

GEORG EBERS

HOMO SUM.

VOLUME 05

Georg Ebers

Homo Sum. Volume 05

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CHAPTER XVIII

Common natures can only be lightly touched by the immeasurable depth of anguish that is experienced by a soul that despairs of itself; but the more heavily the blow of such suffering falls, the more surely does it work with purifying power on him who has to taste of that cup.

Paulus thought no more of the fair, sleeping woman; tortured by acute remorse he lay on the hard stones, feeling that he had striven in vain. When he had taken Hermas' sin and punishment and disgrace upon himself, it had seemed to him that he was treading in the very footsteps of the Saviour. And now?—He felt like one who, while running for a prize, stumbles over a stone and grovels in the sand when he is already close to the goal.

"God sees the will and not the deed," he muttered to himself. "What I did wrong with regard to Sirona—or what I did not do—that matters not. When I leaned over her, I had fallen utterly and entirely into the power of the evil one, and was an ally of the deadliest enemy of Him to whom I had dedicated my life and soul. Of what avail was my flight from the world, and my useless sojourn in the desert? He who always keeps out of the way of the battle can easily boast of being unconquered to the end— but is he therefore a hero? The palm belongs to him who in the midst of the struggles and affairs of the world clings to the heavenward road, and never lets himself be diverted from it; but as for me who walk here alone, a woman and a boy cross my path, and one threatens and the other beckons to me, and I forget my aim and stumble into the bog of iniquity. And so I cannot find—no, here I cannot find what I strive after. But how then—how? Enlighten me, O Lord, and reveal to me what I must do."

Thus thinking he rose, knelt down, and prayed fervently; when at last he came to the 'Amen,' his head was burning, and his tongue parched.

The clouds had parted, though they still hung in black masses in the west; from time to time gleams of lightning shone luridly on the horizon and lighted up the jagged peak of mountain with a flare; the moon had risen, but its waning disk was frequently obscured by dark driving masses of cloud; blinding flashes, tender light, and utter darkness were alternating with bewildering rapidity, when Paulus at last collected himself, and went down to the spring to drink, and to cool his brow in the fresh water. Striding from stone to stone he told himself, that ere he could begin a new life, he must do penance—some heavy penance; but what was it to be? He was standing at the very margin of the brook, hemmed in by cliffs, and was bending down to it, but before he had moistened his lips he drew back: just because he was so thirsty he resolved to deny himself drink. Hastily, almost vehemently, he turned his back on the spring, and after this little victory over himself, his storm-tossed heart seemed a little calmer. Far, far from hence and from the wilderness and from the Sacred Mountain he felt impelled to fly, and he would gladly have fled then and there to a distance. Whither should he flee? It was all the same, for he was in search of suffering, and suffering, like weeds, grows on every road. And from whom? This question repeated itself again and again as if he had shouted it in the very home of echo, and the answer was not hard to find: "It is from yourself that you would flee. It is your own inmost self that is your enemy; bury yourself in what desert you will, it will pursue you, and it would be easier for you to cut off your shadow than to leave that behind?"

His whole consciousness was absorbed by this sense of impotency, and now, after the stormy excitement of the last few hours, the deepest depression took possession of his mind. Exhausted, unstrung, full of loathing of himself and life, he sank down on a stone, and thought over the occurrences of the last few days with perfect impartiality.

"Of all the fools that ever I met," thought he, "I have gone farthest in folly, and have thereby led things into a state of confusion which I myself could not make straight again, even if I were a sage—which I certainly never shall be any more than a tortoise or a phoenix. I once heard tell of a hermit who, because it is written that we ought to bury the dead, and because he had no corpse, slew a traveller that he might fulfil the commandment: I have acted in exactly the same way, for, in order to spare another man suffering and to bear the sins of another, I have plunged an innocent woman into misery, and made myself indeed a sinner. As soon as it is light I will go down to the oasis and confess to Petrus and Dorothea what I have done. They will punish me, and I will honestly help them, so that nothing of the penance that they may lay upon me may be remitted. The less mercy I show to myself, the more will the Eternal judge show to me."

He rose, considered the position of the stars, and when he perceived that morning was not far off, he prepared to return to Sirona, who was no longer any more to him than an unhappy woman to whom he owed reparation for much evil, when a loud cry of distress in the immediate vicinity fell on his ear.

He mechanically stooped to pick up a stone for a weapon, and listened. He knew every rock in the neighborhood of the spring, and when the strange groan again made itself heard, he knew that it came from a spot which he knew well and where he had often rested, because a large flat stone supported by a stout pillar of granite, stood up far above the surrounding rocks, and afforded protection from the sun, even at noonday, when not a hand's breath of shade was to be found elsewhere.

Perhaps some wounded beast had crept under the rock for shelter from the rain. Paulus went cautiously forward. The groaning sounded louder and more distinct than before, and beyond a doubt it was the voice of a human being.

The anchorite hastily threw away the stone, fell upon his knees, and soon found on the dry spot of ground under the stone, and in the farthest nook of the retreat, a motionless human form.

"It is most likely a herdsman that has been struck by lightning," thought he, as he felt with his hands the curly head of the sufferer, and the strong arms that now hung down powerless. As he raised the injured man, who still uttered low moans, and supported his head on his broad breast, the sweet perfume of fine ointment was wafted to him from his hair, and a fearful suspicion dawned upon his mind.

"Polykarp!" he cried, while he clasped his hands more tightly round the body of the sufferer who, thus called upon, moved and muttered a few unintelligible words; in a low tone, but still much too clearly for Paulus, for he now knew for certain that he had guessed rightly. With a loud cry of horror he grasped the youth's powerless form, raised him in his arms, and carried him like a child to the margin of the spring where he laid his noble burden down in the moist grass; Polykarp started and opened his eyes.

Morning was already dawning, the light clouds on the eastern horizon were already edged with rosy fringes, and the coming day began to lift the dark veil from the forms and hues of creation.

The young man recognized the anchorite, who with trembling hands was washing the wound at the back of his head, and his eye assumed an angry glare as he called up all his remaining strength and pushed his attendant from him. Paulus did not withdraw, he accepted the blow from his victim as a gift or a greeting, thinking, "Aye, and I only wish you had a dagger in your hand; I would not resist you."

The artist's wound was frightfully wide and deep, but the blood had flowed among his thick curls, and had clotted over the lacerated veins like a thick dressing. The water with which Paulus now washed his head reopened them, and renewed the bleeding, and after the one powerful effort with which Polykarp pushed away his enemy, he fell back senseless in his arms. The wan morning-light added to the pallor of the bloodless countenance that lay with glazed eyes in the anchorite's lap.

"He is dying!" murmured Paulus in deadly anguish and with choking breath, while he looked across the valley and up to the heights, seeking help. The mountain rose in front of him, its majestic

mass glowing in the rosy dawn, while light translucent vapor floated round the peak where the Lord had written His laws for His chosen people, and for all peoples, on tables of stone; it seemed to Paulus that he saw the giant form of Moses far, far up on its sublimest height and that from his lips in brazen tones the strictest of all the commandments was thundered down upon him with awful wrath, "Thou shalt not kill!"

Paulus clasped his hands before his face in silent despair, while his victim still lay in his lap. He had closed his eyes, for he dared not look on the youth's pale countenance, and still less dared he look up at the mountain; but the brazen voice from the height did not cease, and sounded louder and louder; half beside himself with excitement, in his inward ear he heard it still, "Thou shalt not kill!" and then again, "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife!" a third time, "Thou shalt not commit adultery!" and at last a fourth, "Thou shalt have none other gods but me!"

He that sins against one of those laws is damned; and he—he had broken them all, broken them while striving to tread the thorny path to a life of blessedness.

Suddenly and wildly he threw his arms up to heaven, and sighing deeply, gazed up at the sacred hill.

What was that? On the topmost peak of Sinai whence the Pharanite sentinels were accustomed to watch the distance, a handkerchief was waving as a signal that the enemy were approaching.

He could not be mistaken, and as in the face of approaching danger he collected himself and recovered his powers of thought and deliberation, his ear distinctly caught the mighty floods of stirring sound that came over the mountain, from the brazen cymbals struck by the watchmen to warn the inhabitants of the oasis, and the anchorites.

Was Hermas returned? Had the Blemmyes outstripped him? From what quarter were the marauding hosts coming on? Could he venture to remain here near his victim, or was it his duty to use his powerful arms in defence of his helpless companions? In agonized doubt he looked down at the youth's pallid features, and deep, sorrowful compassion filled his mind.

How promising was this young tree of humanity that his rough fist had broken off! and these brown curls had only yesterday been stroked by a mother's hand. His eyes filled with tears, and he bent as tenderly as a father might over the pale face, and pressed a gentle kiss on the bloodless lips of the senseless youth. A thrill of joy shot through him, for Polykarp's lips were indeed not cold, he moved his hand, and now—the Lord be praised! he actually opened his eyes.

"And I am not a murderer!" A thousand voices seem to sing with joy in his heart, and then he thought to himself, "First I will carry him down to his parents in the oasis, and then go up to the brethren."

But the brazen signals rang out with renewed power, and the stillness of the holy wilderness was broken here by the clatter of men's voices, there by a blast of trumpets, and there again by stifled cries. It was as if a charm had given life to the rocks and lent their voices; as if noise and clamor were rushing like wild torrents down every gorge and cleft of the mountainside.

"It is too late," sighed the anchorite. "If I only could—if I only knew—"

"Hallo! hallo! holy Paulus!" a shrill woman's voice which seemed to come from high up in the air rang out joyful and triumphant, interrupting the irresolute man's meditations, "Hermas is alive! Hermas is here again! Only look up at the heights. There flies the standard, for he has warned the sentinels. The Blemmyes are coming on, and he sent me to seek you. You must come to the strong tower on the western side of the ravine. Make haste! come at once! Do you hear? He told me to tell you. But the man in your lap—it is—yes, it is—"

"It is your master's son Polykarp," Paulus called back to her. "He is hurt unto death; hurry down to the oasis, and tell the senator, tell Dame Dorothea—"

"I have something else to do now," interrupted the shepherdess. "Hermas has sent me to warn Gelasius, Psoes, and Dulas, and if I went down into the oasis they would lock me up, and not let me come up the mountain again. What has happened to the poor fellow? But it is all the same: there is

something else for you to do besides grieving over a hole in Polykarp's head. Go up to the tower, I tell you, and let him lie—or carry him up with you into your new den, and hand him over to your sweetheart to nurse."

"Demon!" exclaimed Paulus, taking up a stone.

"Let him be!" repeated Miriam. "I will betray her hiding-place to Phoebicius, if you do not do as Dermas orders you. Now I am off to call the others, and we shall meet again at the tower. And you had better not linger too long with your fair companion—pious Paulus—saintly Paulus!"

And laughing loudly, she sprang away from rock to rock as if borne up by the air.

The Alexandrian looked wrathfully after her; but her advice did not seem to be bad, he lifted the wounded man on his shoulders, and hastily carried him up towards his cave; but before he could reach it he heard steps, and a loud agonized scream, and in a few seconds Sirona was by his side, crying in passionate grief, "It is he, it is he—and oh, to see him thus!—But he must live, for if he were dead your God of Love would be inexorable, pitiless, hard, cruel—it would be—"

She could say no more, for tears choked her voice, and Paulus, without listening to her lamentation, passed quickly on in front of her, entered the cave and laid the unconscious man down on the couch, saying gravely but kindly, as Sirona threw herself on her knees and pressed the young man's powerless hand to her lips, "If indeed you truly love him, cease crying and lamenting. He yesterday got a severe wound on his head; I have washed it, now do you bind it up with care, and keep it constantly cool with fresh water. You know your way to the spring; when he recovers his senses rub his feet, and give him some bread and a few drops of the wine which you will find in the little cellar hard by; there is some oil there too, which you will need for a light.

"I must go up to the brethren, and if I do not return to-morrow, give the poor lad over to his mother to nurse. Only tell her this, that I, Paulus, gave him this wound in a moment of rage, and to forgive me if she can, she and Petrus. And you too forgive me that in which I have sinned against you, and if I should fall in the battle which awaits us, pray that the Lord may not be too hard upon me in the day of judgment, for my sins are great and many."

At this moment the sound of the trumpets sounded even into the deepest recess of the cave. Sirona started. "That is the Roman tuba," she exclaimed. "I know the sound—Phoebicius is coming this way."

"He is doing his duty," replied Paulus. "And still, one thing more. I saw last night a ring on your hand—an onyx."

"There it lies," said Sirona; and she pointed to the farthest corner of the cave, where it lay on the dusty soil.

"Let it remain there," Paulus begged of her; he bent over the senseless man once more to kiss his forehead, raised his hand towards Sirona in sign of blessing, and rushed out into the open air.

CHAPTER XIX

Two paths led over the mountain from the oasis to the sea; both followed deep and stony gorges, one of which was named the "short cut," because the traveller reached his destination more quickly by that road than by following the better road in the other ravine, which was practicable for beasts of burden. Half-way up the height the "short cut" opened out on a little plateau, whose western side was shut in by a high mass of rock with steep and precipitous flanks. At the top of this rock stood a tower built of rough blocks, in which the anchorites were wont to take refuge when they were threatened with a descent of their foes.

The position of this castle—as the penitents proudly styled their tower—was well-chosen, for from its summit they commanded not only the "short cut" to the oasis, but also the narrow shell-strewn strip of desert which divided the western declivity of the Holy Mountain from the shore, the blue-green waters of the sea, and the distant chain of hills on the African coast.

Whatever approached the tower, whether from afar or from the neighborhood, was at once espied by them, and the side of the rock which was turned to the roadway was so precipitous and smooth that it remained inaccessible even to the natives of the desert, who, with their naked feet and sinewy arms, could climb points which even the wild goat and the jackal made a circuit to avoid. It was more accessible from the other side, and in order to secure that, a very strong wall had been built, which enclosed the level on which the castle stood in the form of a horseshoe, of which the ends abutted on the declivity of the short road. This structure was so roughly and inartistically heaped together that it looked as if formed by nature rather than by the hand of man. The rough and unfinished appearance of this wall-like heap of stones was heightened by the quantity of large and small pieces of granite which were piled on the top of it, and which had been collected by the anchorites, in case of an incursion, to roll and hurl down on the invading robbers. A cistern had been dug out of the rocky soil of the plateau which the wall enclosed, and care was taken to keep it constantly filled with water.

Such precautions were absolutely necessary, for the anchorites were threatened with dangers from two sides. First from the Ishmaelite hordes of Saracens who fell upon them from the east, and secondly from the Blemmyes, the wild inhabitants of the desert country which borders the fertile lands of Egypt and Nubia, and particularly of the barren highlands that part the Red Sea from the Nile valley; they crossed the sea in light skiffs, and then poured over the mountain like a swarm of locusts.

The little stores and savings which the defenceless hermits treasured in their caves had tempted the Blemmyes again and again, in spite of the Roman garrison in Pharan, which usually made its appearance on the scene of their incursion long after they had disappeared with their scanty booty. Not many months since, the raid had been effected in which old Stephanus had been wounded by an arrow, and there was every reason to hope that the wild marauders would not return very soon, for Phoebicius, the commander of the Roman maniple in the oasis, was swift and vigorous in his office, and though he had not succeeded in protecting the anchorites from all damage, he had followed up the Blemmyes, who fled at his approach, and cut them off from rejoining their boats. A battle took place between the barbarians and the Romans, not far from the coast on the desert tract dividing the hills from the sea, which resulted in the total annihilation of the wild tribes and gave ground to hope that such a lesson might serve as a warning to the sons of the desert. But if hitherto the more easily quelled promptings of covetousness had led them to cross the sea, they were now animated by the most sacred of all duties, by the law which required them to avenge the blood of their fathers and brothers, and they dared to plan a fresh incursion in which they should put forth all their resources. They were at the same time obliged to exercise the greatest caution, and collected their forces of young men in the valleys that lay hidden in the long range of coast-hills.

The passage of the narrow arm of the sea that parted them from Arabia Petraea, was to be effected in the first dark night; the sun, this evening, had set behind heavy storm-clouds that had

discharged themselves in violent rain and had obscured the light of the waning moon. So they drew their boats and rafts down to the sea, and, unobserved by the sentinels on the mountain who had taken shelter from the storm under their little penthouses, they would have reached the opposite shore, the mountain, and perhaps even the oasis, if some one had not warned the anchorites—and that some one was Hermas.

Obedient to the commands of Paulus, the lad had appropriated three of his friend's gold pieces, had provided himself with a bow and arrows and some bread, and then, after muttering a farewell to his father who was asleep in his cave, he set out for Raithu. Happy in the sense of his strength and manhood, proud of the task which had been set him and which he deemed worthy of a future soldier, and cheerfully ready to fulfil it even at the cost of his life, he hastened forward in the bright moonlight. He quitted the path at the spot where, to render the ascent possible even to the vigorous desert-travellers, it took a zigzag line, and clambered from rock to rock, up and down in a direct line; when he came to a level spot he flew on as if pursuers were at his heels. After sunrise he refreshed himself with a morsel of food, and then hurried on again, not heeding the heat of noon, nor that of the soft sand in which his foot sank as he followed the line of the sea-coast.

Thus passionately hurrying onwards he thought neither of Sirona nor of his past life—only of the hills on the farther shore and of the Blemmyes—how he should best surprise them, and, when he had learnt their plans, how he might recross the sea and return to his own people. At last, as he got more and more weary, as the heat of the sun grew more oppressive, and as the blood rushed more painfully to his heart and began to throb more rapidly in his temples, he lost all power of thought, and that which dwelt in his mind was no more than a dumb longing to reach his destination as soon as possible.

It was the third afternoon when he saw from afar the palms of Raithu, and hurried on with revived strength. Before the sun had set he had informed the anchorite, to whom Paulus had directed him, that the Alexandrian declined their call, and was minded to remain on the Holy Mountain.

Then Hermas proceeded to the little harbor, to bargain with the fishermen of the place for the boat which he needed. While he was talking with an old Amalekite boatman, who, with his black-eyed sons, was arranging his nets, two riders came at a quick pace towards the bay in which a large merchant-ship lay at anchor, surrounded by little barks. The fisherman pointed to it.

"It is waiting for the caravan from Petra," he said. "There, on the dromedary, is the emperor's great warrior who commands the Romans in Pharan."

Hermas saw Phoebicius for the first time, and as he rode up towards him and the fisherman he started; if he had followed his first impulse, he would have turned and have taken to flight, but his clear eyes had met the dull and searching glance of the centurion, and, blushing at his own weakness, he stood still with his arms crossed, and proudly and defiantly awaited the Gaul who with his companion came straight up to him.

Talib had previously seen the youth by his father's side; he recognized him and asked how long he had been there, and if he had come direct from the mountain. Hermas answered him as was becoming, and understood at once that it was not he that the centurion was seeking.

Perfectly reassured and not without curiosity he looked at the new-comer, and a smile curled his lips as he observed that the lean old man, exhausted by his long and hurried ride, could scarcely hold himself on his beast, and at the same time it struck him that this pitiable old man was the husband of the blooming and youthful Sirona. Far from feeling any remorse for his intrusion into this man's house, he yielded entirely to the audacious humor with which his aspect filled him, and when Phoebicius himself asked him as to whether he had not met on his way with a fair-haired woman and a limping greyhound, he replied, repressing his laughter with difficulty:

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