

**GEORG EBERS**

THE EMPEROR.

VOLUME 10

Georg Ebers

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# Georg Ebers

## The Emperor – Volume 10

### CHAPTER XVIII

Selene and Helios were baptized, and two days after dame Hannah with her adopted children and Mary, escorted by the presbyter Hilarion and a deacon, embarked in the harbor of Mareotis on board a Nile-boat which was to convey them to their new home, the town of Besa in Upper Egypt. The deformed girl had hesitated as to her answer to the widow's question whether she would accompany her. Her old mother dwelt in Alexandria, and then—but it was this "then" which helped her abruptly to cut short all reflection and to pronounce a decided "yes," for it referred to Antinous.

For a few minutes it had seemed unendurable to think that she should never see him again, for she could not help often thinking of the beautiful youth, and her whole heart ought to belong solely to the One who had with His blood purchased peace for her on earth and bliss in the world to come.

The day after being baptized, Selene had gone to Paulina's town-house, and there, with many tears had taken leave of Arsinoe. All the affection which bound the sisters together found expression at this moment of parting. Selene had heard from Paulina that Pollux was dead, and she no longer grudged her rival sister that she grieved for him more passionately than herself, though at first her peace of mind had more than once been disturbed by memories of her old playfellow.

She felt it hard to leave Alexandria, where most of her brothers and sisters were left behind, and yet she rejoiced to think of a distant home, for she was no longer the same creature that she had been a few months since, and she longed for a remote scene of a new and sanctified life.

Eumenes and Hannah were in the right. It was not the widow but the little blind boy who had won her to Christianity. The child's influence had proceeded in a strange course. In the first instance the promises of the slave Master that Helios should some day meet his father again in a shining realm among beautiful angels had a powerful effect on the blind child's tender heart and vivid imagination. In Hannah's house his hopes had received fresh nurture, and Mary and the widow told him much about their kind and loving God and His Son who loved children and had invited them to come to Him. When Selene began to recover and he was permitted to talk to her he poured out to her all his delight at what he had heard from the women. At first, to be sure, his sister took no pleasure in these fanciful fables and tried to shake his belief and lead back his heart to the old gods. But while she tried to guide the child, by degrees she felt compelled to follow in his path; at first with wavering steps, but dame Hannah helped her by her example and with many words of good counsel. She only taught her doctrine when the girl asked her questions and begged for information. All that here surrounded Selene breathed of love and peace, and the child felt this, spoke of it, forced her to acknowledge it, and, in his own person, was the first object on which to exercise a wish hitherto unknown to her, to be herself loving and lovable. The boy's firm faith, which was not to be shaken by any reasoning or by any of the myths which she knew, touched her deeply and led to her asking Hannah what was the real bearing of one and another of his statements. It had always seemed a comfort to her that the miseries of our earthly life would come to an end with death; but Helios left her without a reply when he said in a sad voice:

"Do you feel no longing, then, to see our father and mother again?"

To see her mother again! This thought gave her an interest in the next world, and dame Hannah fanned the spark of hope in her soul into flame.

Selene had seen and suffered much misery, and was accustomed to call the gods cruel. Helios told her that God and the Saviour were good and kind, and loved human beings as their children.

"Is it not good and kind," asked he, "of our Heavenly Father to lead us to dame Hannah?"

"Yes, but we have all been torn apart," said Selene. "Never mind," said the child confidently, "we shall all meet in Heaven."

As she got well Selene asked after each of the children and Hannah described all the families into which they had been received. The widow did not look as if she spoke falsely, and the little ones, when they came to see her, confirmed her report, and yet Selene could hardly believe in the accuracy of the pictures drawn of their lives in the houses of the Christians.

The mother of a Christian family—says a great Christian teacher—should be the pride of her children, the wife the pride of her husband, husband and children the pride of the wife, and God the pride and glory of every member of the household. Love and faith in fact the bond, contentment and virtuous living the law of the family; and it was in just such a pure and beneficent atmosphere, as Selene herself and Helios felt the blessing of in Hannah's house, that each and all of her brothers and sisters were growing up. Her upright sense gave an honest answer when she asked herself what would have become of them all if her father had remained alive and had been dispossessed of his office? They must all have perished in misery and degradation.

And now?—Perhaps in truth the Divine Being had dealt in kindness with the children.

Love, love, and again love, was breathed from all she saw and heard, and yet—was it not love that had caused her greatest sorrows. Wherefore had it been her lot to endure so much through the same sentiment which beautified life to others? Had any one ever had more to suffer than she? Aye indeed! A vivacious, eager youth had duped her and had promised happiness to her sister instead of to her; it had been hard to bear—and yet, the Saviour of whom Helios had told her, had been far more severely tried. Mankind, for whom He—the Son of God—had come down upon earth, to save from misery and guilt, had rewarded His loving kindness by hanging Him on the cross. In Him she could see a companion in suffering and she asked the widow to tell her all about Him. Selene had made many sacrifices to her family—she could never forget her walk to the papyrus-factory—but He had let them mock Him and had shed His blood for His own. And who was she?—and who was He? The Son of God. His image became dear to her; she was never weary of hearing about His life and fate, His words and deeds; and without her observing it the day came when her soul was free to receive the teaching of Christ with fervent longing. With faith she acquired that consciousness of guilt which had previously been unknown to her. She had been busy and industrious out of pride and fear, but never from love; she had selfishly tried to fling from her the sacred gift of life without ever thinking what would become of those whom it was her duty to care for. She had cursed her lovely sister who needed her protection and care, and even Pollux, her childhood's playfellow; and a thousand times had she imprecated the ruler of human destinies. All this she now keenly felt with all the earnestness natural to her, but she was soothed by the tidings that there was One who had redeemed the world, and taken on Himself the sins of every repentant sinner.

After Selene had once expressed to the widow her desire to be a Christian, Hannah brought the bishop to see her. He himself undertook to instruct the girl and he found in her a disciple anxious and craving for knowledge. Just like those dried-up and dull-colored plants which, when they are plunged in water, open out and revive, so did her heart, untimely withered and dry; and she longed to be perfectly recovered that she, like Hannah, might tend the sick and exercise that love which Christ demands of His followers. That which most particularly appealed to her in her new faith was that it did not promise joys to the rich who could make great sacrifices, but to the miserable sinner who with a contrite heart yearned for forgiveness, to the poor and abject, towards whom she felt as though they belonged to the same family as herself. And her valiant spirit could not be satisfied with intentions but longed to act upon them. In Besa she could set to work with Hannah, and this prospect lightened her grief in quitting Alexandria.

A favoring wind bore the voyagers southward safe to their destination.

Two days after their departure Antinous once more stole into Paulina's garden. He went up to the widow's little house looking in vain for the deformed girl; the road was open; her absence could

but be pleasing to him, and yet it disquieted him. His heart beat wildly, for to-day— perhaps he might find Selene alone. He opened the door without knocking, but he dared not cross the threshold, for in the anteroom stood a strange man, placing boards against the wall. The carpenter, a Christian to whom Paulina had given this little house for his family to live in, asked Antinous what he wanted.

"Is dame Hannah at home?" stammered the Bithynian.

"She no longer lives here."

"And her adopted daughter, Selene?"

"She is gone with her into Upper Egypt. Have you any message for her?"

"No," said the lad, quite confounded.

"When did they go?"

"The day before yesterday."

"And they are not coming back."

"For the next few years, certainly not. Later may be, if it is the Lord's pleasure."

Antinous left the garden by the public gate, unmolested. He was very pale, and he felt like a wanderer in the desert who finds the spring choked where he had hoped to find a refreshing draught.

Next day, at the first moment he could dispose of, Antinous again knocked at the carpenter's door to inquire in what town of Upper Egypt the travellers proposed to settle and the artisan told him frankly, "In Besa."

Antinous had always been a dreamer, but Hadrian had never seen him so listless, so vaguely brooding as in these days. When he tried to rouse him and spur him to greater energy his favorite would look at him beseechingly, and though he made every effort to be of use to him and to show him a cheerful countenance it was always with but brief success. Even on the hunting excursions into the Libyan desert which the Emperor frequently made, Antinous remained apathetic and indifferent to the pleasures of the sport to which he had formerly devoted himself with enjoyment and skill.

The Emperor had remained in Alexandria longer than in any other place, and was weary of festivities and banquets, of the wordy war with the philosophers of the Museum, of conversing with the ecstatic mystics, the soothsayers; astrologers and empirics with whom the place swarmed. And the short audiences which he accorded to the heads of the different religious communities, and the inspection of the factories and workshops of this centre of industry, began to annoy him. One day he announced his intention of visiting the southern provinces of the Nile valley.

The high-priests of the native Egyptian faith had craved this favor of him, and he was prompted, not only by his love of information and passion for travelling, but also by considerations of statecraft, to gratify this desire of a hierarchy which was extremely influential in those rich and important provinces. The prospect of seeing with his own eyes those marvels of Pharaonic times which attracted so many travellers, was also an incitement, and his good spirits rose as soon as he observed what a reviving effect his determination to visit southern Egypt had upon Antinous.

His favorite had for the last few weeks expressed not the smallest pleasure at any single thing. The homage paid him no less by the Alexandrian than by the Roman ladies of rank sickened him. At banquets he sat a silent guest whose neighborhood could not add to anybody's pleasure, and even the most brilliant and exciting exhibitions in the Circus and the best contests and races in the Hippodrome had hardly sufficed to attract his gaze. Formerly he had been an eager and attentive spectator of the plays of Menander and of his imitators, Alexis, Apollodorus and Posidippus; but now when they were performed he stared into vacancy and thought of Selene. The prospect of going to the place where she was living excited him powerfully and revived his drooping courage for life. He could hope once more, and to the man who sees light shining in the future the present is no longer dark.

Hadrian rejoiced in this change in the lad and hastened the preparations for their departure; still, some months passed before he could begin his journey.

In the first place he had to provide for newly colonizing Libya, which had been depopulated by a revolt of the Jews. Then he had to come to a determination as to certain new post-roads which

were to connect the different parts of the empire more nearly, and finally he had to await the formal assent of the Roman Senate to some new resolutions concerning the hereditary reversion of conferred free-citizenship. This assent was, no doubt a matter of course, but the Emperor never issued an edict without it, and he was very desirous that his decree should come into operation as soon as possible.

In the course of his visits to the Museum the sovereign had informed himself as to the position of the several members of that institution, and he was occupied in making certain regulations which should relieve them of the more sordid cares of life; the condition of the aged teachers and educators of the young had also attracted his observation, and he had endeavored to improve it.

When Sabina represented to him what a large outlay these new measures would entail, he replied:

"We do not allow the veterans to perish who placed their lives, and limbs at the service of the state. Why then should those who serve it with their intellect be burdened with petty cares? Which should we rank the higher, power and poverty or mental wealth? The harder I—as the sovereign—find it to answer the question the more positively do I feel it to be my duty to mete out the same measure to all veterans alike, whether officials, warriors or instructors."

The Alexandrians themselves detained him too by a succession of new acts of homage. They raised him to the rank of a divinity, dedicated a temple to him, and instituted a series of new festivals in his honor; partly no doubt to win his partiality for their city and to express their pride and satisfaction in his long stay there, but also because the pleasure-loving community was glad to seize this opportunity as a favorable one for gratifying their own inclinations and revelling in mere unusual enjoyment. Thus the Imperial visit swallowed up millions, and Hadrian, who enquired into every detail and contrived to obtain information as to the sums expended by the city, blamed the recklessness of his lavish entertainers. He wrote afterwards to his brother-in-law, Servianus, his fullest recognition of both the wealth and the industry of Alexandrians, saying, with terms of praise, that among them not one was idle. One made glass, another papyrus, another linen; and each of these restless mortals, said he, is busied in some handiwork. Even the lame, the blind and the maimed here sought and found employment. Nevertheless he calls the Alexandrians a contumacious and good-for-nothing community, with sharp and evil tongues that had spared neither Verus nor Antinous. Jews, Christians, and the votaries of Serapis, he adds in the same letter, serve but one God instead of the divinities of Olympus, and when he asserts of the Christians that they even worshipped Serapis he means to say that they were persuaded of the doctrine of the survival of the soul after death. The dispute as to which temple should be assigned as the residence of the newly-found Apis gave Hadrian much to do. From time immemorial this sacred bull had been kept in the temple of Ptah at Memphis, but this venerable city of the Pyramids had been outstripped by Alexandria, and the temple of Serapis outvied that at Memphis in the province of Sokari, tenfold in size and in magnificence. The Egyptians of Alexandria, who dwelt in the quarter called Rhakotis, close to the Serapeum, desired to have the incarnation of the god in the form of a bull, in their midst; but the Memphites would not abandon their old prescriptive rights, and the Emperor had found it far from easy to guide the contest, which proved a very exciting one to all parties, to a satisfactory issue. Memphis had its Apis, and the Serapeum was indemnified by certain endowments which had formerly been granted to the temple at Memphis.

At last, in June, the Emperor could set out. He wished to traverse the province on foot and on horseback, and Sabina was to follow by boat as soon as the inundation should begin.

The Empress would gladly have returned to Rome or to Tibur, for Verus had been obliged to quit Egypt by the orders of the physician as soon as the summer heat had set in. He departed with his wife, as the son of the Imperial couple, but no word on Hadrian's part had justified him in hoping confidently to be nominated as his successor to the sovereignty.

The handsome rake's unlimited dissipations were severely checked by his sufferings, but not altogether prevented, and on his return to Rome he continued to indulge in all the pleasures of life. Hadrian's hesitation and reluctance often disquieted him, for that imperial Sphinx had, only too

frequently, given the most unexpected solutions to his mystifications. But the fatal end with which he had been threatened caused him small anxiety; nay, Ben Jochai's prediction rather prompted him to enjoy to the utmost every hour of health and ease that Fate might still allow him.

## CHAPTER XIX

Balbilla and her companion, Publius Balbinus and other illustrious Romans, Favorinus the sophist, and a numerous suite of chamberlains and servants, were to accompany the Empress by water, while Hadrian set forth on his land journey with a small escort to which he added a splendid array of huntsmen. Before he reached Memphis, in crossing the Libyan desert, through which his road lay, he had killed a few lions and many other beasts of prey, and here he had once more found Antinous the best of sporting companions. Cool headed in danger, indefatigable on foot, content and serviceable in all circumstances, the young fellow seemed to Hadrian to be a comrade created by the gods themselves for his special delectation. When Hadrian was in the humor to brood and be silent the whole day long, he never disturbed him by a word; but in these moods the Emperor found his favorite's society indispensable, for the mere consciousness of his presence soothed him.

Antinous too, was happy on these occasions, for he felt that he was of some use to his venerated master and could thus alleviate the burden which had never ceased to weigh on his own soul ever since the crime he had committed. Besides, he preferred dreaming to talking, and the exercise in the open air preserved him from listless lassitude.

In Memphis Hadrian was detained a whole month, for there he was expected to visit the Egyptian temples with Sabina, who had arrived before him, and to submit to many ceremonials invested with the regalia of the Pharaohs. Sabina often felt as if she must faint when, crowned with the ponderous vulture-headed fillet of the Queens of Egypt, weighed down with long robes and golden ornaments, she was conducted with her husband, in procession, through all the rooms, over the roof and finally into the holiest place of some vast sanctuary. What senseless ceremonials they had to go through in the course of these long circuits, and how many sacrifices had they to attend! When she returned from these visitations she was utterly exhausted, and indeed, it was no small exertion to undergo so many fumigations with incense and so many aspersions, to listen to so many litanies and hymns, to parade through such endless halls and while being elevated to the rank of celestial beings, to be crowned with so many crowns in turn and decorated with all kinds of fillets and symbolic adornments.

Her husband set her a good example, however; through all the ceremonials he displayed the whole grave majesty of his nature, and among the Egyptians behaved as one of themselves. He even took pleasure in the mystical lore of the priests, with whom he often held long conversations.

As at Memphis, so in all the principal temples of the great cities to the southward, the Imperial pair accepted the homage of the hierarchy and the honors due to divinity. Wherever Hadrian granted money for the extension of a temple, he was required to perform the ceremony of laying a stone with his own hand. But he always found time to hunt in the desert, to manage the affairs of state, and to visit the most interesting monuments of past times, and at Memphis especially, the city of the dead, with the Pyramids, the great Sphinx, the Serapeum and the tombs of the Apis.

Before quitting the city he and his companions consulted the oracle of the sacred bull. The fairest future was promised to Balbilla; the bull to whom she had to offer a cake, with her face averted, had approved of her gift and had touched her hand with his moist muzzle. Hadrian was left in ignorance as to the sentence of the priests of Apis, for it was given to him in a sealed roll with an explanation of the signs it contained; but he was solemnly adjured not to open them before at least half a year had elapsed.

It was only in the cities that Hadrian met his wife, for he pursued his journey by land and she hers by water. The boats almost invariably reached their destination sooner than the land-travellers, and when they at last arrived, there was always a grand festival to welcome them, in which however Sabina but rarely took part. Balbilla proved herself all the more eager to make their arrival pleasant by some kindly surprise. She sincerely revered Hadrian, and his favorite's beauty had an irresistible

charm for her artist's soul. It was a delight to her only to look at him; his absence troubled her, and when he returned she was always the first to greet him. And yet the bright girl troubled herself about him neither more nor less than the other ladies in Sabina's train; only Balbilla asked nothing of him but the pleasure of looking at him and rejoicing in his beauty.

If he had dared to mistake her admiration for love and to have offered her his, the poetess would have indignantly brought him to his bearings; and yet she gave unqualified expression to her admiration of the Bithynian's splendid person, and indeed with rather remarkable demonstrativeness.

When the travellers made their appearance again after a prolonged absence Antinous would find in the room in the ship where he was to live flowers, and choice fruits sent by her, and verses in which she had sung his praises. He put it all aside with the rest and only esteemed the donor the less; but the poetess knew nothing of these sentiments in her beautiful idol, and indeed troubled herself very little about his feelings. She had hitherto found no difficulty in keeping within the limits of what was becoming. But lately there had been moments in which she had owned to herself that she might be carried away into overstepping these limits. But what did she care for the opinion of those around her, or about the inner life of the Bithyman, whose external perfection of form was all that pleased her. She did not shrink from the possibility of arousing hopes in him which she never could nor intended to fulfil, for the idea did not once enter her mind; still she felt dissatisfied with herself, for there was one person who might disapprove of her proceedings, one who had indeed in plain words reprehended her fancy for doing honor to the handsome boy with offerings of flowers, and the opinion of that one person weighed with her more than that of all the rest of the men and women she knew, put together.

This one was Pontius the architect; and yet, strangely enough, it was precisely her remembrance of him that urged her on from one folly to another. She had often seen the architect in Alexandria, and when they parted she had allowed him to promise to follow her and the Empress, and to escort them at any rate for a part of their voyage up the Nile. But he came not, nor had he sent any report of himself, though he was alive and well, and every express that overtook them brought documents for Caesar in his handwriting.

So he, on whose faithful devotion she had built as on a rock, was no less self-seeking and fickle than other men. She thought of him every day and every hour; and as soon as a vessel from the north cast anchor within sight, she watched the voyagers as they disembarked to detect him among them. She longed for Pontius as a traveller who has lost his way sighs for a sight of the guide who has deserted him; and yet she was angry with him, for he had betrayed by a thousand tokens that he esteemed and cared for her, that she had a certain power over his strong will—and now he had broken his word and did not come.

And she? She had not been unmoved by his devotion, and had been gentler to this grandson of her father's freed slave than to the best-born man of her own rank. And in spite of it all Pontius could spoil all the pleasure of her journey and stay in Alexandria instead of following in her wake. He could easily have intrusted his building to other architects—the great metropolis was swarming with them! Well, if he did not trouble himself about her she certainly need care even less about him. Perhaps at last, at the end of their travels he might yet come, and then he should see how much she cared for his admonitions.

But she sighed impatiently for the hour when she might read him all the verses she had addressed to Antinous, and ask him how he liked them. It gave her a childish pleasure to add to the number of these little poems, to finish them elaborately, and display in them all her knowledge and ability. She gave the preference to artificial and massive metres; some of the verses were in Latin, others in the Attic, and others again in the Aeolian dialects of Greek, for she had now learnt to use this, and all to punish Pontius—to vex Pontius—and at the same time to appear in his eyes as brilliant as she could. She belauded Antinous, but she wrote for Pontius, and for every flower she gave the lad she had sent a thought to the architect, though with a curl on her lips of scornful defiance.

But a young girl cannot be always praising the beauty of a youth in new and varied forms with complete impunity, and thus there were hours when Balbilla was inclined to believe that she really loved Antinous. Then she would call herself his Sappho, and he seemed destined to be her Phaon. During his long absences with the Emperor she would long to see him—nay, even with tears; but, as soon as he was by her side again, and she could look at his inanimate beauty and into his weary eyes, when she heard the torpid "Yes" or "No" with which he replied to her questions, the spell was entirely broken and she honestly confessed to herself that she would as soon see him before her hewn in marble as clothed in flesh and blood.

In such moments as these her memory of the architect was particularly fresh, and once, when their ship was sailing through a mass of lotos leaves, above which one splendid full-blown flower raised its head, her apt imagination, which rapidly seized on everything noteworthy and gave it poetic form, entwined the incident in a set of verses, in which she designated Antinous as the lotos-flower which fulfils its destiny simply by being beautiful, and comparing Pontius to the ship which, well constructed and well guided, invited the traveller to new voyages in distant lands.

The Nile voyage came to an end at Thebes of the hundred gates, and here nothing that could attract the Roman travellers remained unvisited. The tombs of the Pharaohs extending into the very heart of the rocky hills, and the grand temples that stood to the west of the city of the dead, shorn though they were of their ancient glory, filled the Emperor with admiration. The Imperial travellers and their companions listened to the famous colossus of Memnon, of which the upper portion had been overthrown by an earthquake, and three times in the dawn they heard it sound.

Balbilla described the incident in several long poems which Sabina caused to be engraved on the stone of the colossus. The poetess imagined herself as hearing the voice of Memnon singing to his mother Eos while her tears, the fresh morning dew, fell upon the image of her son, fallen before the walls of Troy. These verses she composed in the Aeolian dialect, named herself as their writer and informed the readers—among whom she included Pontius—that she was descended from a house no less noble than that of King Antiochus.

The gigantic structures on each bank of the Nile fully equalled Hadrian's expectations, though they had suffered so much injury from earthquakes and sieges, and the impoverished priesthood of Thebes were no longer in a position to provide for their preservation even, much less for their restoration. Balbilla accompanied Caesar on a visit to the sanctuary of Ammon, on the eastern shore of the Nile. In the great hall, the most vast and lofty pillared hall in the world, her impressionable soul felt a peculiar exaltation, and as the Emperor observed how, with a heightened color she now gazed upward, and then again, leaning against a towering column, looked at the scene around her, he asked her what she felt, standing in this really worthy abode of the gods.

"One thing—above all things one thing!" cried the girl. "That architecture is the sublimest of the arts! This temple is to me like some grand epode, and the poet who composed it conceived it not in feeble words but formed it out of almost immovable masses. Thousands of parts are here combined to form a whole, and each is welded with the rest into beautiful harmony and helps to give expression to the stupendous idea which existed in the brain of the builder of this hall. What other art is gifted with the power of creating a work so imperishable and so far transcending all ordinary standards?"

"A poetess crowning the architect with laurels!" exclaimed the Emperor. "But is not the poet's realm the infinite, and can the architect ever get beyond the finite and the limited?"

"Then is the nature of the divinity a measurable unit?" asked Balbilla. "No, it is not; and yet this hall gives one the impression that the very divinity might find space in it to dwell in."

"Because it owes its existence to a master-mind, which while it conceived it stood on the boundary line of eternity. But do you think this temple will outlast the poems of Homer?"

"No; but the memory of it will no more fade away than that of the wrath of Achilles or the wanderings of the experienced Odysseus."

"It is a pity that our friend Pontius cannot hear you," said Hadrian. "He has completed the plans for a work which is destined to outlive me and him and all of us.

"I mean my own tomb. Besides that I intend him to erect gates, courts and halls in the Egyptian style at Tibur, which may remind us of our travels in this wonderful country. I expect him to-morrow."

"To-morrow!" exclaimed Balbilla, and her face fired with a scarlet flush to her very brow.

## CHAPTER XX

Shortly after starting from Thebes—on the second day of November—Hadrian came to a great decision. Verus should be acknowledged not merely as his son but also as his successor.

## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

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