

GEORG EBERS

A THORNY
PATH, VOLUME
10

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A Thorny Path. Volume 10

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CHAPTER XXVIII

The amphitheatre was soon emptied, amid the flare of lightning and the crash and roll of thunder. Caracalla, thinking only of the happy omen of Tarautas's wonderful escape, called out to Melissa, with affectionate anxiety, to fly to shelter as quickly as possible; a chariot was in waiting to convey her to the Serapeum. On this she humbly represented that she would rather be permitted to return under her brother's escort to her father's house, and Caracalla cheerfully acceded. He had business on hand this night, which made it seem desirable to him that she should not be too near him. He should expect her brother presently at the Serapeum.

With his own hand he wrapped her in the caracalla and hood which old Adventus was about to put on his master's shoulders, remarking, as he did so, that he had weathered worse storms in the field.

Melissa thanked him with a blush, and, going close up to her, he whispered: "To-morrow, if Fate grants us gracious answers to the questions I shall put to her presently after this storm—tomorrow the horn of happiness will be filled to overflowing for

you and me. The thrifty goddess promises to be lavish to me through you."

Slaves were standing round with lighted lanterns; for the torches in the theatre were all extinguished, and the darkened auditorium lay like an extinct crater, in which a crowd of indistinguishable figures were moving to and fro. It reminded him of Hades and a troop of descending spirits; but he would not allow anything but what was pleasant to occupy his mind or eye. By a sudden impulse he took a lantern from one of the attendants, held it up above Melissa's head, and gazed long and earnestly into her brightly illuminated face. Then he dropped his hand with a sigh and said, as though speaking in a dream: "Yes, this is life! Now I begin to live."

He lifted the dripping laurel crown from his head, tossed it into the arena, and added to Melissa: "Now, get under shelter at once, sweetheart. I have been able to see you this whole evening, even when the lamps were out; for lightning gives light. Thus even the storm has brought me joy. Sleep well. I shall expect you early, as soon as I have bathed."

Melissa wished him sound slumbers, and he replied, lightly:

"If only all life were a dream, and if to-morrow I might but wake up, no longer the son of Severus, but Alexander; and you, not Melissa, but Roxana, whom you so strongly resemble! To be sure I might find myself the gladiator Tarautas. But, then, who would you be? And your stalwart father, who stands there defying the rain, certainly does not look like a vision, and this storm is

not favorable to philosophizing."

He kissed his hand to her, had a dry caracalla thrown over his shoulders, ordered Theocritus to take care of Tarautas and carry him a purse of gold—which he handed to the favorite—and then, pulling the hood over his head, led the way, followed by his impatient courtiers; but not till he had answered Heron, who had come forward to ask him what he thought of the mechanical arts of the Alexandrians, desiring him to postpone that matter till the morrow.

The storm had silenced the music. Only a few stanch trumpeters had remained in their places; and when they saw by the lanterns that Caesar had left the Circus, they sounded a fanfare after him, which followed the ruler of the world with a dull, hoarse echo.

Outside, the streets were still crowded with people pouring out of the amphitheatre. Those of the commoner sort sought shelter under the archways of the building, or else hurried boldly home through the rain. Heron stood waiting at the entrance for his daughter, though the purple-hemmed toga was wet, through and through. But she had, in fact, hurried out while he was pushing forward to speak to Caesar, and in his excitement overlooked everything else. The behavior of his fellow-citizens had annoyed him, and he had an obscure impression that it would be a blunder to claim Caesar's approval of anything they had done; still, he had not self-control enough to suppress the question which had fluttered on his lips all through the performance. At last, in high

dudgeon at the inconsiderateness of young people and at the rebuff he had met with—with the prospect, too, of a cold for his pains—he made his way homeward on foot.

To Caracalla the bad weather was for once really an advantage, for it put a stop to the unpleasant demonstrations which the "Green" party had prepared for him on his way home.

Alexander soon found the closed carruca intended for Melissa, and placed her in it as soon as he had helped Euryale into her harmamaxa. He was astonished to find a man inside it, waiting for his sister. This was Diodoros, who, while Alexander was giving his directions to the charioteer, had, under cover of the darkness, sprung into the vehicle from the opposite side. An exclamation of surprise was followed by explanations and excuses, and the three young people, each with a heart full almost to bursting, drove off toward Heron's house. Their conveyance was already rolling over the pavement, while most of the magnates of the town were still waiting for their slaves to find their chariots or litters.

For the lovers this was a very different scene from the terrible one they had just witnessed in the Circus, for, in spite of the narrow space and total darkness in which they sat, and the rain rattling and splashing on the dripping black leather hood which sheltered them, in their hearts they did not lack for sunshine. Caracalla's saying that the lightning, too, was light, proved true more than once in the course of their drive, for the vivid flashes which still followed in quick succession enabled the reunited

lovers to exchange many confidences with their eyes, for which it would have been hard to find words. When both parties to a quarrel are conscious of blame, it is more quickly made up than when one only needs forgiveness; and the pair in the carruca were so fully prepared to think the best of each other that there was no need for Alexander's good offices to make them ready and willing to renew their broken pledges. Besides, each had cause to fear for the other; for Diodoros was afraid that the lady Euryale's power was not far-reaching enough to conceal Melissa from Caesar's spies, and Melissa trembled at the thought that the physician might too soon betray to Caesar that she had been betrothed before he had ever seen her, and to whom; for, in that case, Diodoros would be the object of relentless pursuit. So she urged on her lover to embark, if possible, this very night.

Hitherto Alexander had taken no part in the conversation. He could not forget the reception he had met with outside the amphitheatre. Euryale's presence had saved his sister from evil imputations, but had not helped him; and even his gay spirits could make no head against the consciousness of being regarded by his fellow-citizens as a hired traitor. He had withdrawn to one of the back seats to see the performance; for as soon as the theatre was suddenly lighted up, he had become the object of dark looks and threatening gestures. For the first time in his life he had felt compassion for the criminals torn by wild beasts, and for the wounded gladiators, whose companion in misfortune he vaguely felt himself to be. But, what was worst of all, he

could not regard himself as altogether free from the reproach of having accepted a reward for the service he had so thoughtlessly rendered.

Nor did he see the remotest possibility of ever making those whose opinion he cared for understand how it had come to pass that he should have acceded to the desire of the villain in the purple, now that his father, by showing himself to the people in the 'toga pretexta', had set the seal to their basest suspicions. The thought that henceforth he could never hope to feel the grasp of an honest man's hand gnawed at his heart.

The esteem of Diodoros was dear to him, and, when his young comrade spoke to him, he felt at first as though he were doing him an unexpected honor; but then he fell back into the suspicion that this was only for his sister's sake.

The deep sigh that broke from him induced Melissa to speak a few words of comfort, and now the unhappy man's bursting heart overflowed. In eloquent words he described to Diodoros and Melissa all he had felt, and the terrible consequences of his heedless folly, and as he spoke acute regret filled his eyes with tears.

He had pronounced judgment on himself, and expected nothing of his friend but a little pity. But in the darkness Diodoros sought and found his hand, and grasped it fervently; and if Alexander could but have seen his old playfellow's face, he would have perceived that his eyes glistened as he said what he could to encourage him to hope for better days.

Diodoros knew his friend well. He was incapable of falsehood; and his deed, which under a false light so easily assumed an aspect of villainy, had, in fact, been no more than an act of thoughtlessness such as he had himself often lent a hand in. Alexander, however, seemed determined not to hear the comfort offered him by his sister and his friend. A flash of lightning revealed him to them, sitting with a bent head and his hands over his brow; and this gloomy vision of one who so lately had been the gayest of the gay troubled their revived happiness even more than the thought of the danger which, as each knew, threatened the others.

As they passed the Temple of Artemis, which was brightly illuminated, reminding them that they were reaching their destination, Alexander at last looked up and begged the lovers to consider their immediate affairs. His mind had remained clear, and what he said showed that he had not lost sight of his sister's future.

As soon as Melissa should have effected her escape, Caesar would undoubtedly seize, not only her lover, but his father as well. Diodoros must forthwith cross the lake and rouse Polybius and Praxilla, to warn them of the imminent danger, while Alexander undertook to hire a ship for the party. Argutis would await the fugitives in a tavern by the harbor, and conduct them on board the vessel which would be in readiness. Diodoros, who was not yet able to walk far, promised to avail himself of one of the litters waiting outside the Temple of Artemis.

Just before the vehicle stopped, the lovers took leave. They arranged where and how they might have news of each other, and all they said, in brief words and a fervent parting kiss, in this moment, when death or imprisonment might await them, had the solemn purport of a vow.

The swift horses stopped. Alexander hastily leaned over to his friend, kissed him on both cheeks, and whispered:

"Take good care of her; think of me kindly if we should never meet again, and tell the others that wild Alexander has played another fool's trick, at any rate, not a wicked one, however badly it may turn out for him."

For the sake of the charioteer, who, after Melissa's flight, would be certainly cross-examined, Diodoros could make no reply. The carruca rattled off by the way by which it had come; Diodoros vanished in the darkness, and Melissa clasped her hands over her face. She felt as though this were her last parting from her lover, and the sun would never shine on earth again.

It was now near midnight. The slaves had heard the approach of the chariot, and received them as heartily as ever, but in obedience to Heron's orders they added the most respectful bows to their usual well-meant welcome. Since their master had shown himself to Dido, in the afternoon, with braggart dignity, as a Roman magnate, she had felt as though the age of miracles had come, and nothing was impossible. Splendid visions of future grandeur awaiting the whole family, including herself and Argutus, had not ceased to haunt her; but as to the empress,

something seemed to have gone wrong, for why had the girl wet eyes and so sad a face? What was all this long whispering with Argutis? But it was no concern of hers, after all, and she would know all in good time, no doubt. "What the masters plot to-day the slaves hear next week," was a favorite saying of the Gauls, and she had often proved its truth.

But the cool way in which Melissa received the felicitations which the old woman poured out in honor of the future empress, and her tear-reddened eyes, seemed at any rate quite comprehensible. The child was thinking, no doubt, of her handsome Diodoros. Among the splendors of the palace she would soon forget. And how truly magnificent were the dress and jewels in which the damsel had appeared in the amphitheatre!

"How they must have hailed her!" thought the old woman when she had helped Melissa to exchange her dress for a simpler robe, and the girl sat down to write. "If only the mistress had lived to see this day! And all the other women must have been bursting with envy. Eternal gods! But, after all, who knows whether the good luck we envy others is great or small? Why, even in this house, which the gods have filled to the roof with gifts and favors, misfortune has crept in through the key hole. Poor Philip!

"Still, if all goes well with the girl. Things have befallen her such as rarely come to any one, and yet no more than her due. The fairest and best will be the greatest and wealthiest in the empire."

And she clutched the amulets and the cross which hung round her arm and throat, and muttered a hasty prayer for her darling.

Argutis, for his part, did not know what to think of it all. He, if any one, rejoiced in the good fortune of his master and Melissa; but Heron's promotion to the rank of praetor had been too sudden, and Heron demeaned himself too strangely in his purple-bordered toga. It was to be hoped that this new and unexpected honor had not turned his brain! And the state in which his master's eldest son remained caused him the greatest anxiety. Instead of rejoicing in the honors of his family, he had at his first interview with his father flown into a violent rage; and though he, Argutis, had not understood what they were saying, he perceived that they were in vehement altercation, and that Heron had turned away in great wrath. And then—he remembered it with horror, and could hardly tell what he had seen to Alexander and Melissa in a reasonable and respectful manner—Philip had sprung out of bed, had dressed himself without help, even to his shoes, and scarcely had his father set out in his litter before Philip had come into the kitchen. He looked like one risen from the grave, and his voice was hollow as he told the slaves that he meant to go to the Circus to see for himself that justice was done. But Argutis felt his heart sink within him when the philosopher desired him to fetch the pipe his father used to teach the birds to whistle, and at the same time took up the sharp kitchen knife with which Argutis slaughtered the sheep.

The young man then turned to go, but even on the threshold he had stumbled over the straps of his sandals which dragged unfastened, and Argutis had had to lead him, almost to carry him

in from the garden, for a violent fit of coughing had left him quite exhausted. The effort of pulling at the heavy oars on board the galley had been too much for his weak chest. Argutis and Dido had carried him to bed, and he had soon fallen into a deep sleep, from which he had not waked since.

And now what were these two plotting? They were writing; and not on wax tablets, but with reed pens on papyrus, as though it were a matter of importance.

All this gave the slave much to think about, and the faithful soul did not know whether to weep for joy or grief when Alexander told him, with a gravity which frightened him in this light-hearted youth, that, partly as the reward of his faithful service and partly to put him in a position to aid them all in a crisis of peculiar difficulty, he gave him his freedom. His father had long since intended to do this, and the deed was already drawn out. Here was the document; and he knew that, even as a freedman, Argutis would continue to serve them as faithfully as ever. With this he gave the slave his manumission, which he was in any case to have received within a month, at the end of thirty years' service, and Argutis took it with tears of joy, not unmixed with grief and anxiety, while only a few hours since it would have been enough to make him the happiest of mortals.

While he kissed their hands and stammered out words of gratitude, his uncultured but upright spirit told him that he had been blind ever to have rejoiced for a moment at the news that Melissa had been chosen to be empress. All that he had seen

during the last half-hour had convinced him, as surely as if he had been told it in words, that his beloved young mistress scorned her imperial suitor, and firmly intended to evade him—how, Argutis could not guess. And, recognizing this, a spirit of adventure and daring stirred him also. This was a struggle of the weak against the strong; and to him, who had spent his life as one of the oppressed, nothing could be more tempting than to help on the side of the weak.

Argutis now undertook with ardent zeal to get Diodoros and his parents safely on board the ship he was to engage, and to explain to Heron, as soon as he should have read the letter which Alexander was now writing, that, unless he could escape at once with Philip, he was lost. Finally, he promised that the epistle to Caesar, which Melissa was composing, should reach his hands on the morrow.

He could now receive his letter of freedom with gladness, and consented to dress up in Heron's garments; for, as a slave, he would have been forbidden to conclude a bargain with a ship's captain or any one else.

All this was done in hot haste, for Caesar was awaiting Alexander, and Euryale expected Melissa. The ready zeal of the old man, free for the first time to act on his own responsibility in matters which would have been too much for many a free-born man, but to which he felt quite equal, had an encouraging effect even on the oppressed hearts of the other two. They knew now that, even if death should be their lot, Argutis would be faithful

to their father and sick brother, and the slave at once showed his ingenuity and shrewdness; for, while the young people were vainly trying to think of a hiding-place for Heron and Philip, he suggested a spot which would hardly be discovered even by the sharpest spies.

Glaukias, the sculptor, who had already fled, was Heron's tenant. His work-room, a barn-like structure, stood in the little vegetable-garden which the gem-cutter had inherited from his father-in-law, and none but Heron and the slave knew that, under the flooring, instead of a cellar, there was a vast reservoir connected with the ancient aqueducts constructed by Vespasian. Many years since Argutis had helped his master to construct a trap-door to the entrance to these underground passages, of which the existence had remained unknown even to Glaukias during all the years he had inhabited the place. It was here that Heron kept his gold, not taking his children even into his confidence; and only a few months ago Argutis had been down with him and had found the old reservoir dry, airy, and quite habitable. The gem-cutter would be quite content to conceal himself where his treasure was, and the garden and work-room were only distant a few hundred paces from his own home. To get Philip there without being seen was to Argutis a mere trifle. Alexander, too, old Dido, and, if needful, Diodoros, could all be concealed there. But for Melissa, neither he nor Alexander thought it sufficiently secure.

As she took leave of him the young girl once more charged the

newly freed man to greet her father from her a thousand times, to beseech his forgiveness of her for the bitter grief she must cause him, and to assure him of her affection.

"Tell him," she added, as the tears streamed down her cheeks, "that I feel as if I were going to my death. But, come what may, I am always his dutiful child, always ready to sacrifice anything—excepting only the man to whom, with my father's consent, I pledged my heart. Tell him that for love of him I might have been ready even to give my hand to the blood-stained Caesar, but that Fate—and perhaps the manes of her we loved, and who is dead—have ordered it otherwise."

She then went into the room where her mother had closed her eyes. After a short prayer by that bed, which still stood there, she hastened to Philip's room. He lay sleeping heavily; she bent over him and kissed the too high brow, which looked as though even in sleep the brain within were still busy over some difficult and painful question.

Her way led her once more through her father's work-room, and she had already crossed it when she hastily turned back to look once more—for the last time—at the little table where she had sat for so many years, busy with her needle, in modest contentment by the artist's side, dreaming with waking eyes, and considering what she, with her small resources and great love, could do that would be of use to those she loved, or relieve them if they were in trouble. Then, as though she knew that she was bidding a last farewell to all the pleasant companionship of

her youth, she looked at the birds, long since gone to roost in their cages. In spite of his recent curule honors Heron had not forgotten them, and, before quitting the house to display himself to the populace in the 'toga pretexa', he had as usual carefully covered them up. And now, as Melissa lifted the cloth from the starling's cage, and the bird muttered more gently than usual, and perhaps in its sleep, the cry, "Olympias!" a shudder ran through her; and, as she stepped out into the road by Alexander's side, she said, dejectedly:

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