum. The prize for soldiers and lictors alike lies in the merchants' chests."

Still no one spoke; and now he observed it. His scheme was too grand for these feeble spirits. He must teach them to silence their conscience and the voice of Roman rectitude; he must take on himself the whole responsibility of this deed, at which the timid quaked. So he drew himself up to his full height, and, affecting not to see the hesitancy of his companions, he said, in a tone of cheerful confidence:

"Let each man do his part. All I ask of you is to carry out the sentence I pronounce as a judge. You know the crime of the citizens of this town, and, by virtue of the power I exercise over life and death, be it known to all that I, Caesar, condemn—mark the word, condemn—every free male of Alexandria, of whatever age or rank, to die by the sword of a Roman warrior! This is a conquered city, which has forfeited every claim to quarter. The blood and the treasure of the inhabitants are the prize of my soldiery. Only"—and he turned to Timotheus—"this house of your god, which has given me shelter, with the priests and the treasure of great Serapis, are spared. Now it lies with each of you to show whether or no he is faithful to me. All of you"—and he addressed his friends—"all who do me service in avenging me for the audacious insults which have been offered to your sovereign, are assured of my imperial gratitude."

This declaration was not without effect, and murmurs of applause rose from the "friends" and favorites, though less enthusiastic than Caracalla was accustomed to hear. But the feebleness of this demonstration made him all the prouder of his own undaunted resolve.

Macrinus was one of those who had most loudly approved him, and Caracalla rejoiced to think that this prudent counselor should advise his drinking the cup of vengeance to the dregs. Intoxicated already before he had even sipped it, he called Macrinus and Zminis to his side, and with glowing looks impressed on them to take particular care that Melissa, with her father, Alexander, and Diodoros were brought to him alive.

"And remember," he added, "there will be many weeping mothers here by to-morrow morning; but there is one I must see again, and that not as a corpse—that bedizened thing in red whom I saw in the Circus—I mean the wife of Seleukus, of the Kanopic way."

CHAPTER XXXI

On the wide ascent leading to the Serapeum the praetorians stood awaiting Caesar's commands. They had not yet formed in rank and file, but were grouped round the centurion Martialis, who had come to tell them, sadly, of his removal to Edessa, and to take leave of his comrades. He gave his hand to each one of them in turn, and received a kindly pressure in return; for the stubborn fellow, though not of the cleverest, had proved himself a good soldier, and to many of them a trusty friend. There was not one who did not regret his going from among them. But Caesar had spoken, and there was no gainsaying his orders. In the camp, after service, they might talk the matter over; for the present it were wise to guard their tongues.

The centurion had just said farewell to the last of his cohort, when the prefect, with the legate Quintus Flavius Nobilior, who commanded the legion, and several other higher officers, appeared among them. Macrinus greeted them briefly, and, instead of having the tuba blown as usual and letting them fall into their ranks, he told them to gather close round him, the centurions in front. He then disclosed to them the emperor's secret orders. Caesar, he began, had long exercised patience and mercy, but the insolence and malice of the Alexandrians knew no bounds; therefore, in virtue of his power over life and death, he had pronounced judgment upon them. To them as being nearest to his person he handed over the most remunerative part of the work of punishment. Whomsoever they found on the Kanopic way, the greatest and richest thoroughfare of the city, they were to cut down as they would the rebellious inhabitants of a conquered town. Only the women and children and the slaves were to be spared. If for this task, a hideous one at best, they chose to pay themselves out of the treasures of the citizens, nobody would blame them.

A loud cheer followed these orders, and many an eye gleamed brighter. Even the coolest among them seemed to see a broad, deep pool of blood into which he need only dip his hand and bring out something worth the catching. And the fish that were to be had there were not miserable carp, but heavy gold and silver vessels, and coins and magnificent ornaments. Macrinus then proceeded to inform the higher and lower officers of the course of action he had agreed upon with the emperor and Zminis. Seven trumpet-blasts from the terrace of the Serapeum would give the signal for the attack to begin. Then they were to advance, maniple on maniple; but they were not required to keep their ranks—each man had his own work to do. The legion was to assemble again at sunset at the Gate of the Sun, at the eastern end of the road, after having swept it from end to end.

By order of the emperor, each man, however, must be particularly careful whom he cut down in any hiding-place, for Caesar wished to give the following Alexandrians—who had sinned most flagrantly against him—the benefit of a trial, and they must therefore be taken alive. He then named the gem-cutter Heron, his son Alexander, and his daughter Melissa, the Alexandrian senator Polybius, his son Diodoros, and the wife of Seleukus.

He described them as well as he was able. For each one Caesar promised a reward of three thousand drachmas, and for Heron's daughter twice as much, but only on condition of their being delivered up unhurt. It would therefore be to their own advantage to keep their eyes open in the houses, and to be cautious. Whoever should take the daughter of the gem-cutter—and he described Melissa once more—would render a special service to Caesar and might reckon on promotion.

The centurion Julius Martialis stayed to hear the end of this discourse, and then hurriedly departed. He felt just as he had done in the war with the Alemanni when a red-haired German had dealt him a blow on the helmet with his club. His head whirled and swam as it did then—only today blood-red lights danced before his eyes instead of deep blue and gold. It was some time before he could collect his thoughts to any purpose; but when he did, he clinched his fists as he recalled Caesar's malignant cruelty in forcing him away from his family.

Presently his large mouth widened into a satisfied smile. He was no longer in that company, and need take no part in the horrid butchery. In any other place he would no doubt have joined in it like the rest, glad of the rich booty; but here, in his own home, where his mother and wife and child dwelt, it seemed a monstrous and accursed deed. Besides the gemcutter's family, in whom Martialis took no interest, Caesar seemed to have a special grudge against the lady Berenike, whose husband Seleukus had been master to the centurion's father; nay, his own wife was still in the service of the merchant.

Not being skilled in any trade, he had entered the army early. As Evocatus he had married the daughter of a free gardener of Seleukus, and when he was ordered to Rome to join the praetorians his wife had obtained the post of superintendent of the merchant's villa at Kanopus. For this they had to thank the kindness of the lady Berenike and her now dead daughter Korinna; and he was honestly grateful to the wife of Seleukus, for, as his wife was established in the villa, he could leave her without anxiety and go with the army wherever it was ordered.

Having by this time reached the Kanopic street on his way to his family, he perceived the statues of Hermes and Demeter which stood on each side of the entrance to the merchant's house, and his slow mind recapitulated the long list of benefits he had received from Seleukus and his wife; a secret voice urged upon him that it was his duty to warn them.

He owed nothing to Caesar, that crafty butcher, who out of pure malice could deprive an honest soldier of his only joy in life and cheat him of half his pay—for the praetorians had twice the wages of the other troops; and if he only knew some handicraft, he would throw away his sword today.

Here, at least, he could interfere with Caesar's ruthless schemes, besides doing his benefactors a good turn. He therefore entered the house of the merchant, instead of pursuing on his homeward way.

He was well known, and the mistress of the house was at once apprised of his arrival.

All the lower apartments were empty, the soldiers who had been quartered in them having joined the others at the Serapeum.

But what had happened to the exquisite garden in the impluvium? What hideous traces showed where the soldiers had camped, and, drunk with their host's costly wine, had given free play to their reckless spirits!

The velvet lawn looked like a stable-floor; the rare shrubs had been denuded of their flowers and branches. Blackened patches on the mosaic pavement showed where fires had been kindled; the colonnades were turned into drying-grounds for the soldiers' linen, and a rope on which hung some newly washed clothes was wound at one end round the neck of a Venus from the hand of Praxiteles, and at the other round the lyre of an Apollo fashioned in marble by Bryaxis. Some Indian shrubs, of which his father-in-law had been very proud, were trampled underfoot; and in the great banqueting-hall, which had served as sleeping-room for a hundred praetorians, costly cushions and draperies were strewn, torn from the couches and walls to make their beds more comfortable.

Used to the sights of war as he was, the soldier ground his teeth with wrath at this scene. As long as he could remember, he had looked upon everything here with reverence and awe; and to think that his comrades had destroyed it all made his blood boil.

As he approached the women's apartments he took fright. How was he to disclose to his mistress what threatened her?

But it must be done; so he followed the waiting-maid Johanna, who led him to her lady's livingroom.

In it sat the Christian steward Johannes, with writing tablets and scrolls of papyrus, working in the service of his patroness. She herself was with the wounded Aurelius; and Martialis, on hearing this, begged to be admitted to her.

Berenike was in the act of renewing the wounded soldier's bandages, and when the centurion saw how cruelly disfigured was the handsome, blooming face of the young tribune, to whom he was heartily attached, the tears rose to his eyes. The matron observed it, and witnessed with much surprise the affectionate greeting between the young noble and the plain soldier.

The centurion greeted her respectfully; but it was not till Nernesianus asked him how it was that the troops had been called to arms at this hour, that Martialis plucked up courage and begged the lady of the house to grant him an interview.

But Berenike had still to wash and bandage the wounds of her patient—a task which she always performed herself and with the greatest care; she therefore promised the soldier to be at his disposal in half an hour.

"Then it will be too late!" burst from the lips of the centurion; then she knew, by his voice and the terror-stricken aspect of the man whom she had known so long, that he meant to warn her, and there was but one from whom the danger could come.

"Caesar?" she asked. "He is sending out his creatures to murder me?"

The imperious gaze of Berenike's large eyes so overpowered the simple soldier as to render him speechless for a while. But Caesar had threatened his mistress's life—he must collect himself, and thus he managed to stammer:

"No, lady, no! He will not have you killed assuredly not! On the contrary—they are to let you live when they cut down the others!"

"Cut down!" cried Apollinaris, raising himself up and staring horrified at this messenger of terror; but his brother laid his hand upon the centurion's broad shoulder, and, shaking him vigorously, commanded him as his tribune to speak out.

The soldier, ever accustomed to obey, and only too anxious that his warning should not come too late, disclosed in hurried words what he had learned from the prefect. The brothers interrupted him from time to time with some exclamation of horror or disgust, but Berenike remained silent till Martialis stopped with a deep breath.

Then the lady gave a shrill laugh, and as the others looked at her in amazement she said coolly "You men will wade through blood and shame with that reprobate, if he but orders you to do so. I am only a woman, and yet I will show him that there are limits even to his malignity."

She remained for a few moments lost in thought, and then ordered the centurion to go and find out where her husband was.

Martialis obeyed at once, and no sooner was the door closed behind him than she turned to the two brothers, and addressing herself first to one and then to the other with equal vehemence, she cried "Who is right now? Of all the villains who have brought shame upon the throne and name of mighty Caesar, this is the most dastardly. He has written plainly enough upon Apollinaris's face how much he values a brave soldier, the son of a noble house. And you, Nemesianus—are you not also an Aurelius? You say so; and yet, had he not chanced to let you care for your brother, you would at this moment be wandering through the city like a mad dog, biting all who crossed your path. Why do you not speak? Why not tell me once more, Nemesianus, that a soldier must obey his commander blindly?—And you, Apollinaris, will you dare still to assert that the hand with which Caesar tore your face was guided only by righteous indignation at an insult offered to an innocent maiden? Have you the courage to excuse the murders by Caracalla of his own wife, and many other noble women, by his anxiety for the safety of throne and state? I, too, am a woman, and may hold up my head with the best; but what have I to do with the state or with the throne? My eye met his, and from that moment the fiend was my deadly enemy. A quick death at the hands of one of his soldiers seemed too good for the woman he hated. Wild beasts were to tear me to pieces before his eyes. Is that not sufficient for you? Put every abomination together, everything unworthy of an honorable man and abhorrent to the gods, and you have the man whom you so willingly obey. I am only the wife of a citizen. But were I the widow of a noble Aurelian and your mother—" Here Apollinaris, whose wounds were beginning to burn again, broke in: "She would have counseled us to leave revenge to the gods. He is Caesar!"

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