GEORG EBERS

A THORNY PATH. VOLUME 12

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Содержание

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CHAPTER XXXIV

Caracalla's evening meal was ended, and for years past his friends had never seen the gloomy monarch in so mad a mood. The high-priest of Serapis, with Dio Cassius the senator, and a few others of his suite, had not indeed appeared at table; but the priest of Alexander, the prefect Macrinus, his favorites Theocritus, Pandion, Antigonus, and others of their kidney, had crowded round him, had drunk to his health, and wished him joy of his glorious revenge.

Everything which legend or history had recorded of similar deeds was compared with this day's work, and it was agreed that it transcended them all. This delighted the half-drunken monarch. To-day, he declared with flashing eyes, and not till to-day, he had dared to be entirely what Fate had called him to be—at once the judge and the executioner of an accursed and degenerate race. As Titus had been named "the Good," so he would be called "the Terrible." And this day had secured him that grand name, so pleasing to his inmost heart.

"Hail to the benevolent sovereign who would fain be terrible!" cried Theocritus, raising his cup; and the rest of the guests echoed him.

Then the number of the slain was discussed. No one could estimate it exactly. Zminis, the only man who could have seen everything, had not appeared: Fifty, sixty, seventy thousand Alexandrians were supposed to have suffered death; Macrinus, however, asserted that there must have been more than a hundred thousand, and Caracalla rewarded him for his statement by exclaiming loudly "Splendid! grand! Hardly comprehensible by the vulgar mind! But, even so, it is not the end of what I mean to give them. To-day I have racked their limbs; but I have yet to strike them to the heart, as they have stricken me!"

He ceased, and after a short pause repeated unhesitatingly, and as though by a sudden impulse, the lines with which Euripides ends several of his tragedies:

"Jove in high heaven dispenses various fates;
And now the gods shower blessings which our hope
Dared not aspire to, now control the ills
We deemed inevitable. Thus the god
To these hath given an end we never thought."

—Potter's translation.

And this was the end of the revolting scene, for, as he spoke, Caesar pushed away his cup and sat staring into vacancy, so pale that his physician, foreseeing a fresh attack, brought out his medicine vial.

The praetorian prefect gave a signal to the rest that they should not notice the change in their imperial host, and he did his best to keep the conversation going, till Caracalla, after a long pause, wiped his brow and exclaimed hoarsely: "What has become of the Egyptian? He was to bring in the living prisoners—the living, I say! Let him bring me them."

He struck the table by his couch violently with his fist; and then, as if the clatter of the metal vessels on it had brought him to himself, he added, meditatively: "A hundred thousand! If they burned their dead here, it would take a forest to reduce them to ashes."

"This day will cost him dear enough as it is," the high-priest of Alexander whispered; he, as idiologos, having to deposit the tribute from the temples and their estates in the imperial treasury. He addressed his neighbor, old Julius Paulinus, who replied:

"Charon is doing the best business to-day. A hundred thousand obolus in a few hours. If Tarautas reigns over us much longer, I will farm his ferry!"

During this whispered dialogue Theocritus the favorite was assuring Caesar in a loud voice that the possessions of the victims would suffice for any form of interment, and an ample number of thank-offerings into the bargain.

"An offering!" echoed Caracalla, and he pointed to a short sword which lay beside him on the couch. "That helped in the work. My father wielded it in many a fight, and I have not let it rust. Still, I doubt whether in my hands and his together it ever before yesterday slaughtered a hundred thousand."

He looked round for the high-priest of Serapis, and after seeking him in vain among the guests, he exclaimed:

"The revered Timotheus withdraws his countenance from us to-day. Yet it was to his god that I dedicated the work of vengeance. He laments the loss of worshipers to great Serapis, as you, Vertinus"—and he turned to the idiologos—"regret the slain tax-payers. Well, you are thinking of my loss or gain, and that I can not but praise. Your colleague in the service of Serapis has nothing to care for but the honor of his god; but he does not succeed in rising to the occasion. Poor wretch! I will give him a lesson. Here Epagathos, and you, Claudius—go at once to Timotheus; carry him this sword. I devote it to his god. It is to be preserved in his holy of holies, in memory of the greatest act of vengeance ever known. If Timotheus should refuse the gift—But no, he has sense—he knows me!"

He paused, and turned to look at Macrinus, who had risen to speak to some officials and soldiers who had entered the room. They brought the news that the Parthian envoys had broken off all negotiations, and had left the city in the afternoon. They would enter into no alliance, and were prepared to meet the Roman army.

Macrinus repeated this to Caesar with a shrug of his shoulders, but he withheld the remark added by the venerable elder of the ambassadors, that they did not fear a foe who by so vile a deed had incurred the wrath of the gods.

"Then it is war with the Parthians!" cried Caracalla, and his eyes flashed. "My breast-plated favorites will rejoice."

But then he looked grave, and inquired: "They are leaving the town, you say? But are they birds? The gates and harbor are closed."

"A small Phoenician vessel stole out just before sundown between our guard-ships," was the reply. "Curse it!" broke from Caesar's lips in a loud voice, and, after a brief dialogue in an undertone with the prefect, he desired to have papyrus and writing materials brought to him. He himself must inform the senate of what had occurred, and he did so in a few words.

He did not know the number of the slain, and he did not think it worth while to make a rough estimate. All the Alexandrians, he said, had in fact merited death. A swift trireme was to carry the letter to Ostia at daybreak.

He did not, indeed, ask the opinion of the senate, and yet he felt that it would be better that news of the day's events should reach the curia under his own hand than through the distorting medium of rumor.

Nor did Macrinus impress on him, as usual, that he should give his dispatch a respectful form. This crime, if anything, might help him to the fulfillment of the Magian's prophecy.

As Caesar was rolling up his missive, the long-expected Zminis came into the room. He had attired himself splendidly, and bore the insignia of his new office. He humbly begged to be pardoned for his long delay. He had had to make his outer man fit to appear among Caesar's guests, for— as he boastfully explained—he himself had waded in blood, and in the court-yard of the Museum the

red life-juice of the Alexandrians had reached above his horse's knees. The number of the dead, he declared with sickening pride, was above a hundred thousand, as estimated by the prefect.

"Then we will call it eleven myriad," Caracalla broke in. "Now, we have had enough of the dead. Bring in the living."

"Whom?" asked the Egyptian, in surprise. Hereupon Caesar's eyelids began to quiver, and in a threatening tone he reminded his bloody-handed tool of those whom he had ordered him to take alive. Still Zminis was silent, and Caesar furiously shrieked his demand as to whether by his blundering Heron's daughter had escaped; whether he could not produce the gem-cutter and his son. The blood-stained butcher then perceived that Caesar's murderous sword might be turned against him also. Still, he was prepared to defend himself by every means in his power. His brain was inventive, and, seeing that the fault for which he would least easily be forgiven was the failure to capture Melissa, he tried to screen himself by a lie. Relying on an incident which he himself had witnessed, he began: "I felt certain of securing the gem-cutter's pretty daughter, for my men had surrounded his house. But it had come to the ears of these Alexandrian scoundrels that a son of Heron's, a painter, and his sister, had betrayed their fellow-citizens and excited your wrath. It was to them that they ascribed the punishment which I executed upon them in your name. This rabble have no notion of reflection; before we could hinder them they had rushed on the innocent dwelling. They flung fire-brands into it, burned it, and tore it down. Any one who was within perished, and thus the daughter of Heron died. That is, unfortunately, proved. I can take the old man and his son tomorrow. To-day I have had so much to do that there has not been time to bind the sheaves. It is said that they had escaped before the mob rushed on the house."

"And the gem-cutter's daughter?" asked Caracalla, in a trembling voice.

"You are sure she was burned in the building?"

"As sure as that I have zealously endeavored to let the Alexandrians feel your avenging hand," replied the Egyptian resolutely, and with a bold face he confirmed his he. "I have here the jewel she wore on her arm. It was found on the charred body in the cellar. Adventus, your chamberlain, says that Melissa received it yesterday as a gift from you. Here it is."

And he handed Caracalla the serpent-shaped bracelet which Caesar had sent to his sweetheart before setting out for the Circus. The fire had damaged it, but there was no mistaking it. It had been found beneath the ruins on a human arm, and Zminis had only learned from the chamberlain, to whom he had shown it, that it had belonged to the daughter of Heron.

"Even the features of the corpse," Zminis added, "were still recognizable."

"The corpse!" Caesar echoed gloomily. "And it was the Alexandrians, you say, who destroyed the house?"

"Yes, my lord; a raging mob, and mingled with them men of every race- Jews, Greeks, Syrians, what not. Most of them had lost a father, a son, or a brother, sent to Hades by your vengeance. Their wildest curses were for Alexander, the painter, who in fact had played the spy for you. But the Macedonian phalanx arrived at the right moment. They killed most of them and took some prisoners. You can see them yourself in the morning. As regards the wife of Seleukus—"

"Well," exclaimed Caesar, and his eye brightened again.

"She fell a victim to the clumsiness of the praetorians."

"Indeed!" interrupted the legate Quintus Flavius Nobilior, who had granted Alexander's life to the prayer of the twins Aurelius; and Macrinus also forbade any insulting observations as to the blameless troops whom he had the honor to command.

But the Egyptian was not to be checked; he went on eagerly: "Pardon, my lords. It is perfectly certain, nevertheless, that it was a praetorian— his name is Rufus, and he belongs to the second cohort —who pierced the lady Berenike with his spear."

Flavius here begged to be allowed to speak, and reported how Berenike had sought and found her end. And he did so as though he were narrating the death of a heroine, but he added, in a tone

of disapproval: "Unhappily, the misguided woman died with a curse on you, great Caesar, on her treasonable lips."

"And this female hero finds her Homer in you!" cried Caesar. "We will speak together again, my Quintus."

He raised a brimming cup to his lips and emptied it at a draught; then, setting it on the table with such violence that it rang, he exclaimed "Then you have brought me none of those whom I commanded you to capture? Even the feeble girl who had not quitted her father's house you allowed to be murdered by those coarse monsters! And you think I shall look on you with favor? By this time to-morrow the gem-cutter and his son Alexander are here before me, or by the head of my divine father you go to the wild beasts in the Circus."

"They will not eat such as he," observed old Julius Paulinus, and Caesar nodded approvingly. The Egyptian shuddered, for this imperial nod showed him by how slender a thread his life hung.

In a flash he reflected whither he might fly if he should fail to find this hated couple. If, after all, he should discover Melissa alive, so much the better. Then, he might have been mistaken in identifying the body; some slave girl might have stolen the bracelet and put it on before the house was burned down. He knew for a fact that the charred corpse of which he had spoken was that of a street wench who had rushed among the foremost into the house of the much-envied imperial favorite—the traitress—and had met her death in the spreading flames.

Zminis had but a moment to rack his inventive and prudent brain, but he already had thought of something which might perhaps influence Caesar in his favor. Of all the Alexandrians, the members of the Museum were those whom Caracalla hated most. He had been particularly enjoined not to spare one of them; and in the course of the ride which Caesar, attended by the armed troopers of Arsinoe, had taken through the streets streaming with blood, he had stayed longest gazing at the heap of corpses in the court-yard of the Museum. In the portico, a colonnade copied from the Stoa at Athens, whither a dozen or so of the philosophers had fled when attacked, he had even stabbed several with his own hand. The blood on the sword which Caracalla had dedicated to Serapis had been shed at the Museum.

The Egyptian had himself led the massacre here, and had seen that it was thoroughly effectual. The mention of those slaughtered hair-splitters must, if anything, be likely to mitigate Caesar's wrath; so no sooner had the applause died away with which the proconsul's jest at his expense had been received, than Zminis began to give his report of the great massacre in the Museum. He could boast of having spared scarcely one of the empty word-pickers with whom the epigrams against Caesar and his mother had originated. Teachers and pupils, even the domestic officials, had been overtaken by the insulted sovereign's vengeance. Nothing was left but the stones of that great institution, which had indeed long outlived its fame. The Numidians who had helped in the work had been drunk with blood, and had forced their way even into the physician's lecture-rooms and the hospital adjoining. There, too, they had given no quarter; and among the sufferers who had been carried thither to be healed they had found Tarautas, the wounded gladiator. A Numidian, the youngest of the legion, a beardless youth, had pinned the terrible conqueror of lions and men to the bed with his spear, and then, with the same weapon, had released at least a dozen of his fellow-sufferers from their pain.

As he told his story the Egyptian stood staring into vacancy, as though he saw it all, and the whites of his eyeballs gleamed more hideously than ever out of his swarthy face. The lean, sallow wretch stood before Caesar like a talking corpse, and did not observe the effect his narrative of the gladiator's death was producing. But he soon found out. While he was yet speaking, Caracalla, leaning on the table by his couch with both hands, fixed his eyes on his face, without a word.

Then he suddenly sprang up, and, beside himself with rage, he interrupted the terrified Egyptian and railed at him furiously:

"My Tarautas, who had so narrowly escaped death! The bravest hero of his kind basely murdered on his sick-bed, by a barbarian, a beardless boy! And you, you loathsome jackal, could

allow it? This deed—and you know it, villain—will be set down to my score. It will be brought up against me to the end of my days in Rome, in the provinces, everywhere. I shall be cursed for your crime wherever there is a human heart to throb and feel, and a human tongue to speak. And I—when did I ever order you to slake your thirst for blood in that of the sick and suffering? Never! I could never have done such a thing! I even told you to spare the women and helpless slaves. You are all witnesses, But you all hear me— I will punish the murderer of the wretched sick! I will avenge you, foully murdered, brave, noble Tarautas!—Here, lictors! Bind him—away with him to the Circus with the criminals thrown to the wild beasts! He allowed the girl whose life I bade him spare to be burned to death before his eyes, and the hapless sick were slain at his command by a beardless boy!—And Tarautas! I valued him as I do all who are superior to their kind; I cared for him. He was wounded for our entertainment, my friends. Poor fellow—poor, brave Tarautas!"

He here broke into loud sobs, and it was so unheard-of, so incomprehensible a thing that this man should weep who, even at his father's death had not shed a tear, that Julius Paulinus himself held his mocking tongue.

The rest of the spectators also kept anxious and uneasy silence while the lictors bound Zminis's hands, and, in spite of his attempts to raise his voice once more in self-defense, dragged him away and thrust him out across the threshold of the dining-hall. The door closed behind him, and no applause followed, though every one approved of the Egyptian's condemnation, for Caracalla was still weeping.

Was it possible that these tears could be shed for sick people whom he did not know, and for the coarse gladiator, the butcher of men and beasts, who had had nothing to give Caesar but a few hours of excitement at the intoxicating performances in the arena? So it must be; for from time to time Caracalla moaned softly, "Those unhappy sick!" or "Poor Tarautas!"

And, indeed, at this moment Caracalla himself could not have said whom he was lamenting. He had in the Circus staked his life on that of Tarautas, and when he shed tears over his memory it was certainly less for the gladiator's sake than over the approaching end of his own existence, to which he looked forward in consequence of Tarautas's death. But he had often been near the gates of Hades in the battle-field with calm indifference; and now, while he thus bewailed the sick and Tarautas with bitter lamentations, in his mind he saw no sick-bed, nor, indeed, the stunted form of the braggart hero of the arena, but the slender, graceful figure of a sweet girl, and a blackened, charred arm on which glittered a golden armlet.

That woman! Treacherous, shameless, but how lovely and beloved! That woman, under his eyes, as it were, was swept out of the land of the living; and with her, with Melissa, the only girl for whom his heart had ever throbbed faster, the miracle-worker who had possessed the unique power of exorcising his torments, whose love—for so he still chose to believe, though he had always refused her petitions that he would show mercy—whose love would have given him strength to become a benefactor to all mankind, a second Trajan or Titus. He had quite forgotten that he had intended her to meet a disgraceful end in the arena under fearful torments, if she had been brought to him a prisoner. He felt as though the fate of Roxana, with whom his most cherished dream had perished, had quite broken his heart; and it was Melissa whom he really bewailed, with the gladiator's name on his lips and the jewel before his eyes which had been his gift, and which she had worn on her arm even in death. But he ere long controlled this display of feeling, ashamed to shed tears for her who had cheated him and who had fled from his love. Only once more did he sob aloud. Then he raised himself, and while holding his handkerchief to his eyes he addressed the company with theatrical pathos:

"Yes, my friends, tell whom you will that you have seen Bassianus weep; but add that his tears flowed from grief at the necessity for punishing so many of his subjects with such rigor. Say, too, that Caesar wept with pity and indignation. For what good man would not be moved to sorrow at seeing the sick and wounded thus maltreated? What humane heart could refrain from loud lamentations at the sight of barbarity which is not withheld from laying a murderous hand even on the sacred anguish of the sick and wounded? Defend me, then, against those Romans who may shrug their shoulders over

the weakness of a weeping Caesar—the Terrible. My office demands severity; and yet, my friends, I am not ashamed of these tears."

With this he took leave of his guests and retired to rest, and those who remained were soon agreed that every word of this speech, as well as Caesar's tears, were rank hypocrisy. The mime Theocritus admired his sovereign in all sincerity, for how rarely could even the greatest actors succeed in forcing from their eyes, by sheer determination, a flood of real, warm tears—he had seen them flow. As Caesar quitted the room, his hand on the lion's mane, the praetor Priscillianus whispered to Cilo:

"Your disciple has been taking lessons here of the weeping crocodile."

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Out on the great square the soldiers were resting after the day's bloody work. They had lighted large fires in front of the most sacred sanctuary of a great city, as though they were in the open field. Round each of these, foot and horse soldiers lay or squatted on the ground, according to their companies; and over the wine allowed them by Caesar they told each other the hideous experiences of the day, which even those who had grown rich by it could not think of without disgust. Gold and silver cups, the plunder of the city, circulated round those camp-fires and the juice of the vine was poured into them out of jugs of precious metal. Tongues were wagging fast, for, though there was indeed but one opinion as to what had been done, there were mercenaries enough and ambitious pretenders who could dare to defend it. Every word might reach the sovereign's ears, and the day might bring promotion as well as gold and booty. Even the calmest were still in some excitement over the massacre they had helped in; the plunder was discussed, and barter and exchange were eagerly carried on.

As Caracalla passed the balcony he stepped out for a moment, followed by the lamp-bearers, to thank his faithful warriors for the valor and obedience they had shown this day. The traitorous Alexandrians had now met their deserts. The greater the plunder his dear brethren in arms could win, the better he would be pleased. This speech was hailed with a shout of glee drowning his words; but Caracalla had heard his dearly bought troops cheer him with greater zeal and vigor. There were here whole groups of men who did not join at all, or hardly opened their mouths. And his ear was sharp.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.