

GEORG EBERS

A THORNY
PATH, VOLUME
02

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A Thorny Path. Volume 02

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CHAPTER V

The crowds on the road were now homeward bound, and they were all in such wild, high spirits that, from what was to be seen and heard, it could never have been supposed that they had come from so mournful a scene. They took the road by the sea leading from the Nekropolis to Eleusis, wandering on in the glowing moonlight.

A great procession of Greeks had been to Eleusis, to celebrate the mysteries after the manner of the Greek Eleusis, on which that of Alexandria was modeled. The newly initiated, and the elder adepts, whose duty it was to superintend their reception, had remained in the temple; but the other mystics now swelled the train of those who were coming from the city of the dead.

Here, indeed, Serapis took the place of Pluto, and much that was Greek had assumed strange and Egyptian forms: even the order of the ceremonies had been entirely changed; still, on the African, as on the Attic shore, the Greek cry went up, "To the sea, O mystics!" and the bidding to Iakchos: "Be with us, O Iakchos!"

It could be heard from afar, but the voices of the shouters were already weary, and most of the torches had burned low.

The wreaths of ivy and myrtle in their hair were limp; the singers of the hymn no longer kept their ranks; and even Iambe, whose jests had cheered the mourning Demeter, and whose lips at Eleusis had overflowed with witticisms, was exhausted and silent. She still held in her hand the jar from which she had given the bereaved goddess a reviving draught, but it was empty and she longed for a drink. She was indeed a he: for it was a youth in woman's dress who played the rollicking part of Iambe, and it was Alexander's friend and comrade Diodoros who had represented the daughter of Pan and Echo, who, the legend said, had acted as slave in the house of Metaneira, the Eleusinian queen, when Demeter took refuge there. His sturdy legs had good reason to be as weary as his tongue, which had known no rest for five hours.

But he caught sight of the large vehicle drawn by four horses, in which the vast corn-measure, the kalathos, which Serapis wore as his distinguishing head-gear, had been conveyed to Eleusis. It was empty now, for the contents had been offered to the god, and the four black horses had an easy task with the great wagon. No one had as yet thought of using it as a conveyance back to the town; but Diodoros, who was both ingenious and tired, ran after it and leaped up. Several now wanted to follow his example, but he pushed them off, even thrusting at them with a newly lighted torch, for he could not be quiet in spite of his fatigue. In the midst of the skirmishing he perceived his friend and Melissa.

His heart had been given to the gentle girl ever since they

had been playmates in his father's garden, and when he saw her, walking along downcast, while her brother sported with his neighbor's daughters, he beckoned to her, and, as she refused to accompany him in the wagon, he nimbly sprang off, lifted her up in his arms, made strong by exercise in the Palaestra, and gently deposited her, in spite of her struggles, on the flat floor of the car, by the side of the empty kalathos.

"The rape of Persephone!" he cried. "The second performance in one. night!"

Then the old reckless spirit seized Alexander too.

With as much gay audacity—as though he were free of every care and grief, and had signed a compact with Fortune, he picked up pretty Ino, lifted her into the wagon, as Diodoros had done with his sister, and exclaiming, "The third performance!" seated himself by her side.

His bold example found immediate imitators. "A fourth!" "A fifth!" cried one and another, shouting and laughing, with loud calls on Iakchos.

The horses found it hard work, for all along the edge of the car, and round the kalathos of the great Serapis, sat the merry young couples in close array. Alexander and Melissa soon were wreathed with myrtle and ivy. In the vehicle and among the crowd there were none but radiant and frolicsome faces, and no sound but triumphant revelry.

Fatigue was forgotten; it might have been supposed that the sinister sisters, Care and Sorrow, had been banished from earth.

There was a smile even on Melissa's sweet, calm face. At first her old friend's audacious jest had offended her maidenly coyness; but if Diodoros had always loved her, so had she always loved him; and as other well-conducted girls had been content to have the like done to them, and her companion so confidently and roguishly sued for pardon, she gave him a smile which filled his heart with rapture, and said more than words.

It was a comfort, too, to sit still and rest.

She spoke but little, but even she forgot what troubled her when she felt her friend's hand on hers, and he whispered to her that this was the most delightful night he had ever known, and that, of all the sweets the gods had created, she was to him the sweetest?

The blue sea spread before them, the full moon mirrored on its scarcely heaving surface like a tremulous column of pure and shining silver. The murmur of the ripples came up from the strand as soothing and inviting as the song of the Nereids; and if a white crest of foam rose on a wave, she could fancy it was the arm of Thetis or Galatea. There, where the blue was deepest, the sea-god Glaukos must dwell, and his heart be gladdened by the merry doings on shore.

Nature is so great; and as the thought came to her that her heart was not too small to take its greatness in, even to the farthest horizon, it filled her with glad surprise.

And Nature was bountiful too. Melissa could see the happy and gracious face of a divinity in everything she looked upon.

The immortals who had afflicted her, and whom she had often bitterly accused, could be kind and merciful too. The sea, on whose shining surface the blue vault of heaven with the moon and stars rocked and twinkled, the soft breeze which fanned her brow, the new delicious longing which filled her heart—all she felt and was conscious of, was a divinity or an emanation of the divine. Mighty Poseidon and majestic Zeus, gentle Selene, and the sportive children of the god of winds, seemed to be strangely near her as she rode along. And it was the omnipotent son of Kypris, no doubt, who stirred her heart to beat higher than it had ever done before.

Her visit to her mother's grave, too, her prayer and her offerings there, had perhaps moved the spirit of the beloved dead to hover near her now as a guardian genius.

Still, now and again the memory of something terrible passed over her soul like a sweeping shadow; but what it was which threatened her and those dear to her she did not see, and would not now inquire. What the morrow might bring should not cloud the enchantment of this hour. For oh, how fair the world was, and how blessed might mortals be!

"Iakchos! Iakchos!" the voices about her shouted, and it sounded as gleeful as though the breasts of the revelers were overflowing with gladness; and as the scented curls of Diodoros bent over her head, as his hand closed on hers, and his whispered words of love were in her ear, she murmured: "Alexander is right; the world is a banqueting-hall, and life is fair."

"So fair!" echoed the youth, pensively. Then he shouted aloud to his companions: "The world is a banqueting-hall! Bring roses, bring wine, that we may sacrifice to Eros, and pour libations to Dionysus. Light the flaming torches! Iakchos! come, Iakchos, and sanctify our glad festival!"

"Come, Iakchos, come!" cried one and another, and soon the enthusiastic youth's cry was taken up on all sides. But wine-skin and jar were long since emptied.

Hard by, below the cliff, and close to the sea, was a tavern, at the sign of the Cock. Here cool drink was to be had; here the horses might rest—for the drivers had been grumbling bitterly at the heavy load added to the car over the deep sand—and here there was a level plot, under the shade of a spreading sycamore, which had often before now served as a floor for the choric dance.

The vehicle soon drew up in front of the whitewashed inn, surrounded on three sides by a trellised arbor, overgrown with figs and vine. The young couples sprang to the ground; and, while the host and his slave dragged up a huge wine-jar with two ears, full of the red juice of the grape, fresh torches were lighted and stuck on poles or fastened to the branches of the sycamore, the youths took their places eager for the dance, and suddenly the festal song went up from their clear throats unbidden, and as though inspired by some mysterious power:

Iakchos, come! oh, come, Iakchos!

Hither come, to the scene of our revel,
The gladsome band of the faithful.
Shake the fragrant, berried garland,
Myrtle-twined, that crowns thy love-locks,
Shedding its odors!
Tread the measure, with fearless stamp,
Of this our reckless, rapturous dance,
In holy rejoicing!
Hand in hand, thrice beatified,
Lo we thread the rhythmic, fanciful,
Mystical mazes!

And the dance begins. Youths and maidens advance to meet each other with graceful movements. Every step must be a thing of beauty, every bend and rising, while the double flutes play faster and faster, and the measured rhythm becomes a wild whirl. They all know the dance, and the music is a guide to the feeling to be expressed; the dancing must be suited to it. Every gesture is a stroke of color which may beautify or mar the picture. Body and spirit are in perfect harmony, combining to represent the feelings that stir the soul. It is a work of art, the art of the arms and feet. Even when passion is at the highest the guiding law is observed. Nay, when the dancers fly wildly apart, they, not merely come together again with unerring certainty, but form in new combination another delightful and perfectly harmonious picture.

"Seek and find" this dance might be called, for the first idea is

to represent the wandering of Demeter in search of her daughter Persephone, whom Pluto has carried off to the nether world, till she finds her and clasps her in her motherly arms once more. Thus does the earth bewail the reaped fruit of the field, which is buried in the ground in the winter sowing, to rise again in the spring; thus does a faithful heart pine during absence till it is reunited to the beloved one; thus do we mourn our dead till our soul is assured of their resurrection: and this belief is the end and clew to the mystery.

All this grief and search, this longing and crying for the absent, this final restoration and the bliss of new possession, is set forth by the youths and damsels—now in slow and now in vehement action, but always with infinite grace.

Melissa threw her whole soul into the dance while Demeter was seeking the lost Persephone, her thoughts were with her brothers; and she laughed as heartily as any one at the jests with which Iambe cheered the stricken mother. And when the joy of meeting was to find expression, she need not think of anything but the fact that the youth who held out his hand to her loved her and cared for her. In this, for the moment, lay the end of all her longing and seeking, the fulfillment of every wish; and as the chorus shouted, "Iakchos!" again and again, her soul seemed to have taken wings.

The reserve of her calm and maidenly nature broke down; in her ecstasy she snatched from her shoulder the wreath of ivy with which Diodoros had decked her, and waved it aloft. Her long hair

had fallen loose in the dance and flowed wildly about her, and her shout of "Iakchos!" rang clear in the night air.

The youth she loved gazed at her with ravished eyes, as at some miracle; she, heedless of the others, threw her arms round his neck, and, as he kissed her, she said once more, but loud enough now to be heard from afar, "The world is a banqueting-hall!" and again she joined in the shout of "Iakchos!" her eyes bright with excitement. Cups filled high with wine now circulated among the mad-cap mystics; even Melissa refreshed herself, handing the beaker to her lover, and Diodoros raised to his mouth that place on the rim which her lips had touched.

"O life! fount of joys!" cried Diodoros, kissing her and pressing her closer to him. "Come, Iakchos! Behold with envy how thankfully two mortals can bless the gift of life. But where is Alexander? To none but to our Andreas have I ever confided the secret I have borne in my heart since that day when we went to the circus. But now! Oh, it is so much happiness for two hearts! My friend, too, must have part in it!"

At this Melissa clasped her hand to her brow, as though waking from a dream. How hot she was from dancing, and the unusual strength of the wine and water she had drunk!

The danger impending over both her brothers came back to her mind. She had always been accustomed to think of others rather than herself, and her festal mood dropped from her suddenly, like a mantle of which the brooch breaks. She vehemently shook herself free of her lover's embrace, and her

eyes glanced from one to another in rapid search.

There stood pretty Ino, who had danced the mazy measure with Alexander.

Panting for breath, she stood leaning her weary head and tangled hair against the trunk of the tree, a wine-cup upside down in her right hand.

It must be empty; but where was he who had emptied it?

Her neighbor's daughter would surely know. Had the reckless youth quarreled with the girl? No, no!

One of the tavern-keeper's slaves, Ino told her, had whispered something to Alexander, whereupon he had instantly followed the man into the house. Melissa knew that it could be no trivial matter which detained him there, and hurried after him into the tavern.

The host, a Greek, and his buxom wife, affected not to know for whom she was inquiring; but, perceiving the anxiety which spoke in every line of the girl's face, when she explained that she was Alexander's sister, they at first looked at each other doubtfully, and then the woman, who had children of her own, who fondly loved each other, felt her heart swell within her, and she whispered, with her finger on her lips: "Do not be uneasy, pretty maid; my husband will see him well through."

And then Melissa heard that the Egyptian, who had alarmed her in the Nekropolis, was the spy Zminis, who, as her old slave Dido had once told her, had been a rejected suitor of her mother's before she had married Heron, and who was therefore always

glad to bring trouble on all who belonged to her father's house. How often had she heard of the annoyances in which this man had involved her father and Alexander, who were apt to be very short with the man!

This tale-bearer, who held the highest position as guardian of the peace under the captain of the night-watch, was of all men in the city the most hated and feared; and he had heard her brother speaking of Caesar in a tone of mockery which was enough to bring him to prison, to the quarries, nay, to death. Glaukias, the sculptor, had previously seen the Egyptian on the bridge, where he had detained those who were returning home from the city of the dead. He and his followers had already stopped the poet Argeios on his way, but the thyrsus staves of the Dionysiac revelers had somewhat spoiled the game for him and his satellites. He was probably still standing on the bridge. Glaukias had immediately run back, at any risk, to warn Alexander. He and the painter were now in hiding, and would remain in safety, come what might, in the cellar at the Cock, till the coast was clear again. The tavern-keeper strongly advised no one to go meddling with his wine-skins and jars.

"Much less that Egyptian dog!" cried his wife, doubling her fist as though the hated mischief-maker stood before her already.

"Poor, helpless lamb!" she murmured to herself, as she looked compassionately at the fragile, town-bred girl, who stood gazing at the ground as if she had been struck by lightning. She remembered, too, how hard life had seemed to her in her own

young days, and glanced with pride at her brawny arms, which were able indeed to work and manage.

But what now?

The drooping flower suddenly raised her head, as if moved by a spring, exclaiming: "Thank you heartily, thank you! But that will never do. If Zminis searches your premises he will certainly go into the cellar; for what can he not do in Caesar's name? I will not part from my brother."

"Then you, too, are a welcome guest at the Cock," interrupted the woman, and her husband bowed low, assuring her that the Cock was as much her house as it was his.

But the helpless town-bred damsel declined this friendly invitation; for her shrewd little head had devised another plan for saving her brother, though the tavern-keepers, to whom she confided it in a whisper, laughed and shook their heads over it. Diodoros was waiting outside in anxious impatience; he loved her, and he was her brother's best friend. All that he could do to save Alexander he would gladly do, she knew. On the estate which would some day be his, there was room and to spare to hide the fugitives, for one of the largest gardens in the town was owned by his father. His extensive grounds had been familiar to her from her childhood, for her own mother and her lover's had been friends; and Andreas, the freedman, the overseer of Polybius's gardens and plantations, was dearer to her and her brothers than any one else in Alexandria.

Nor had she deceived herself, for Diodoros made Alexander's

cause his own, in his eager, vehement way; and the plan for his deliverance seemed doubly admirable as proceeding from Melissa. In a few minutes Alexander and the sculptor were released from their hiding-place, and all further care for them was left to Diodoros.

They were both very, craftily disguised. No one would have recognized the artists in two sailors, whose Phrygian caps completely hid their hair, while a heavy fisherman's apron was girt about their loins; still less would any one have suspected from their laughing faces that imprisonment, if nothing worse, hung over them. Their change of garb had given rise to so much fun; and now, on hearing how they were to be smuggled into the town, their merriment grew higher, and proved catching to those who were taken into the secret. Only Melissa was oppressed with anxious care, in spite of her lover's eager consolation.

Glaukias, a man of scarcely middle height, was sure of not being recognized, and he and his comrades looked forward to whatever might happen as merely an amusing jest. At the same time they had to balk the hated chief of the city guards and his menials of their immediate prey; but they had played them a trick or two ere now. It might turn out really badly for Alexander; still, it was only needful to keep him concealed till Caesar should arrive; then he would be safe, for the Emperor would certainly absorb all the thoughts and time of the captain of the night-watch and his chief officers. In Alexandria, anything once past was so soon forgotten! When once Caracalla was gone—and it was to

be hoped that he would not stay long—no one would ever think again of any biting speech made before his arrival.

The morning must bring what it might, so long as the present moment was gay!

So, refreshed and cheered by rest and wine, the party of mystics prepared to set out again; and, as the procession started, no one who did not know it had observed that the two artists, disguised as sailors, were, by Melissa's advice, hidden inside the kalathos of Serapis, which would easily have held six, and was breast-high even for Alexander, who was a tall man. They squatted on the floor of the huge vessel, with a jar of wine between them, and peeped over now and then with a laugh at the girls, who had again seated themselves on the edge of the car.

When they were fairly on their way once more, Alexander and his companions were so daring that, whenever they could do it unobserved, they pelted the damsels with the remains of the corn, or sprinkled them with wine-drops. Glaukias had the art of imitating the pattering of rain and the humming of a fly to perfection with his lips; and when the girls complained of the tiresome insect buzzing in their faces, or declared, when a drop fell on them, that in spite of the blue and cloudless sky it was certainly beginning to rain, the two men had to cover their mouths with their hands, that their laughter might not betray them.

Melissa, who had comforted Ino with the assurance that Alexander had been called away quite unexpectedly, was now

sitting by her side, and perceived, of course, what tricks the men in the kalathos were playing; but, instead of amusing her, they only made her anxious.

Every one about her was laughing and joking, but for her all mirth was at an end. Fear, indeed, weighed on her like an incubus, when the car reached the bridge and rattled across it. It was lined with soldiers and lictors, who looked closely at each one, even at Melissa herself. But no one spoke to her, and when the water lay behind them she breathed more freely. But only for a moment; for she suddenly remembered that they would presently have to pass through the gate leading past Hadrian's western wall into the town. If Zminis were waiting there instead of on the bridge, and were to search the vehicle, then all would be lost, for he had looked her, too, in the face with those strange, fixed eyes of his; and that where he saw the sister he would also seek the brother, seemed to her quite certain. Thus her presence was a source of peril to Alexander, and she must at any cost avert that.

She immediately put out her hand to Diodoros, who was walking at her side, and with his help slipped down from her seat. Then she whispered her fears to him, and begged him to quit the party and conduct her home.

This was a surprising and delightful task for her lover. With a jesting word he leaped on to the car, and even succeeded in murmuring to Alexander, unobserved, that Melissa had placed herself under his protection. When they got home, they could tell Heron and Andreas that the youths were safe in hiding.

Melissa could explain, to-morrow morning, how everything had happened. Then he drew Melissa's arm through his, loudly shouted, "Iakchos!" and with a swift dance-step soon outstripped the wagon.

Not fifty paces beyond, large pine torches sent bright flames up skyward, and by their light the girl could see the dreaded gateway, with the statues of Hadrian and Sabina, and in front of them, in the middle of the road, a horseman, who, as they approached, came trotting forward to meet them on his tall steed. His head towered above every one else in the road; and as she looked up at him her heart almost ceased beating, for her eyes met those of the dreaded Egyptian; their white balls showed plainly in his brown, lean face, and their cruel, evil sparkle had stamped them clearly on her memory.

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