

GEORG EBERS

UARDA : A ROMANCE OF
ANCIENT EGYPT.

VOLUME 10

Georg Ebers

**Uarda : a Romance of
Ancient Egypt. Volume 10**

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CHAPTER XLII

The cloudless vault of heaven spread over the plain of Pelusium, the stars were bright, the moon threw her calm light over the thousands of tents which shone as white as little hillocks of snow. All was silent, the soldiers and the Egyptians, who had assembled to welcome the king, were now all gone to rest.

There had been great rejoicing and jollity in the camp; three enormous vats, garlanded with flowers and overflowing with wine, which spilt with every movement of the trucks on which they were drawn by thirty oxen, were sent up and down the little streets of tents, and as the evening closed in tavern-booths were erected in many spots in the camp, at which the Regent's servants supplied the soldiers with red and white wine. The tents of the populace were only divided from the pavilion of the Pharaoh by the hastily-constructed garden in the midst of which it stood, and the hedge which enclosed it.

The tent of the Regent himself was distinguished from all the others by its size and magnificence; to the right of it was the encampment of the different priestly deputations, to the left that of his suite; among the latter were the tents of his friend Katuti, a large one for her own use, and some smaller ones for her servants. Behind Ani's pavilion stood a tent, enclosed in a wall or screen of canvas, within which old Hekt was lodged; Ani had secretly conveyed her hither on board his own boat. Only Katuti and his confidential servants knew who it was that lay concealed in the mysteriously shrouded abode.

While the banquet was proceeding in the great pavilion, the witch was sitting in a heap on the sandy earth of her conical canvas dwelling; she breathed with difficulty, for a weakness of the heart, against which she had long struggled, now oppressed her more frequently and severely; a little lamp of clay burned before her, and on her lap crouched a sick and ruffled hawk; the creature shivered from time to time, closing the filmy lids of his keen eyes, which glowed with a dull fire when Hekt took him up in her withered hand, and tried to blow some air into his hooked beak, still ever ready to peck and tear her.

At her feet little Scherai lay asleep. Presently she pushed the child with her foot. "Wake up," she said, as he raised himself still half asleep. "You have young ears—it seemed to me that I heard a woman scream in Ani's tent. Do you hear any thing?"

"Yes, indeed," exclaimed the little one. "There is a noise like crying, and that—that was a scream! It came from out there, from Nemu's tent."

"Creep through there," said the witch, "and see what is happening!"

The child obeyed: Hekt turned her attention again to the bird, which no longer perched in her lap, but lay on one side, though it still tried to use its talons, when she took him up in her hand.

"It is all over with him," muttered the old woman, "and the one I called Rameses is sleeker than ever. It is all folly and yet—and yet! the Regent's game is over, and he has lost it. The creature is stretching itself—its head drops—it draws itself up—one more clutch at my dress—now it is dead!"

She contemplated the dead hawk in her lap for some minutes, then she took it up, flung it into a corner of the tent, and exclaimed:

"Good-bye, King Ani. The crown is not for you!" Then she went on: "What project has he in hand now, I wonder? Twenty times he has asked me whether the great enterprise will succeed; as if

I knew any more than he! And Nemu too has hinted all kinds of things, though he would not speak out. Something is going on, and I—and I? There it comes again."

The old woman pressed her hand to her heart and closed her eyes, her features were distorted with pain; she did not perceive Scherau's return, she did not hear him call her name, or see that, when she did not answer him, he left her again. For an hour or more she remained unconscious, then her senses returned, but she felt as if some ice-cold fluid slowly ran through her veins instead of the warm blood.

"If I had kept a hawk for myself too," she muttered, "it would soon follow the other one in the corner! If only Ani keeps his word, and has me embalmed!

"But how can he when he too is so near his end. They will let me rot and disappear, and there will be no future for me, no meeting with Assa."

The old woman remained silent for a long time; at last she murmured hoarsely with her eyes fixed on the ground:

"Death brings release, if only from the torment of remembrance. But there is a life beyond the grave. I do not, I will not cease to hope. The dead shall all be equally judged, and subject to the inscrutable decrees.—Where shall I find him? Among the blest, or among the damned? And I? It matters not! The deeper the abyss into which they fling me the better. Can Assa, if he is among the blest, remain in bliss, when he sees to what he has brought me? Oh! they must embalm me—I cannot bear to vanish, and rot and evaporate into nothingness!"

While she was still speaking, the dwarf Nemu had come into the tent; Scherau, seeing the old woman senseless, had run to tell him that his mother was lying on the earth with her eyes shut, and was dying. The witch perceived the little man.

"It is well," she said, "that you have come; I shall be dead before sunrise."

"Mother!" cried the dwarf horrified, "you shall live, and live better than you have done till now! Great things are happening, and for us!"

"I know, I know," said Hekt. "Go away, Scherau—now, Nemu, whisper in my ear what is doing?" The dwarf felt as if he could not avoid the influence of her eye, he went up to her, and said softly—"The pavilion, in which the king and his people are sleeping, is constructed of wood; straw and pitch are built into the walls, and laid under the boards. As soon as they are gone to rest we shall set the tinder thing on fire. The guards are drunk and sleeping."

"Well thought of," said Hekt. "Did you plan it?" "I and my mistress," said the dwarf not without pride. "You can devise a plot," said the old woman, "but you are feeble in the working out. Is your plan a secret? Have you clever assistants?"

"No one knows of it," replied the dwarf, "but Katuti, Paaker, and I; we three shall lay the brands to the spots we have fixed upon. I am going to the rooms of Bent-Anat; Katuti, who can go in and out as she pleases, will set fire to the stairs, which lead to the upper story, and which fall by touching a spring; and Paaker to the king's apartments."

"Good-good, it may succeed," gasped the old woman. "But what was the scream in your tent?" The dwarf seemed doubtful about answering; but Hekt went on:

"Speak without fear—the dead are sure to be silent." The dwarf, trembling with agitation, shook off his hesitation, and said:

"I have found Uarda, the grandchild of Pinem, who had disappeared, and I decoyed her here, for she and no other shall be my wife, if Ani is king, and if Katuti makes me rich and free. She is in the service of the Princess Bent-Anat, and sleeps in her anteroom, and she must not be burnt with her mistress. She insisted on going back to the palace, so, as she would fly to the fire like a gnat, and I would not have her risk being burnt, I tied her up fast."

"Did she not struggle?" said Hekt.

"Like a mad thing," said the dwarf. "But the Regent's dumb slave, who was ordered by his master to obey me in everything to-day, helped me. We tied up her mouth that she might not be heard screaming!"

"Will you leave her alone when you go to do your errand?"

"Her father is with her!"

"Kaschta, the red-beard?" asked the old woman in surprise. "And did he not break you in pieces like an earthenware pot?"

"He will not stir," said Nemu laughing. "For when I found him, I made him so drunk with Ani's old wine that he lies there like a mummy. It was from him that I learned where Uarda was, and I went to her, and got her to come with me by telling her that her father was very ill, and begged her to go to see him once more. She flew after me like a gazelle, and when she saw the soldier lying there senseless she threw herself upon him, and called for water to cool his head, for he was raving in his dreams of rats and mice that had fallen upon him. As it grew late she wanted to return to her mistress, and we were obliged to prevent her. How handsome she has grown, mother; you cannot imagine how pretty she is."

"Aye, aye!" said Hekt. "You will have to keep an eye upon her when she is your wife."

"I will treat her like the wife of a noble," said Nemu. "And pay a real lady to guard her. But by this time Katuti has brought home her daughter, Mena's wife; the stars are sinking and—there—that was the first signal. When Katuti whistles the third time we are to go to work. Lend me your fire-box, mother."

"Take it," said Hekt. "I shall never need it again. It is all over with me! How your hand shakes! Hold the wood firmly, or you will drop it before you have brought the fire."

The dwarf bid the old woman farewell, and she let him kiss her without moving. When he was gone, she listened eagerly for any sound that might pierce the silence of the night, her eyes shone with a keen light, and a thousand thoughts flew through her restless brain. When she heard the second signal on Katuti's silver whistle, she sat upright and muttered:

"That gallows-bird Paaker, his vain aunt and that villain Ani, are no match for Rameses, even when he is asleep. Ani's hawk is dead; he has nothing to hope for from Fortune, and I nothing to hope for from him. But if Rameses—if the real king would promise me—then my poor old body — Yes, that is the thing, that is what I will do."

She painfully raised herself on her feet with the help of her stick, she found a knife and a small flask which she slipped into her dress, and then, bent and trembling, with a last effort of her remaining strength she dragged herself as far as Nemu's tent. Here she found Uarda bound hand and foot, and Kaschta lying on the ground in a heavy drunken slumber.

The girl shrank together in alarm when she saw the old woman, and Scherau, who crouched at her side, raised his hands imploringly to the witch.

"Take this knife, boy," she said to the little one. "Cut the ropes the poor thing is tied with. The papyrus cords are strong, saw them with the blade."

[Papyrus was used not only for writing on, but also for ropes. The bridge of boats on which Xerxes crossed the Hellespont was fastened with cables of papyrus.]

While the boy eagerly followed her instructions with all his little might, she rubbed the soldier's temples with an essence which she had in the bottle, and poured a few drops of it between his lips. Kaschta came to himself, stretched his limbs, and stared in astonishment at the place in which he found himself. She gave him some water, and desired him to drink it, saying, as Uarda shook herself free from the bonds:

"The Gods have predestined you to great things, you white maiden. Listen to what I, old Hekt, am telling you. The king's life is threatened, his and his children's; I purpose to save them, and I ask

no reward but this- that he should have my body embalmed and interred at Thebes. Swear to me that you will require this of him when you have saved him."

"In God's name what is happening?" cried Uarda. "Swear that you will provide for my burial," said the old woman.

"I swear it!" cried the girl. "But for God's sake—"

"Katuti, Paaker, and Nemu are gone to set fire to the palace when Rameses is sleeping, in three places. Do you hear, Kaschta! Now hasten, fly after the incendiaries, rouse the servants, and try to rescue the king."

"Oh fly, father," cried the girl, and they both rushed away in the darkness.

"She is honest and will keep her word," muttered Hekt, and she tried to drag herself back to her own tent; but her strength failed her half-way. Little Scherau tried to support her, but he was too weak; she sank down on the sand, and looked out into the distance. There she saw the dark mass of the palace, from which rose a light that grew broader and broader, then clouds of black smoke, then up flew the soaring flame, and a swarm of glowing sparks.

"Run into the camp, child," she cried, "cry fire, and wake the sleepers."

Scherau ran off shouting as loud as he could.

The old woman pressed her hand to her side, she muttered: "There it is again."

"In the other world—Assa—Assa," and her trembling lips were silent for ever.

CHAPTER XLIII

Katuti had kept her unfortunate nephew Paaker concealed in one of her servants' tents. He had escaped wounded from the battle at Kadesh, and in terrible pain he had succeeded, by the help of an ass which he had purchased from a peasant, in reaching by paths known to hardly any one but himself, the cave where he had previously left his brother. Here he found his faithful Ethiopian slave, who nursed him till he was strong enough to set out on his journey to Egypt. He reached Pelusium, after many privations, disguised as an Ismaelite camel-driver; he left his servant, who might have betrayed him, behind in the cave.

Before he was permitted to pass the fortifications, which lay across the isthmus which parts the Mediterranean from the Red Sea, and which were intended to protect Egypt from the incursions of the nomad tribes of the Chasu, he was subjected to a strict interrogatory, and among other questions was asked whether he had nowhere met with the traitor Paaker, who was minutely described to him. No one recognized in the shrunken, grey-haired, one-eyed camel-driver, the broad-shouldered, muscular and thick-legged pioneer. To disguise himself the more effectually, he procured some hair-dye—a cosmetic known in all ages—and blackened himself.

[In my papyrus there are several recipes for the preparation of hair-dye; one is ascribed to the Lady Schesch, the mother of Teta, wife of the first king of Egypt. The earliest of all the recipes preserved to us is a prescription for dyeing the hair.]

Katuti had arrived at Pelusium with Ani some time before, to superintend the construction of the royal pavilion. He ventured to approach her disguised as a negro beggar, with a palm-branch in his hand. She gave him some money and questioned him concerning his native country, for she made it her business to secure the favor even of the meanest; but though she appeared to take an interest in his answers, she did not recognize him; now for the first time he felt secure, and the next day he went up to her again, and told her who he was.

The widow was not unmoved by the frightful alteration in her nephew, and although she knew that even Ani had decreed that any intercourse with the traitor was to be punished by death, she took him at once into her service, for she had never had greater need than now to employ the desperate enemy of the king and of her son-in-law.

The mutilated, despised, and hunted man kept himself far from the other servants, regarding the meaner folk with undiminished scorn. He thought seldom, and only vaguely of Katuti's daughter, for love had quite given place to hatred, and only one thing now seemed to him worth living for—the hope of working with others to cause his enemies' downfall, and of being the instrument of their death; so he offered himself to the widow a willing and welcome tool, and the dull flash in his uninjured eye when she set him the task of setting fire to the king's apartments, showed her that in the Mohar she had found an ally she might depend on to the uttermost.

Paaker had carefully examined the scene of his exploit before the king's arrival. Under the windows of the king's rooms, at least forty feet from the ground, was a narrow parapet resting on the ends of the beams which supported the rafters on which lay the floor of the upper story in which the king slept. These rafters had been smeared with pitch, and straw had been laid between them, and the pioneer would have known how to find the opening where he was to put in the brand even if he had been blind of both eyes.

When Katuti first sounded her whistle he slunk to his post; he was challenged by no watchman, for the few guards who had been placed in the immediate vicinity of the pavilion, had all gone to sleep under the influence of the Regent's wine. Paaker climbed up to about the height of two men from the ground by the help of the ornamental carving on the outside wall of the palace; there a rope ladder

was attached, he clambered up this, and soon stood on the parapet, above which were the windows of the king's rooms, and below which the fire was to be laid.

Rameses' room was brightly illuminated. Paaker could see into it without being seen, and could bear every word that was spoken within. The king was sitting in an arm-chair, and looked thoughtfully at the ground; before him stood the Regent, and Mena stood by his couch, holding in his hand the king's sleeping-robe.

Presently Rameses raised his head, and said, as he offered his hand with frank affection to Ani:

"Let me bring this glorious day to a worthy end, cousin. I have found you my true and faithful friend, and I had been in danger of believing those over-anxious counsellors who spoke evil of you. I am never prone to distrust, but a number of things occurred together that clouded my judgment, and I did you injustice. I am sorry, sincerely sorry; nor am I ashamed to apologize to you for having for an instant doubted your good intentions. You are my good friend—and I will prove to you that I am yours. There is my hand—take it; and all Egypt shall know that Rameses trusts no man more implicitly than his Regent Ani. I will ask you to undertake to be my guard of honor to-night—we will share this room. I sleep here; when I lie down on my couch take your place on the divan yonder." Ani had taken Rameses' offered hand, but now he turned pale as he looked down. Paaker could see straight into his face, and it was not without difficulty that he suppressed a scornful laugh.

Rameses did not observe the Regent's dismay, for he had signed to Mena to come closer to him.

"Before I sleep," said the king, "I will bring matters to an end with you too. You have put your wife's constancy to a severe test, and she has trusted you with a childlike simplicity that is often wiser than the arguments of sages, because she loved you honestly, and is herself incapable of guile. I promised you that I would grant you a wish if your faith in her was justified. Now tell me what is your will?"

Mena fell on his knees, and covered the king's robe with kisses.

"Pardon!" he exclaimed. "Nothing but pardon. My crime was a heavy one, I know; but I was driven to it by scorn and fury—it was as if I saw the dishonoring hand of Paaker stretched out to seize my innocent wife, who, as I now know, loathes him as a toad—"

"What was that?" exclaimed the king. "I thought I heard a groan outside."

He went up to the window and looked out, but he did not see the pioneer, who watched every motion of the king, and who, as soon as he perceived that his involuntary sigh of anguish had been heard, stretched himself close under the balustrade. Mena had not risen from his knees when the king once more turned to him.

"Pardon me," he said again. "Let me be near thee again as before, and drive thy chariot. I live only through thee, I am of no worth but through thee, and by thy favor, my king, my lord, my father!"

Rameses signed to his favorite to rise. "Your request was granted," said he, "before you made it. I am still in your debt on your fair wife's account. Thank Nefert—not me, and let us give thanks to the Immortals this day with especial fervor. What has it not brought forth for us! It has restored to me you two friends, whom I regarded as lost to me, and has given me in Pentaur another son."

A low whistle sounded through the night air; it was Katuti's last signal.

Paaker blew up the tinder, laid it in the bole under the parapet, and then, unmindful of his own danger, raised himself to listen for any further words.

"I entreat thee," said the Regent, approaching Rameses, "to excuse me. I fully appreciate thy favors, but the labors of the last few days have been too much for me; I can hardly stand on my feet, and the guard of honor—"

"Mena will watch," said the king. "Sleep in all security, cousin. I will have it known to all men that I have put away from me all distrust of you. Give me my night-robe, Mena. Nay—one thing more I must tell you. Youth smiles on the young, Ani. Bent-Anat has chosen a worthy husband, my preserver, the poet Pentaur. He was said to be a man of humble origin, the son of a gardener of the House of Seti; and now what do I learn through Ameni? He is the true son of the dead Mohar, and the foul

traitor Paaker is the gardener's son. A witch in the Necropolis changed the children. That is the best news of all that has reached me on this propitious day, for the Mohar's widow, the noble Setchem, has been brought here, and I should have been obliged to choose between two sentences on her as the mother of the villain who has escaped us. Either I must have sent her to the quarries, or have had her beheaded before all the people—In the name of the Gods, what is that?"

They heard a loud cry in a man's voice, and at the same instant a noise as if some heavy mass had fallen to the ground from a great height. Rameses and Mena hastened to the window, but started back, for they were met by a cloud of smoke.

"Call the watch!" cried the king.

"Go, you," exclaimed Mena to Ani. "I will not leave the king again in danger."

Ani fled away like an escaped prisoner, but he could not get far, for, before he could descend the stairs to the lower story, they fell in before his very eyes; Katuti, after she had set fire to the interior of the palace, had made them fall by one blow of a hammer. Ani saw her robe as she herself fled, clenched his fist with rage as he shouted her name, and then, not knowing what he did, rushed headlong through the corridor into which the different royal apartments opened.

The fearful crash of the falling stairs brought the King and Mena also out of the sleeping-room.

"There lie the stairs! that is serious!" said the king coolly; then he went back into his room, and looked out of a window to estimate the danger. Bright flames were already bursting from the northern end of the palace, and gave the grey dawn the brightness of day; the southern wing or the pavilion was not yet on fire. Mena observed the parapet from which Paaker had fallen to the ground, tested its strength, and found it firm enough to bear several persons. He looked round, particularly at the wing not yet gained by the flames, and exclaimed in a loud voice:

"The fire is intentional! it is done on purpose. See there! a man is squatting down and pushing a brand into the woodwork."

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