

GEORG EBERS

UARDA : A ROMANCE OF
ANCIENT EGYPT.

VOLUME 08

Georg Ebers

**Uarda : a Romance of
Ancient Egypt. Volume 08**

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Содержание

CHAPTER XXXIII	5
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	12

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CHAPTER XXXIII

An hour later, Ani, in rich attire, left his father's tomb, and drove his brilliant chariot past the witch's cave, and the little cottage of Uarda's father.

Nemu squatted on the step, the dwarf's usual place. The little man looked down at the lately rebuilt hut, and ground his teeth, when, through an opening in the hedge, he saw the white robe of a man, who was sitting by Uarda.

The pretty child's visitor was prince Rameri, who had crossed the Nile in the early morning, dressed as a young scribe of the treasury, to obtain news of Pentaur—and to stick a rose into Uarda's hair.

This purpose was, indeed, the more important of the two, for the other must, in point of time at any rate, be the second.

He found it necessary to excuse himself to his own conscience with a variety of cogent reasons. In the first place the rose, which lay carefully secured in a fold of his robe, ran great danger of fading if he first waited for his companions near the temple of Seti; next, a hasty return from thence to Thebes might prove necessary; and finally, it seemed to him not impossible that Bent-Anat might send a master of the ceremonies after him, and if that happened any delay might frustrate his purpose.

His heart beat loud and violently, not for love of the maiden, but because he felt he was doing wrong. The spot that he must tread was unclean, and he had, for the first time, told a lie. He had given himself out to Uarda to be a noble youth of Bent-Anat's train, and, as one falsehood usually entails another, in answer to her questions he had given her false information as to his parents and his life.

Had evil more power over him in this unclean spot than in the House of Seti, and at his father's? It might very well be so, for all disturbance in nature and men was the work of Seth, and how wild was the storm in his breast! And yet! He wished nothing but good to come of it to Uarda. She was so fair and sweet—like some child of the Gods: and certainly the white maiden must have been stolen from some one, and could not possibly belong to the unclean people.

When the prince entered the court of the hut, Uarda was not to be seen, but he soon heard her voice singing out through the open door. She came out into the air, for the dog barked furiously at Rameri. When she saw the prince, she started, and said:

"You are here already again, and yet I warned you. My grandmother in there is the wife of a paraschites."

"I am not come to visit her," retorted the prince, "but you only; and you do not belong to them, of that I am convinced. No roses grow in the desert."

"And yet: am my father's child," said Uarda decidedly, "and my poor dead grandfather's grandchild. Certainly I belong to them, and those that do not think me good enough for them may keep away."

With these words she turned to re-enter the house; but Rameri seized her hand, and held her back, saying:

"How cruel you are! I tried to save you, and came to see you before I thought that you might—and, indeed, you are quite unlike the people whom you call your relations. You must not misunderstand me; but it would be horrible to me to believe that you, who are so beautiful, and as

white as a lily, have any part in the hideous curse. You charm every one, even my mistress, Bent-Anat, and it seems to me impossible—"

"That I should belong to the unclean!—say it out," said Uarda softly, and casting down her eyes.

Then she continued more excitedly: "But I tell you, the curse is unjust, for a better man never lived than my grandfather was."

Tears sprang from her eyes, and Rameri said: "I fully believe it; and it must be very difficult to continue good when every one despises and scorns one; I at least can be brought to no good by blame, though I can by praise. Certainly people are obliged to meet me and mine with respect."

"And us with contempt!" exclaimed Uarda. "But I will tell you something. If a man is sure that he is good, it is all the same to him whether he be despised or honored by other people. Nay—we may be prouder than you; for you great folks must often say to yourselves that you are worth less than men value you at, and we know that we are worth more."

"I have often thought that of you," exclaimed Rameri, "and there is one who recognizes your worth; and that is I. Even if it were otherwise, I must always—always think of you."

"I have thought of you too," said Uarda. "Just now, when I was sitting with my sick grandmother, it passed through my mind how nice it would be if I had a brother just like you. Do you know what I should do if you were my brother?"

"Well?"

"I should buy you a chariot and horse, and you should go away to the king's war."

"Are you so rich?" asked Rameri smiling.

"Oh yes!" answered Uarda. "To be sure, I have not been rich for more than an hour. Can you read?"

"Yes."

"Only think, when I was ill they sent a doctor to me from the House of Seti. He was very clever, but a strange man. He often looked into my eyes like a drunken man, and he stammered when he spoke."

"Is his name Nebsecht?" asked the prince.

"Yes, Nebsecht. He planned strange things with grandfather, and after Pentaur and you had saved us in the frightful attack upon us he interceded for us. Since then he has not come again, for I was already much better. Now to-day, about two hours ago, the dog barked, and an old man, a stranger, came up to me, and said he was Nebsecht's brother, and had a great deal of money in his charge for me. He gave me a ring too, and said that he would pay the money to him, who took the ring to him from me. Then he read this letter to me."

Rameri took the letter and read. "Nebsecht to the fair Uarda."

"Nebsecht greets Uarda, and informs her that he owed her grandfather in Osiris, Pinem—whose body the kolchytes are embalming like that of a noble—a sum of a thousand gold rings. These he has entrusted to his brother Teta to hold ready for her at any moment. She may trust Teta entirely, for he is honest, and ask him for money whenever she needs it. It would be best that she should ask Teta to take care of the money for her, and to buy her a house and field; then she could remove into it, and live in it free from care with her grandmother. She may wait a year, and then she may choose a husband. Nebsecht loves Uarda much. If at the end of thirteen months he has not been to see her, she had better marry whom she will; but not before she has shown the jewel left her by her mother to the king's interpreter."

"How strange!" exclaimed Rameri. "Who would have given the singular physician, who always wore such dirty clothes, credit for such generosity? But what is this jewel that you have?"

Uarda opened her shirt, and showed the prince the sparkling ornament.

"Those are diamonds—it is very valuable!" cried the prince; "and there in the middle on the onyx there are sharply engraved signs. I cannot read them, but I will show them to the interpreter. Did your mother wear that?"

"My father found it on her when she died," said Uarda. "She came to Egypt as a prisoner of war, and was as white as I am, but dumb, so she could not tell us the name of her home."

"She belonged to some great house among the foreigners, and the children inherit from the mother," cried the prince joyfully. "You are a princess, Uarda! Oh! how glad I am, and how much I love you!"

The girl smiled and said, "Now you will not be afraid to touch the daughter of the unclean."

"You are cruel," replied the prince. "Shall I tell you what I determined on yesterday,—what would not let me sleep last night,—and for what I came here today?"

"Well?"

Rameri took a most beautiful white rose out of his robe and said:

"It is very childish, but I thought how it would be if I might put this flower with my own hands into your shining hair. May I?"

"It is a splendid rose! I never saw such a fine one."

"It is for my haughty princess. Do pray let me dress your hair! It is like silk from Tyre, like a swan's breast, like golden star-beams—there, it is fixed safely! Nay, leave it so. If the seven Hathors could see you, they would be jealous, for you are fairer than all of them."

"How you flatter!" said Uarda, shyly blushing, and looking into his sparkling eyes.

"Uarda," said the prince, pressing her hand to his heart. "I have now but one wish. Feel how my heart hammers and beats. I believe it will never rest again till you—yes, Uarda—till you let me give you one, only one, kiss."

The girl drew back.

"Now," she said seriously. "Now I see what you want. Old Hekt knows men, and she warned me."

"Who is Hekt, and what can she know of me?"

"She told me that the time would come when a man would try to make friends with me. He would look into my eyes, and if mine met his, then he would ask to kiss me. But I must refuse him, because if I liked him to kiss me he would seize my soul, and take it from me, and I must wander, like the restless ghosts, which the abyss rejects, and the storm whirls before it, and the sea will not cover, and the sky will not receive, soulless to the end of my days. Go away—for I cannot refuse you the kiss, and yet I would not wander restless, and without a soul!"

"Is the old woman who told you that a good woman?" asked Rameri.

Uarda shook her head.

"She cannot be good," cried the prince. "For she has spoken a falsehood. I will not seize your soul; I will give you mine to be yours, and you shall give me yours to be mine, and so we shall neither of us be poorer— but both richer!"

"I should like to believe it," said Uarda thoughtfully, "and I have thought the same kind of thing. When I was strong, I often had to go late in the evening to fetch water from the landing-place where the great water-wheel stands. Thousands of drops fall from the earthenware pails as it turns, and in each you can see the reflection of a moon, yet there is only one in the sky. Then I thought to myself, so it must be with the love in our hearts. We have but one heart, and yet we pour it out into other hearts without its losing in strength or in warmth. I thought of my grandmother, of my father, of little Scherai, of the Gods, and of Pentaur. Now I should like to give you a part of it too."

"Only a part?" asked Rameri.

"Well, the whole will be reflected in you, you know," said Uarda, "as the whole moon is reflected in each drop."

"It shall!" cried the prince, clasping the trembling girl in his arms, and the two young souls were united in their first kiss.

"Now do go!" Uarda entreated.

"Let me stay a little while," said Rameri. "Sit down here by me on the bench in front of the house. The hedge shelters us, and besides this valley is now deserted, and there are no passers by."

"We are doing what is not right," said Uarda. "If it were right we should not want to hide ourselves."

"Do you call that wrong which the priests perform in the Holy of Holies?" asked the prince. "And yet it is concealed from all eyes."

"How you can argue!" laughed Uarda. "That shows you can write, and are one of his disciples."

"His, his!" exclaimed Rameri. "You mean Pentaur. He was always the dearest to me of all my teachers, but it vexes me when you speak of him as if he were more to you than I and every one else. The poet, you said, was one of the drops in which the moon of your soul finds a reflection— and I will not divide it with many."

"How you are talking!" said Uarda. "Do you not honor your father, and the Gods? I love no one else as I do you—and what I felt when you kissed me—that was not like moon-light, but like this hot mid-day sun. When I thought of you I had no peace. I will confess to you now, that twenty times I looked out of the door, and asked whether my preserver—the kind, curly-headed boy—would really come again, or whether he despised a poor girl like me? You came, and I am so happy, and I could enjoy myself with you to my heart's content. Be kind again—or I will pull your hair!"

"You!" cried Rameri. "You cannot hurt with your little hands, though you can with your tongue. Pentaur is much wiser and better than I, you owe much to him, and nevertheless I—"

"Let that rest," interrupted the girl, growing grave. "He is not a man like other men. If he asked to kiss me, I should crumble into dust, as ashes dried in the sun crumble if you touch them with a finger, and I should be as much afraid of his lips as of a lion's. Though you may laugh at it, I shall always believe that he is one of the Immortals. His own father told me that a great wonder was shown to him the very day after his birth. Old Hekt has often sent me to the gardener with a message to enquire after his son, and though the man is rough he is kind. At first he was not friendly, but when he saw how much I liked his flowers he grew fond of me, and set me to work to tie wreaths and bunches, and to carry them to his customers. As we sat together, laying the flowers side by side, he constantly told me something about his son, and his beauty and goodness and wisdom. When he was quite a little boy he could write poems, and he learned to read before any one had shown him how. The high-priest Ameni heard of it and took him to the House of Seti, and there he improved, to the astonishment of the gardener; not long ago I went through the garden with the old man. He talked of Pentaur as usual, and then stood still before a noble shrub with broad leaves, and said, My son is like this plant, which has grown up close to me, and I know not how. I laid the seed in the soil, with others that I bought over there in Thebes; no one knows where it came from, and yet it is my own. It certainly is not a native of Egypt; and is not Pentaur as high above me and his mother and his brothers, as this shrub is above the other flowers? We are all small and bony, and he is tall and slim; our skin is dark and his is rosy; our speech is hoarse, his as sweet as a song. I believe he is a child of the Gods that the Immortals have laid in my homely house. Who knows their decrees?' And then I often saw Pentaur at the festivals, and asked myself which of the other priests of the temple came near him in height and dignity? I took him for a God, and when I saw him who saved my life overcome a whole mob with superhuman strength must I not regard him as a superior Being? I look up to him as to one of them; but I could never look in his eyes as I do in yours. It would not make my blood flow faster, it would freeze it in my veins. How can I say what I mean! my soul looks straight out, and it finds you; but to find him it must look up to the heavens. You are a fresh rose-garland with which I crown myself—he is a sacred persea-tree before which I bow."

Rameri listened to her in silence, and then said, "I am still young, and have done nothing yet, but the time shall come in which you shall look up to me too as to a tree, not perhaps a sacred tree, but as to a sycamore under whose shade we love to rest. I am no longer gay; I will leave you for I have

a serious duty to fulfil. Pentaur is a complete man, and I will be one too. But you shall be the rose-garland to grace me. Men who can be compared to flowers disgust me!"

The prince rose, and offered Uarda his hand.

"You have a strong hand," said the girl. "You will be a noble man, and work for good and great ends; only look, my fingers are quite red with being held so tightly. But they too are not quite useless. They have never done anything very hard certainly, but what they tend flourishes, and grandmother says they are 'lucky.' Look at the lovely lilies and the pomegranate bush in that corner. Grandfather brought the earth here from the Nile, Pentaur's father gave me the seeds, and each little plant that ventured to show a green shoot through the soil I sheltered and nursed and watered, though I had to fetch the water in my little pitcher, till it was vigorous, and thanked me with flowers. Take this pomegranate flower. It is the first my tree has borne; and it is very strange, when the bud first began to lengthen and swell my grandmother said, 'Now your heart will soon begin to bud and love.' I know now what she meant, and both the first flowers belong to you—the red one here off the tree, and the other, which you cannot see, but which glows as brightly as this does."

Rameri pressed the scarlet blossom to his lips, and stretched out his hand toward Uarda; but she shrank back, for a little figure slipped through an opening in the hedge.

It was Scherau.

His pretty little face glowed with his quick run, and his breath was gone. For a few minutes he tried in vain for words, and looked anxiously at the prince.

Uarda saw that something unusual agitated him; she spoke to him kindly, saying that if he wished to speak to her alone he need not be afraid of Rameri, for he was her best friend.

"But it does not concern you and me," replied the child, "but the good, holy father Pentaur, who was so kind to me, and who saved your life."

"I am a great friend of Pentaur," said the prince. "Is it not true, Uarda? He may speak with confidence before me."

"I may?" said Scherau, "that is well. I have slipped away; Hekt may come back at any moment, and if she sees that I have taken myself off I shall get a beating and nothing to eat."

"Who is this horrible Hekt?" asked Rameri indignantly.

"That Uarda can tell you by and by," said the little one hurriedly. "Now only listen. She laid me on my board in the cave, and threw a sack over me, and first came Nemu, and then another man, whom she spoke to as Steward. She talked to him a long time. At first I did not listen, but then I caught the name of Pentaur, and I got my head out, and now I understand it all. The steward declared that the good Pentaur was wicked, and stood in his way, and he said that Ameni was going to send him to the quarries at Chennu, but that that was much too small a punishment. Then Hekt advised him to give a secret commission to the captain of the ship to go beyond Chennu, to the frightful mountain-mines, of which she has often told me, for her father and her brother were tormented to death there."

"None ever return from thence," said the prince. "But go on."

"What came next, I only half understood, but they spoke of some drink that makes people mad. Oh! what I see and hear!—I would he contentedly on my board all my life long, but all else is too horrible—I wish that I were dead."

And the child began to cry bitterly.

Uarda, whose cheeks had turned pale, patted him affectionately; but Rameri exclaimed:

"It is frightful! unheard of! But who was the steward? did you not hear his name? Collect yourself, little man, and stop crying. It is a case of life and death. Who was the scoundrel? Did she not name him? Try to remember."

Scherau bit his red lips, and tried for composure. His tears ceased, and suddenly he exclaimed, as he put his hand into the breast of his ragged little garment: "Stay, perhaps you will know him again—I made him!"

"You did what?" asked the prince.

"I made him," repeated the little artist, and he carefully brought out an object wrapped up in a scrap of rag, "I could just see his head quite clearly from one side all the time he was speaking, and my clay lay by me. I always must model something when my mind is excited, and this time I quickly made his face, and as the image was successful, I kept it about me to show to the master when Hekt was out."

While he spoke he had carefully unwrapped the figure with trembling fingers, and had given it to Uarda.

"Ani!" cried the prince. "He, and no other! Who could have thought it! What spite has he against Pentaur? What is the priest to him?"

For a moment he reflected, then he struck his hand against his forehead.

"Fool that I am!" he exclaimed vehemently. "Child that I am! of course, of course; I see it all. Ani asked for Bent-Anat's hand, and she—now that I love you, Uarda, I understand what ails her. Away with deceit! I will tell you no more lies, Uarda. I am no page of honor to Bent-Anat; I am her brother, and king Rameses' own son. Do not cover your face with your hands, Uarda, for if I had not seen your mother's jewel, and if I were not only a prince, but Horus himself, the son of Isis, I must have loved you, and would not have given you up. But now other things have to be done besides lingering with you; now I will show you that I am a man, now that Pentaur is to be saved. Farewell, Uarda, and think of me!"

He would have hurried off, but Scherau held him by the robe, and said timidly: "Thou sayst thou art Rameses' son. Hekt spoke of him too. She compared him to our moulting hawk."

"She shall soon feel the talons of the royal eagle," cried Rameri. "Once more, farewell!"

He gave Uarda his hand, she pressed it passionately to her lips, but he drew it away, kissed her forehead, and was gone.

The maiden looked after him pale and speechless. She saw another man hastening towards her, and recognizing him as her father, she went quickly to meet him. The soldier had come to take leave of her, he had to escort some prisoners.

"To Chennu?" asked Uarda.

"No, to the north," replied the man.

His daughter now related what she had heard, and asked whether he could help the priest, who had saved her.

"If I had money, if I had money!" muttered the soldier to himself.

"We have some," cried Uarda; she told him of Nebsecht's gift, and said: "Take me over the Nile, and in two hours you will have enough to make a man rich."

[It may be observed that among the Egyptian women were qualified to own and dispose of property. For example a papyrus (vii) in the Louvre contains an agreement between Asklepias (called Semmuthis), the daughter or maid-servant of a corpse-dresser of Thebes, who is the debtor, and Arsiesis, the creditor, the son of a kolchytes; both therefore are of the same rank as Uarda.]

But no; I cannot leave my sick grandmother. You yourself take the ring, and remember that Pentaur is being punished for having dared to protect us."

"I remember it," said the soldier. "I have but one life, but I will willingly give it to save his. I cannot devise schemes, but I know something, and if it succeeds he need not go to the gold-mines. I will put the wine-flask aside—give me a drink of water, for the next few hours I must keep a sober head."

"There is the water, and I will pour in a mouthful of wine. Will you come back and bring me news?"

"That will not do, for we set sail at midnight, but if some one returns to you with the ring you will know that what I propose has succeeded."

Uarda went into the hut, her father followed her; he took leave of his sick mother and of his daughter. When they went out of doors again, he said: "You have to live on the princess's gift till I return, and I do not want half of the physician's present. But where is your pomegranate blossom?"

"I have picked it and preserved it in a safe place."

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