

GEORG EBERS

A THORNY

PATH, VOLUME

03

Georg Ebers

A Thorny Path. Volume 03

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A Thorny Path – Volume 03

CHAPTER VIII

The sun had passed the meridian when Melissa and Andreas left the house. They walked on in silence through the deserted streets, the girl with her eyes sadly fixed on the ground; for an inward voice warned her that her lover's life was in danger. She did not sob, but more than once she wiped away a large tear.

Andreas, too, was lost in his own thoughts. To win a soul to the Saviour was surely a good work. He knew Melissa's sober, thoughtful nature, and the retired, joyless life she led with her surly old father. So his knowledge of human nature led him to think that she, if any one, might easily be won over to the faith in which he found his chief happiness. Baptism had given such sanctification to his life that he longed to lead the daughter of the only woman for whom his heart had ever beat a shade faster, to the baptismal font. In the heat of summer Olympias had often been the guest for weeks together of Polybius's wife, now likewise dead. Then she had taken a little house of her own for herself and her children, and when his master's wife died, the lonely widower had known no greater pleasure than that of receiving her on his estate for as long as Heron would allow her to remain; he himself never left his work for long. Thus Andreas had become the great ally of the gem-cutter's children, and, as they could learn nothing from him that was not good and worth knowing, Olympias had gladly allowed them to remain in his society, and herself found a teacher and friend in the worthy steward. She knew that Andreas had joined the Christians; she had made him tell her much about his faith; still, as the daughter and wife of artists, she was firmly attached to the old gods, and could only regard the Christian doctrine as a new system of philosophy in which many things attracted her, but many, on the other hand, repelled her. At that time his passion for Melissa's mother had possessed him so wholly that his life was a constant struggle against the temptation to covet his neighbor's wife. And he had conquered, doing severe penance for every glance which might for an instant betray to her the weakness of his soul. She had loved flowers, and he knew the plant-world so well, and was so absolutely master over everything which grew and bloomed in the gardens of which he had charge, that he could often intrust his speechless favorites to tell her things which lips and eyes might not reveal. Now she was no more, and the culture of plants had lost half its charm since her eyes could no longer watch their thriving. He now left the gardens for the most part to his men, while he devoted himself to other cares with double diligence, and to the strictest exercises of his faith.

But, as many a man adores the children of the woman he might not marry, Alexander and Melissa daily grew dearer to Andreas. He took a father's interest in their welfare, and, needing little himself, he carefully hoarded his ample income to promote the cause of Christianity and encourage good works; but he had paid Alexander's debts when his time of apprenticeship was over, for they were so considerable that the reckless youth had not dared confess the sum to his stern father.

Very soon after this, Alexander had become one of the most popular painters of the town; and when he proposed to repay his friend the money he had lent him, Andreas accepted it; but he added it to a capital of which the purpose was his secret, but which, if his prayers were heard, might return once more to benefit Alexander. Diodoros, too, was as dear to the freedman as a son of his own could have been, though he was a heathen. In the gymnasium and the race-course, or in the practice of the mysteries, the good seed which he sowed in the lad's heart was trodden down. Polybius, too, was an utter heathen; indeed, he was one of the priests of Dionysus and Demeter, as his wealth and position in the senate required.

Then, Diodoros had confessed to him that he hoped to win Melissa for his wife, and this had been adverse to Andreas's hope and purpose of making a Christian of the girl; for he knew by experience how easily married happiness was wrecked when man and wife worship different gods. But when the freedman had again seen the gem-cutter's brutality and the girl's filial patience, an inward voice had called to him that this gentle, gifted creature was one of those elect from among whom the Lord chose the martyrs for the faith; and that it was his part to lead her into the fold of the Redeemer. He had begun the work of converting her with the zeal he put into everything. But fresh doubts had come upon him on the threshold of the sick-room, after seeing the lad who was so dear to him, and whose eye had met his with such a trustful, suffering look. Could it be right to sow the seed of discord between him and his future wife? And supposing Diodoros, too, should be converted by Melissa, could he thus alienate from his father the son and heir of Polybius—his benefactor and master?

Then, he remembered, too, to what a position he had risen through that master's confidence in him. Polybius knew nothing of the concerns of his house but from the reports laid before him by Andreas; for the steward controlled not merely the estate but the fortune of the family, and for years had been at the head of the bank which he himself had founded to increase the already vast income of the man to whom he owed his freedom. Polybius paid him a considerable portion of each year's profits, and had said one day at a banquet, with the epigrammatic wit of an Alexandrian, that his freedman, Andreas, served his interests as only one other man could do—namely, himself—but with the industry of ten. The Christian greatly appreciated his confidence; and as he walked on by the side of Melissa, he told himself again and again that it would be dishonorable to betray it.

If only the sweet girl might find the way alone! If she were chosen to salvation, the Lord himself would lead and guide her. Had he indeed not beckoned her already by impressing on her heart those words, "The fullness of the time is now come?"

That he was justified in keeping this remembrance alive he had no doubt; and he was about to speak of it again, when she prevented him by raising her large eyes beseechingly to his, and asking him:

"Is Diodoros in real danger? Tell me the truth. I would rather endure the worst than this dreadful anxiety."

So Andreas acknowledged that the youth was in a bad way, but that Ptolemaeus, himself well-skilled, hoped to cure him if his greater colleague Galenus would aid him.

"And it is to secure his assistance, then," Melissa went on, "that the leech would have him carried to the Serapeum?"

"Yes, my child. For he is in Caesar's train, and it would be vain to try to speak with him to-day or to-morrow."

"But the journey through the town will do the sufferer a mischief."

"He will be carried in a litter."

"But even that is not good for him. Perfect quiet, Ptolemaeus said, was the best medicine."

"But Galenus has even better remedies at hand," was the reply.

Melissa seemed satisfied with this assurance, for she walked on for some time in silence. But when the uproar of the crowd in the vicinity of the Serapeum became more audible as they advanced, she suddenly stood still, and said:

"Come what may, I will find my way to the great physician's presence and crave his help." "You?" cried the freedman; and when she firmly reiterated her purpose, the strong man turned pale.

"You know not what you say!" he exclaimed, in deep concern. "The men who guard the approaches to Caracalla are ruthless profligates, devoid of courtesy or conscience. But, you may rely upon it, you will not even get into the antechamber."

"Perhaps. Nevertheless, it is my duty, and I will try."

How firmly and decisively she spoke! And what strength of will sparkled in the quiet, modest maiden's eyes! And the closely set lips, which usually were slightly parted, and hardly covered two of her pearly white teeth, gave her a look of such determination, that Andreas could see that no obstacle would check her.

Still, love and duty alike required him to use every means in his power to keep her from taking such a step. He lavished all his eloquence; but she adhered to her purpose with steadfast persistency, and none of the reasons he could adduce to prove the impossibility of the undertaking convinced her. The only point which staggered her was the information that the great leech was an old man, who walked with difficulty; and that Galen, as a heathen and a disciple of Aristotle, would never be induced to enter a Christian dwelling. Both these facts might be a serious hindrance to her scheme; yet she would not now stop to reflect. They had got back to the great street of Hermes, leading from the temple of that god to the Serapeum, and must cross it to reach the lake, their immediate destination. As in all the principal streets of Alexandria, a colonnade bordered the street in front of the houses on each side of the wide and handsome roadway. Under these arcades the foot-passengers were closely packed, awaiting Caesar's passage. He must soon be coming, for the reception, first at the Kanopic Gate, and then at the Gate of the Sun, was long since over; and, even if he had carried out his purpose of halting at the tomb of Alexander the Great, he could not be detained much longer. The distance hither down the Kanopic Way was not great, and swift horses would quickly bring him down the Aspendia street to that of Hermes, leading straight to the Serapeum. His train was not to follow him to the Soma, the mausoleum of the founder of the city, but to turn off to the southward by the Paneum, and make a round into the street of Hermes.

The praetorians, the German body-guard, the imperial Macedonian phalanx, and some mounted standard-bearers had by this time reached the spot where Melissa was proceeding up the street holding Andreas's hand. Close by them came also a train of slaves, carrying baskets full of palm-leaves and fresh branches of ivy, myrtle, poplar, and pine, from the gardens of the Paneum, to be carried to the Serapeum. They were escorted by lictors, endeavoring with their axes and fasces to make a way for them through the living wall which barred their way.

By the help of the mounted troops, who kept the main road clear, space was made for them; and Andreas, who knew one of the overseers of the garden-slaves, begged him as a favor to allow Melissa and himself to walk among his people. This was willingly granted to so well-known a man; and the way was quite free for the moment, because the imperial cartage had not followed immediately on the soldiers who had now all marched past. Thus, among the flower-bearers, they reached the middle of the street; and while the slaves proceeded on their way to the Serapeum, the freedman tried to cross the road, and reach the continuation of the street they had come by, and which led to the lake. But the attempt was frustrated, for some Roman lictors who had just come up stood in their way, and sent them to the southern side of the street of Hermes, to mingle with the gaping crowd under the arcade.

They were, of course, but ill received by these, since they naturally found themselves in front of the foremost rank; but the stalwart frame and determined face of Andreas, and the exceptional beauty of his young companion, over whose pretty head most of the gazers could easily see, protected her from rough treatment.

Andreas spoke a few words of apology to those standing nearest to them, and a young goldsmith at once courteously made way, so that Melissa, who had taken a place behind a column, might see better.

And in a few minutes—there was that to see which made every one forget the intruders. Vehicles and outriders, litters swung between mules, and a long train of imperial footmen, in red tunics embroidered with gold, huntsmen with leashes of noble dogs, baggage-wagons and loaded elephants, came trooping down toward the Serapeum; while suddenly, from the Aspendia into the Hermes Way, the Numidian horse rushed out, followed by a troop of mounted lictors, who galloped

up the street, shouting their orders in loud tones to the imperial train, in a mixture of Latin and Greek, of which Melissa understood only the words "Caesar!" and "Make way to the right!"

The command was instantly obeyed. Vehicles, foot-passengers, and riders alike crowded to the southern or left-hand side of the road, and the many-headed throng, of which Andreas and Melissa formed a part, drew as far back as possible under the colonnade; for on the edge of the footway there was the risk of being trampled on by a horse or crushed by a wheel. The back rows of the populace, who had collected under the arcades, were severely squeezed by this fresh pressure from without, and their outcries were loud of anger, alarm; or pain; while on the other side of the street arose shouts of delight and triumph, or, when anything singular came into view, loud laughter at the wit and irony of some jester. Added to these there were the clatter of hoofs and the roll of wheels, the whinnying of horses, the shouts of command, the rattle of drums, the blare of trumpets, and the shrill pipe of flutes, without a moment's pause. It was a wild and ear-splitting tumult; to Melissa, however, neither painful nor pleasing, for the one idea, that she must speak with the great physician, silenced every other. But suddenly there came up from the east, from the rising of the sun, whose course Caesar had followed, such a tremendous roar that she involuntarily clutched her companion's hand.

Every instant the storm of noise increased, rolling on with irresistible vehemence, gathering force as it came on, receiving, as it were, fresh tributaries on its way, and rapidly swelling from the distance to the immediate vicinity, compelling every one, as with a magic power, to yield to the superior will of numbers and join in the cry. Even Melissa cheered. She, too, was as a drop in the tide, a leaf on the rippling face of the rushing torrent; her heart beat as wildly and her voice rang as clear as that of the rest of the throng, intoxicated with they knew not what, which crowded the colonnades by the roadway, and every window and roof-top, waving handkerchiefs, strewing flowers on the ground, and wiping the tears which this unwonted excitement had brought to their eyes.

And now the shout is so tremendous that it could not possibly be louder. It seems as though it were the union of voices innumerable rather than the seabreeze, which flutters the pennons and flags which wave from every house and arch, and sways the garlands hung across the street. Melissa can see none but flushed faces, eyes swimming in tears, parted lips, wildly waving arms and hands. Then suddenly a mysterious power hushes the loud tones close round her; she hears only here and there the cry of "Caesar!" "He is coming!" "Here he is!"—and the swift tramp of hoofs and the clatter of wheels sounding like the rattle of an iron building after a peal of thunder, above the shouts of ten thousand human beings. Closer it comes and closer, without a pause, and followed by fresh shouting, as a flock of daws follow an owl flying across the twilight, swelling again to irrepressible triumph as the expected potentate rushes past Melissa and her neighbors. They only see Caesar as a form scarcely discerned by the eye during the space of a lightning-flash in a dark night.

Four tawny bay horses of medium size, dappled with black, harnessed abreast and wide apart, fly along the cleared road like hunted foxes, the light Gallic chariot at their heels. The wheels seem scarcely to touch the smooth flags of the Alexandrian pavement. The charioteer wears the red-bordered toga of the highest Roman officials. He is well known by repute, and the subject of many a sharp jest; for this is Pandion, formerly a stableboy, and now one of "Caesar's friends," a praetor, and one of the great men of the empire. But he knows his business; and what does Caracalla care for tradition or descent, for the murmurs and discontent of high or low?

Pandion holds the reins with elegant composure, and urges the horses to a frantic pace by a mere whistle, without ever using the whip. But why is it that he whirls the mighty monarch of half a world, before whose bloodthirsty power every one quakes, so swiftly past these eager spectators? Sunk in the cushions on one side, Bassianus Antoninus is reclining rather than sitting in the four-wheeled open chariot of Gallic make which sweeps past. He does not vouchsafe a glance at the jubilant crowd, but gazes down at the road, his well-shaped brow so deeply furrowed with gloom that he might be meditating some evil deed.

It is easy to discern that he is of middle height; that his upper lip and cheeks are unshaven, and his chin smooth; that his hair is already thin, though he lacks two years of thirty; and that his complexion is pale and sallow; indeed, his aspect is familiar from statues and coins, many of which are of base metal.

Most of those who thus beheld the man who held in his hand the fate of each individual he passed, as of the empire at large, involuntarily asked themselves afterward what impression he had made on them; and Caracalla himself would have rejoiced in the answer, for he aimed not at being attractive or admired, but only at being feared. But, indeed, they had long since learned that there was nothing too horrible to be expected of him; and, now that they had seen him, they were of opinion that his appearance answered to his deeds. It would be hard to picture a more sinister and menacing looking man than this emperor, with his averted looks and his haughty contempt for the world and mankind; and yet there was something about him which made it difficult to take him seriously, especially to an Alexandrian. There was a touch of the grotesque in the Gallic robe with a red hood in which this ominous-looking contemner of humanity was wrapped. It was called a 'Caracalla', and it was from this garment that Bassianus Antoninus had gained his nickname.

The tyrant who wore this gaudy cloak was, no doubt, devoid alike of truth and conscience; but, as to his being a philosopher, who knew the worthlessness of earthly things and turned his back upon the world, those who could might believe it! He was no more than an actor, who played the part of Timon not amiss, and who made use of his public to work upon their fears and enjoy the sight of their anguish. There was something lacking in him to make one of those thorough-going haters of their kind at whose mere aspect every knee must bend. The appearance, in short, of this false philosopher was not calculated to subdue the rash tongues of the Alexandrians.

To this many of them agreed; still, there was no time for such reflections till the dust had shrouded the chariot, which vanished as quickly as it had come, till the shouting was stilled, and the crowd had spread over the roadway again. Then they began to ask themselves why they had joined in the acclamations, and had been so wildly excited; how it was that they had so promptly surrendered their self-possession and dignity for the sake of this wicked little man. Perhaps it was his unlimited control over the weal and woe of the world, over the life and death of millions, which raised a mortal, not otherwise formed for greatness, so far above common humanity to a semblance of divinity. Perhaps it was the instinctive craving to take part in the grand impulsive expression of thousands of others that had carried away each individual. It was beyond a doubt a mysterious force which had compelled every one to do as his neighbors did as soon as Caesar had appeared.

Melissa had succumbed with the rest; she had shouted and waved her kerchief, and had not heeded Andreas when he held her hand and asked her to consider what a criminal this man was whom she so eagerly hailed. It was not till all was still again that she recollected herself, and her determination to get the famous physician to visit her lover revived in renewed strength.

Fully resolved to dare all, she looked about with calm scrutiny, considering the ways and means of achieving her purpose without any aid from Andreas. She was in a fever of impatience, and longed to force her way at once into the Serapeum. But that was out of the question, for no one moved from his place. There was, however, plenty to be seen. A complete revulsion of feeling had come over the crowd. In the place of Expectancy, its graceless step-child, Disappointment, held sway. There were no more shouts of joy; men's lungs were no longer strained to the utmost, but their tongues were all the busier. Caesar was for the most part spoken of with contempt as Tarautas, and with the bitterness—the grandchild of Expectancy—which comes of disappointment. Tarautas had originally been the name of a stunted but particularly bloodthirsty gladiator, in whom ill-will had traced some resemblance to Caesar.

The more remarkable figures in the imperial train were curiously gazed at and discussed. A worker in mosaic, who stood near Melissa, had been employed in the decoration of the baths of

Caracalla at Rome, and had much information to impart; he even knew the names of several of the senators and courtiers attached to Caesar. And, with all this, time was found to give vent to discontent.

The town had done its utmost to make itself fine enough to receive the emperor. Statues had been erected of himself, of his father, his mother, and even of his favorite heroes, above all of Alexander the Great; triumphal arches without number had been constructed. The vast halls of the Serapeum, through which he was to pass, had been magnificently decorated; and in front of the new temple, outside the Kanopic Gate, dedicated to his father, who now ranked among the gods, the elders of the town had been received by Caesar, to do him homage and offer him the gifts of the city. All this had cost many talents, a whole heap of gold; but Alexandria was wealthy, and ready to make even greater sacrifices if only they had been accepted with thanks and condescension. But a young actor, who had been a spectator of the scene at the Kanopic Gate, and had then hurried hither, declared, with dramatic indignation, that Caesar had only replied in a few surly words to the address of the senate, and even while he accepted the gift had looked as if he were being ill-used. The delegates had retired as though they had been condemned to death. To none but Timotheus, the high-priest of Serapis, had he spoken graciously.

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