

GEORG EBERS

A THORNY
PATH, VOLUME
08

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A Thorny Path. Volume 08

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CHAPTER XXIII

The slave Argutis was waiting for Melissa in the antechamber. It was evident that he brought good news, for he beamed with joy as she came toward him; and before she left the house she knew that her father and Philip had returned and had regained their freedom.

The slave had not allowed these joyful tidings to reach his beloved mistress's ear, that he might have the undivided pleasure of bringing them himself, and the delight she expressed was fully as great as he had anticipated. Melissa even hurried back to Johanna to impart to her the joyful intelligence that she might tell it to her mistress.

When they were in the street the slave told her that, at break of day, the ship had cast anchor which brought back father and son. The prisoners had received their freedom while they were still at sea, and had been permitted to return home at once. All was well, only—he added, hesitatingly and with tears in his eyes—things were not as they used to be, and now the old were stronger than the young. Her father had taken no harm from the heavy work at the oars, but Philip had returned from the galleys very ill, and

they had carried him forthwith to the bedchamber, where Dido was now nursing him. It was a good thing that she had not been there to hear how the master had stormed and cursed over the infamy they had had to endure; but the meeting with his birds had calmed him down quickly enough.

Melissa and her attendant were walking in the direction of the Serapeum, but now she declared that she must first see the liberated prisoners. And she insisted upon it, although Argutis assured her of her father's intention of seeking her at the house of the high-priest, as soon as he had removed all traces of his captivity and his shameful work at the galleys in the bath. Philip she would, of course, find at home, he being too weak to leave the house. The old man had some difficulty in following his young mistress, and she soon stepped lightly over the "Welcome" on the threshold of her father's house. Never had the red mosaic inscription seemed to shine so bright and friendly, and she heard her name called in delighted tones from the kitchen.

This joyful greeting from Dido was not to be returned from the door only. In a moment Melissa was standing by the hearth; but the slave, speechless with happiness, could only point with fork and spoon, first to the pot in which a large piece of meat was being boiled down into a strengthening soup for Philip, then to a spit on which two young chickens were browning before the fire, and then to the pan where she was frying the little fish of which the returned wanderer was so fond.

But the old woman's struggle between the duty that kept her

near the fire and the love that drew her away from it was not of long duration. In a few minutes Melissa, her hands clasping the slave's withered arm, was listening to the tender words of welcome that Dido had ready for her. The slave woman declared that she scarcely dared to let her eyes rest upon her mistress, much less touch her with the fingers that had just been cleaning fish; for the girl was dressed as grandly as the daughter of the high-priest. Melissa laughed at this; but the slave went on to say that they had not been able to detain her master. His longing to see his daughter and the desire to speak with Caesar had driven him out of the house, and Alexander had, of course, accompanied him. Only Philip, poor, crushed worm, was at home, and the sight of her would put more strength into him than the strong soup and the old wine which his father had fetched for him from the store-room, although he generally reserved it for libations on her mother's grave.

Melissa soon stood beside her brother's couch, and the sight of him cast a dark shadow over the brightness of this happy morn. As he recognized her, a fleeting smile crossed the pale, spiritualized face, which seemed to her to have grown ten years older in this short time; but it vanished as quickly as it had come. Then the great eyes gazed blankly again from the shadows that surrounded them, and a spasm of pain quivered from time to time round the thin, tightly closed lips. Melissa could hardly restrain her tears. Was this what he had been brought to—the youth who only a few days ago had made them all feel conscious of the

superiority of his brilliant mind.

Her warm heart made her feel more lovingly toward her sick brother than she had ever done when he was in health, and surely he was conscious of the tenderness with which she strove to comfort him.

The unaccustomed, hard, and degrading work at the oars, she assured him, would have worn out a stronger man than he; but he would soon be able to visit the Museum again and argue as bravely as ever. With this, she bent over him to kiss his brow, but he raised himself a little, and said, with a contemptuous smile:

"Apathy—ataraxy—complete indifference—is the highest aim after which the soul of the skeptic strives. That at least"—and here his eyes flashed for a moment—"I have attained to in these cursed days. That a thinking being could become so utterly callous to everything—everything, be it what it may—even I could never have believed!" He sank into silence, but his sister urged him to take courage—surely many a glad day was before him yet.

At this he raised himself more energetically, and exclaimed:

"Glad days?—for me, and with you? That you should still be of such good cheer would please or else astonish me if I were still capable of those sentiments. If things were different, I should ask you now, what have you given the imperial bloodhound in return for our freedom?"

Here Melissa exclaimed indignantly, but he continued unabashed:

"Alexander says you have found favor with our imperial master. He calls, and you come. Naturally, it is for him to command. See how much can be made of the child of a gem-cutter! But what says handsome Diodoros to all this?—Why turn so pale? These, truly, are questions which I would fling in your face were things as they used to be. Now I say in all unconcern, do what you will!"

The blood had ebbed from Melissa's cheeks during this attack of her brother's. His injurious and false accusations roused her indignation to the utmost, but one glance at his weary, suffering face showed her how great was the pain he endured, and in her compassionate heart pity strove against righteous anger. The struggle was sharp, but pity prevailed; and, instead of punishing him by a sharp retort, she forced herself to explain to him in a few gentle words what had happened, in order to dispel the unworthy suspicion that must surely hurt him as much as it did her. She felt convinced that the sufferer would be cheered by her words; but he made no attempt to show that he appreciated her kindly moderation, nor to express any satisfaction. On the contrary, when he spoke it was in the same tone as before.

"If that be the case," he said, "so much the better; but were it otherwise, it would have to be endured just the same. I can think of nothing that could affect me now, and it is well. Only my body troubles me still. It weighs upon me like lead, and grows heavier with every word I utter. Therefore, I pray you, leave me to myself!"

But his sister would not obey. "No, Philip," she cried, eagerly, "this may not be. Let your strong spirit arise and burst asunder the bonds that fetter and cripple it."

At this a groan of pain escaped the philosopher, and, turning again to the girl, he answered, with a mournful smile:

"Bid the cushion in that arm-chair do so. It will succeed better than I!" Then crying out impatiently and as loudly as he could, "Now go—you know not how you torture me!" he turned away from her and buried his face in the pillows.

But Melissa, as if beside herself, laid her hands upon his shoulder, and, shaking him gently, exclaimed: "And even if it vexes you, I will not be driven away thus. The misfortunes that have befallen you in these days will end by destroying you, if you will not pull yourself together. We must have patience, and it can only come about slowly, but you must make an effort. The least thing that pains you hurts us too, and you, in return, may not remain indifferent to what we feel. See, Philip, our mother and Andrew taught us often not to think only of ourselves, but of others. We ask so little of you; but if you—"

At this the philosopher shook himself free of her hand, and cried in a voice of anguish:

"Away, I say! Leave me alone! One word more, and I die!" With this he hid his head in the coverlet, and Melissa could see how his limbs quivered convulsively as if shaken by an ague.

To see a being so dear to her thus utterly broken down cut her to the heart. Oh, that she could help him! If she did not succeed,

or if he never found strength to rouse himself, he, too, would be one of Caesar's victims. Corrupted and ruined lives marked the path of this terrible being, and, with a shudder, she asked herself when her turn would come.

Her hair had become disordered, and as she smoothed it she looked in the mirror, and could not but observe that in the simple but costly white robe of the dead Korinna she looked like a maiden of noble birth rather than the lowly daughter of an artist. She would have liked to tear it off and replace it by another, but her one modest festival robe had been left behind at the house of the lady Berenike. To appear in broad daylight before the neighbors or to walk in the streets clad in this fashion seemed to her impossible after her brother's unjust suspicion, and she bade Argutis fetch her a litter.

When they parted, Dido could see distinctly that Philip had wounded her. And she could guess how, so she withheld any questions, that she might not hurt her. Over the fire, however, she stabbed fiercely into the fowl destined for the philosopher, but cooked it, nevertheless, with all possible care.

On the way to the Serapeum, Melissa's anxiety increased. Till now, eagerness for the fray, fear, hope, and the joyful consciousness of right-doing, had alternated in her mind. Now, for the first time, she was seized with a premonition of misfortune. Fate itself had turned against her. Even should she succeed in escaping, she could not hope to regain her lost peace of mind.

Philip's biting words had shown her what most of them must think of her; and, though the ship should bear her far away, would it be right to bring Diodoros away from his old father to follow her? She must see her lover, and if possible tell him all. The rose, too, which the Christian had given her for him, and which lay in her lap, she wished so much to carry to him herself. She could not go alone to the chamber of the convalescent, and the attendance of a slave counted for nothing in the eyes of other people. It was even doubtful if a bondsman might be admitted into the inner apartments of the sanctuary. However, she would, she must see Diodoros and speak to him; and thus planning ways and means by which to accomplish this, looking forward joyfully to the meeting with her father, and wondering how Agatha, the Christian, had received Alexander, she lost the feeling of deep depression which had weighed on her when she had left the house.

The litter stopped, and Argutis helped her to descend. He was breathless, for it had been most difficult to open a way for her through the dense crowds that were already thronging to the Circus, where the grand evening performance in honor of the emperor was to begin as soon as it was dark. Just as she was entering the house, she perceived Andreas coming toward them along the street of Hermes, and she at once bade the slave call him. He was soon at her side, and declared himself willing to accompany her to Diodoros.

This time, however, she did not find her lover alone in the sick-room. Two physicians were with him, and she grew pale as she

recognized in one of them the emperor's Roman body-physician.

But it was too late to escape detection; so she only hastened to her lover's side, whispered warm words of love in his ear, and, while she gave him the rose, conjured him ever and always to have faith in her and in her love, whatever reports he might hear.

Diodoros was up and had fully recovered. His face lighted up with joy as he saw her; but, when she repeated the old, disquieting request, he anxiously begged to know what she meant by it. She assured him, however, that she had already delayed too long, and referred him to Andreas and the lady Euryale, who would relate to him what had befallen her and spoiled every happy hour she had. Then, thinking herself unobserved by those present, she breathed a kiss upon his lips. But he would not let her go, urging with passionate tenderness his rights as her betrothed, till she tore herself away from him and hurried from the room.

As she left, she heard a ringing laugh, followed by loud, sprightly talking. It was not her lover's voice, and endeavoring, while she waited for Andreas, to catch what was being said on the other side of the door, she distinctly heard the body-physician (for no other pronounced the Greek language in that curious, halting manner) exclaim, gayly: "By Cerberus, young man, you are to be envied! The beauty my sovereign lord is limping after flies unbidden into your arms!"

Then came loud laughter as before, but this time interrupted by Diodoros's indignant question as to what this all meant. At last Melissa heard Andreas's deep voice promising the young

man to tell him everything later on; and when the convalescent impatiently asked for an immediate explanation, the Christian exhorted him to be calm, and finally requested the physician to grant him a few moments' conversation.

Then there was quiet for a time in the room, only broken by Diodoros's angry questions and the pacifying exclamations of the freedman. She felt as if she must return to her lover and tell him herself what she had been forced to do in these last days, but maidenly shyness restrained her, till at last Andreas came out. The freedman's honest face expressed the deepest solicitude, and his voice sounded rough and hasty as he exclaimed, "You must fly—fly this day!" And my father and brother, and Diodoros?" she asked, anxiously. But he answered, urgently:

"Let them get away as they may. There is no hole or corner obscure enough to keep you hidden. Therefore take advantage of the ship that waits for you. Follow Argutis at once to the lady Berenike. I can not accompany you, for it lies with me to occupy for the next few hours the attention of the body-physician, from whom you have the most to fear. He has consented to go with me to my garden across the water. There I promised him a delicious, real Alexandrian feast, and you know how gladly Polybius will seize the opportunity to share it with him. No doubt, too, some golden means may be found to bind his tongue; for woe to you if Caracalla discovers prematurely that you are promised to another, and woe then to your betrothed! After sundown, when every one here has gone to the Circus, I will take Diodoros to

a place of safety. Farewell, child, and may our heavenly Father defend you!"

He laid his right hand upon her head as if in blessing; but Melissa cried, wringing her hands: "Oh, let me go to him once more! How can I leave him and go far away without one word of farewell or of forgiveness?"

But Andreas interrupted her, saying: "You can not. His life is at stake as well as your own. I shall make it my business to look after his safety. The wife of Seleukus will assist you in your flight."

"And you will persuade him to trust me?" urged Melissa, clinging convulsively to his arm.

"I will try," answered the freedman, gloomily. Melissa, dropped his arm, for loud, manly voices were approaching down the stairs near which they stood.

It was Heron and Alexander, returning from their audience with the emperor. Instantly the Christian went to meet them, and dismissed the temple servant who accompanied them.

In the half-darkness of the corridor, Melissa threw herself weeping into her father's arms. But he stroked her hair lovingly, and kissed her more tenderly on brow and eyes than he had ever done before, whispering gayly to her: "Dry your tears, my darling. You have been a brave maiden, and now comes your reward. Fear and sorrow will now be changed into happiness and power, and all the glories of the world. I have not even told Alexander yet what promises to make our fortunes, for I know

my duty." Then, raising his voice, he said to the freedman, "If I have been rightly informed, we shall find the son of Polybius in one of the apartments close at hand."

"Quite right," answered the freedman, gravely, and then went on to explain to the gem-cutter that he could not see Diodoros just now, but must instantly leave the country with his son and daughter on Berenike's ship. Not a moment was to be lost. Melissa would tell him all on the way.

But Heron laughed scornfully: "That would be a pretty business! We have plenty of time, and, with the greatness that lies before us, everything must be done openly and in the right way. My first thought, you see, was to come here, for I had promised the girl to Diodoros, and he must be informed before I can consent to her betrothal to another."

"Father!" cried Melissa, scarcely able to command her voice. But Heron took no notice of her, and continued, composedly: "Diodoros would have been dear to me as a son-in-law. I shall certainly tell him so. But when Caesar, the ruler of the world, condescends to ask a plain man for his daughter, every other consideration must naturally be put aside. Diodoros is sensible, and is sure to see it in the right light. We all know how Caesar treats those who are in his way; but I wish the son of Polybius no ill, so I forbore to betray to Caesar what tie had once bound you, my child, to the gallant youth."

Heron had never liked the freedman. The man's firm character had always gone against the gemcutter's surly, capricious nature;

and it was no little satisfaction to him to let him feel his superiority, and boast before him of the apparent good luck that had befallen the artist's family.

But Andreas had already heard from the physician that Caracalla had informed his mother's envoys of his intended marriage with an Alexandrian, the daughter of an artist of Macedonian extraction. This could only refer to Melissa, and it was this news which had caused him to urge the maiden to instant flight.

Pale, incapable of uttering a word, Melissa stood before her father; but the freedman grasped her hand, looked Heron reproachfully in the face, and asked, quietly, "And you would really have the heart to join this dear child's life to that of a bloody tyrant?"

"Certainly I have," returned Heron with decision, and he drew his daughter's hand out of that of Andreas, who turned his back upon the artist with a meaning shrug of the shoulders. But Melissa ran after him, and, clinging to him, cried as she turned first to him and then to her father:

"I am promised to Diodoros, and shall hold fast to him and my love; tell him that, Andreas! Come what may, I will be his and his alone! Caesar—"

"Swear not!" broke in Heron, angrily, "for by great Serapis—"

But Alexander interposed between them, and begged his father to consider what he was asking of the girl. Caesar's proposals could scarcely have been very pleasing to him, or why

had he concealed till now what Caracalla was whispering to him in the adjoining room? He might imagine for himself what fate awaited the helpless child at the side of a husband at whose name even men trembled. He should remember her mother, and what she would have said to such a union. There was little, time to escape from this terrible wooer.

Then Melissa turned to her brother and begged him earnestly: "Then you take me to the ship Alexander; take charge of me yourself!"

"And I?" asked Heron, his eye cast gloomily on the ground.

"You must come with us!" implored the girl, clasping her hands.—"O Andreas! say something! Tell him what I have to expect!"

"He knows that without my telling him," replied the freedman. "I must go now, for two lives are at stake, Heron. If I can not keep the physician away from Caesar, your daughter, too, will be in danger. If you desire to see your daughter forever in fear of death, give her in marriage to Caracalla. If you have her happiness at heart, then escape with her into a far country."

He nodded to the brother and sister, and returned to the sick-room.

"Fly!—escape!" repeated the old man, and he waived his hand angrily. "This Andreas—the freedman, the Christian—always in extremes. Why run one's head against the wall? First consider, then act; that was what she taught us whose sacred memory you have but now invoked, Alexander."

With this he walked out of the half-dark corridor into the open court-yard, in front of his children. Here he looked at his daughter, who was breathing fast, and evidently prepared to resist to the last. And as he beheld her in Korinna's white and costly robes, like a noble priestess, it occurred to him that even before his captivity she had ceased to be the humble, unquestioning instrument of his capricious temper. Into what a haughty beauty the quiet embroideress had been transformed!

By all the gods! Caracalla had no cause to be ashamed of such an empress.

And, unaccustomed as he was to keep back anything whatever from his children, he began to express these sentiments. But he did not get far, for the hour for the morning meal being just over, the court-yard began to fill from all sides with officials and servants of the temple. So, father and son silently followed the maiden through the crowded galleries and apartments, into the house of the highpriest.

Here they were received by Philostratus, who hardly gave Melissa time to greet the lady Euryale before he informed her, but with unwonted hurry and excitement, that the emperor was awaiting her with impatience.

The philosopher motioned to her to follow him, but she clung, as if seeking help, to her brother, and cried: "I will not go again to Caracalla! You are the kindest and best of them all, Philostratus, and you will understand me. Evil will come of it if I follow you—I can not go again to Caesar."

But it was impossible for the courtier to yield to her, in the face of his monarch's direct commands; therefore, hard as it was to him, he said, resolutely: "I well understand what holds you back; still, if you would not ruin yourself and your family, you must submit. Besides which, you know not what Caesar is about to offer you—fortunate, unhappy child!"

"I know—oh, I know it!" sobbed Melissa; "but it is just that . . . I have served the emperor willingly, but before I consent become the wife of such a monster—"

"She is right," broke in Euryale, and drew Melissa toward her. But the philosopher took the girl's hand and said, kindly:—"You must come with me now, my child, and pretend that you know nothing of Caesar's intentions toward you. It is the only way to save you. But while you are with the emperor, who, in any case, can devote but a short time to you to-day, I will return here and consult with your people. There is much to be decided, of the greatest moment, and not to you alone." Melissa turned with tearful eyes to Euryale, and questioned her with a look; whereupon the lady drew the girl's hand out of that of the philosopher, and saying to him, "She shall be with you directly," took her away to her own apartment.

Here she begged Melissa to dry her eyes, and arranging the girl's hair and robe with her own hands, she promised to do all in her power to facilitate her flight. She must do her part now by going into Caesar's presence as frankly as she had done yesterday and the day before. She might be quite easy; her interests were

being faithfully watched over.

Taking a short leave of her father, who was looking very sulky because nobody seemed to care for his opinion, and of Alexander, who lovingly promised her his help, she took the philosopher's hand and walked with him through one crowded apartment after another. They often had difficulty in pressing through the throng of people who were waiting for an audience, and in the antechamber, where the Aurelians had had to pay so bitterly for their insolence yesterday, they were detained by the blonde and red-haired giants of the Uermanian body-guard, whose leader, Sabinus, a Thracian of exceptional height and strength, was acquainted with the philosopher.

Caracalla had given orders that no one was to be admitted till the negotiations with the Parthian ambassadors, which had begun an hour ago, were brought to a conclusion. Philostratus well knew that the emperor would interrupt the most important business if Melissa were announced, but there was much that he would have the maiden lay to heart before he led her to the monarch; while she wished for nothing so earnestly as that the door which separated her from her terrible wooer might remain closed to the end of time. When the chamberlain Adventus looked out from the imperial apartments, she begged him to give her a little time before announcing her.

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