

GEORG EBERS

HOMO SUM.

VOLUME 03

Georg Ebers

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CHAPTER X

Within a few minutes after Hermas had flung himself out of window into the roadway, Phoebicius walked into his sleeping-room. Sirona had had time to throw herself on to her couch; she was terribly frightened, and had turned her face to the wall. Did he actually know that some one had been with her? And who could have betrayed her, and have called him home? Or could he have come home by accident sooner than usual?

It was dark in the room, and he could not see her face, and yet she kept her eyes shut as if asleep, for every fraction of a minute in which she could still escape seeing him in his fury seemed a reprieve; and yet her heart beat so violently that it seemed to her that he must hear it, when he approached the bed with a soft step that was peculiar to him. She heard him walk up and down, and at last go into the kitchen that adjoined the sleeping-room. In a few moments she perceived through her half-closed eyes, that he, had brought in a light; he had lighted a lamp at the hearth, and now searched both the rooms.

As yet he had not spoken to her, nor opened his lips to utter a word.

Now he was in the sitting-room, and now—involuntarily she drew herself into a heap, and pulled the coverlet over her head—now he laughed aloud, so loud and scornfully, that she felt her hands and feet turn cold, and a rushing crimson mist floated before her eyes. Then the light came back into the bed-room, and came nearer and nearer. She felt her head pushed by his hard hand, and with a feeble scream she flung off the coverlet and sat up.

Still he did not speak a word, but what she saw was quite enough to smother the last spark of her courage and hope, for her husband's eyes showed only the whites, his sallow features were ashy-pale, and on his brow the branded mark of Mithras stood out more clearly than ever. In his right hand he held the lamp, in his left Hermas' sheepskin.

As his haggard eye met hers he held the anchorite's matted garment so close to her face, that it touched her. Then he threw it violently on the floor, and asked in a low, husky voice, "What is that?"

She was silent. He went up to the little table near her bed; on it stood her night-draught in a pretty colored glass, that Polykarp had brought her from Alexandria as a token, and with the back of his hand he swept it from the table, so that it fell on the dais, and flew with a crash into a thousand fragments. She screamed, the greyhound sprang up and barked at the Gaul. He seized the little beast's collar, and flung it so violently across the room, that it uttered a pitiful cry of pain. The dog had belonged to Sirona since she was quite a girl, it had come with her to Rome, and from thence to the oasis; it clung to her with affection, and she to it, for Iambe liked no one to caress and stroke her so much as her mistress. She was so much alone, and the greyhound was always with her, and not only entertained her by such tricks as any other dog might have learned, but was to her a beloved, dumb, but by no means deaf, companion from her early home, who would prick its ears when she spoke the name of her dear little sisters in distant Arelas, from whom she had not heard for years; or it would look sadly in her face, and kiss her white hands, when longing forced tears into her eyes.

In her solitary, idle, childless existence Iambe was much, very much, to her, and now as she saw her faithful companion and friend creep ill-treated and whining up to her bed—as the supple animal tried in vain to spring up and take refuge in her lap, and held out to his mistress his trembling, perhaps broken, little paw, fear vanished from the miserable young woman's heart—she sprang from her couch, took the little dog in her arms, and exclaimed with a glance, which flashed with anything rather than fear or repentance: "You do not touch the poor little beast again, if you take my advice."

"I will drown it to-morrow morning," replied Phoebicius with perfect indifference, but with an evil smile on his flaccid lips. "So many two-legged lovers make themselves free to my house, that I do not see why I should share your affections with a quadruped into the bargain. How came this sheepskin here?" Sirona vouchsafed no answer to this last question, but she exclaimed in great excitement, "By God—by your God—by the mighty Rock, and by all the gods! if you do the little beast a harm, it will be the last day I stop in your house."

"Hear her!" said the centurion, "and where do you propose to travel to? The desert is wide and there is room and to spare to starve in it, and for your bones to bleach there. How grieved your lovers would be—for their sakes I will take care before drowning the dog to lock in its mistress."

"Only try to touch me," screamed Sirona beside herself, and springing to the window. "If you lay a finger on me, I will call for help, and Dorothea and her husband will protect me against you."

"Hardly," answered Phoebicius drily. "It would suit you no doubt to find yourself under the same roof as that great boy who brings you colored glass, and throws roses into your window, and perhaps has strewed the road with them by which he found his way to you to-day. But there are nevertheless laws which protect the Roman citizen from criminals and impudent seducers. You were always a great deal too much in the house over there, and you have exchanged your games with the little screaming beggars for one with the grownup child, the rose-thrower-the fop, who, for your sake, and not to be recognized, covers up his purple coat with a sheepskin! Do you think, you can teach me anything about lovesick night-wanderers and women?"

"I see through it all! Not one step do you set henceforth across Petrus' threshold. There is the open window—scream—scream as loud as you will, and let all the people know of your disgrace. I have the greatest mind to carry this sheepskin to the judge, the first thing in the morning. I shall go now, and set the room behind the kitchen in order for you; there is no window there through which men in sheepskin can get in to my house. You shall live there till you are tamed, and kiss my feet, and confess what has been going on here to-night. I shall learn nothing from the senator's slaves, that I very well know; for you have turned all their heads too—they grin with delight when they see you. All friends are made welcome by you, even when they wear nothing but sheepskin. But they may do what they please—I have the right keeper for you in my own hand. I am going at once—you may scream if you like, but I should myself prefer that you should keep quiet. As to the dog, we have not yet heard the last of the matter; for the present I will keep him here. If you are quiet and come to your senses, he may live for aught I care; but if you are refractory, a rope and a stone can soon be found, and the stream runs close below. You know I never jest—least of all just now."

Sirona's whole frame was in the most violent agitation. Her breath came quickly, her limbs trembled, but she could not find words to answer him.

Phoebicius saw what was passing in her mind, and he went on, "You may snort proudly now; but an hour will come when you will crawl up to me like your lame dog, and pray for mercy. I have another idea—you will want a couch in the dark room, and it must be soft, or I shall be blamed; I will spread out the sheepskin for you. You see I know how to value your adorer's offerings."

The Gaul laughed loud, seized the hermit's garment, and went with the lamp into the dark room behind the kitchen, in which vessels and utensils of various sorts were kept. These he set on one side to turn it into a sleeping-room for his wife, of whose guilt he was fully convinced.

Who the man was for whose sake she had dishonored him, he knew not, for Miriam had said nothing more than, "Go home, your wife is laughing with her lover."

While her husband was still threatening and storming, Sirona had said to herself, that she would rather die than live any longer with this man. That she herself was not free from fault never occurred to her mind. He who is punished more severely than he deserves, easily overlooks his own fault in his feeling of the judge's injustice.

Phoebicius was right; neither Petrus nor Dorothea had it in their power to protect her against him, a Roman citizen. If she could not contrive to help her self she was a prisoner, and without air,

light, and freedom she could not live. During his last speech her resolution had been quickly matured, and hardly had he turned his back and crossed the threshold, than she hurried up to her bed, wrapped the trembling greyhound in the coverlet, took it in her arms like a child, and ran into the sitting-room with her light burden; the shutters were still open of the window through which Hermas had fled into the open. With the help of a stool she took the same way, let herself slip down from the sill into the street, and hastened on without aim or goal—inspired only by the wish to escape durance in the dark room, and to burst every bond that tied her to her hated mate—up the church-hill and along the road which lead over the mountain to the sea.

Phoebicius gave her a long start, for after having arranged her prison he remained some time in the little room behind the kitchen, not in order to give her time, collect his thoughts or to reflect on his future action, but simply because he felt utterly exhausted.

The centurion was nearly sixty years of age, and his frame, originally a powerful one, was now broken by every sort of dissipation, and could no longer resist the effects of the strain and excitement of this night.

The lean, wiry, and very active man did not usually fall into these fits of total enervation excepting in the daytime, for after sundown a wonderful change would come over the gray-headed veteran, who nevertheless still displayed much youthful energy in the exercise of his official duties. At night his drooping eyelids, that almost veiled his eyes, opened more wildly, his flaccid hanging under-lip closed firmly, his long neck and narrow elongated head were held erect, and when, at a later hour, he went out to drinking-bouts or to the service in honor of Mithras, he might often still be taken for a fine, indomitable young man.

But when he was drunk he was no longer gay, but wild, braggart, and noisy. It frequently happened that before he left the carouse, while he was still in the midst of his boon-companions, the syncope would come upon him which had so often alarmed Sirona, and from which he could never feel perfectly safe even when he was on duty at the head of his soldiers.

The vehement big man in such moments offered a terrible image of helpless impotence; the paleness of death would overspread his features, his back was as if it were broken, and he lost his control over every limb. His eyes only continued to move, and now and then a shudder shook his frame. His people said that when he was in this condition, the centurion's ghastly demon had entered into him, and he himself believed in this evil spirit, and dreaded it; nay, he had attempted to be released through heathen spells, and even through Christian exorcisms. Now he sat in the dark room on the sheepfell, which in scorn of his wife he had spread on a hard wooden bench. His hands and feet turned cold, his eyes glowed, and the power to move even a finger had wholly deserted him; only his lips twitched, and his inward eye, looking back on the past with preternaturally sharpened vision, saw, far away and beyond, the last frightful hour.

"If," thought he, "after my mad run down to the oasis, which few younger men could have vied with, I had given the reins to my fury instead of restraining it, the demon would not have mastered me so easily. How that devil Miriam's eyes flashed as she told me that a man was betraying me. She certainly must have seen the wearer of the sheepskin, but I lost sight of her before I reached the oasis; I fancy she turned and went up the mountain. What indeed might not Sirona have done to her? That woman snares all hearts with her eyes as a bird-catcher snares birds with his flute. How the fine gentlemen ran after her in Rome! Did she dishonor me there, I wonder? She dismissed the Legate Quintillus, who was so anxious to please me—I may thank that fool of a woman that he became my enemy—but he was older even than I, and she likes young men best. She is like all the rest of them, and I of all men might have known it. It is the way of the world: to-day one gives a blow and to-morrow takes one."

A sad smile passed over his lips, then his features settled into a stern gravity, for various unwelcome images rose clearly before his mind, and would not be got rid of.

His conscience stood in inverse relation to the vigor of his body. When he was well, his too darkly stained past life troubled him little; but when he was unmanned by weakness, he was incapable of fighting the ghastly demon that forced upon his memory in painful vividness those very deeds which he would most willingly have forgotten. In such hours he must need remember his friend, his benefactor, and superior officer, the Tribune Servianus, whose fair young wife he had tempted with a thousand arts to forsake her husband and child, and fly with him into the wide world; and at this moment a bewildering illusion made him fancy that he was the Tribune Servianus, and yet at the same time himself. Every hour of pain, and the whole bitter anguish that his betrayed benefactor had suffered through his act when he had seduced Glycera, he himself now seemed to realize, and at the same time the enemy that had betrayed him, Servianus, was none other than himself, Phoebicius, the Gaul. He tried to protect himself and meditated revenge against the seducer, and still he could not altogether lose the sense of his own identity.

This whirl of mad imagining, which he vainly endeavored to make clear to himself, threatened to distract his reason, and he groaned aloud; the sound of his own voice brought him back to actuality.

He was Phoebicius again and not another, that he knew now, and yet he could not completely bring himself to comprehend the situation. The image of the lovely Glycera, who had followed him to Alexandria, and whom he had there abandoned, when he had squandered his last piece of money and her last costly jewels in the Greek city, no longer appeared to him alone, but always side by side with his wife Sirona.

Glycera had been a melancholy sweetheart, who had wept much, and laughed little after running away from her husband; he fancied he could hear her speaking soft words of reproach, while Sirona defied him with loud threats, and dared to nod and signal to the senator's son Polykarp.

The weary dreamer angrily shook himself, collected his thoughts, doubled his fist, and lifted it angrily; this movement was the first sign of returning physical energy; he stretched his limbs like a man awaking from sleep, rubbed his eyes, pressed his hands to his temples; by degrees full consciousness returned to him, and with it the recollection of all that had occurred in the last hour or two.

He hastily left the dark room, refreshed himself in the kitchen with a gulp of wine, and went up to the open window to gaze at the stars.

It was long past midnight; he was reminded of his companions now sacrificing on the mountain, and addressed a long prayer "to the crown," "the invincible sun-god," "the great light," "the god begotten of the rock," and to many other names of Mithras; for since he had belonged to the mystics of this divinity, he had become a zealous devotee, and could fast too with extraordinary constancy. He had already passed through several of the eighty trials, to which a man had to subject himself before he could attain to the highest grades of the initiated, and the weakness which had just now overpowered him, had attacked him for the first time, after he had for a whole week lain for hours in the snow, besides fasting severely, in order to attain the grade of "lion."

Sirona's rigorous mind was revolted by all these practices, and the decision with which she had always refused to take any part in them, had widened the breach which, without that, parted her from her husband. Phoebicius was, in his fashion, very much in earnest with all these things; for they alone saved him in some measure from himself, from dark memories, and from the fear of meeting the reward of his evil deeds in a future life, while Sirona found her best comfort in the remembrance of her early life, and so gathered courage to endure the miserable present cheerfully, and to hold fast to hope for better times.

Phoebicius ended his prayer to-day—a prayer for strength to break his wife's strong spirit, for a successful issue to his revenge on her seducer—ended it without haste, and with careful observance of all the prescribed forms. Then he took two strong ropes from the wall, pulled himself up, straight and proud, as if he were about to exhort his soldiers to courage before a battle, cleared his throat like an orator in the Forum before he begins his discourse, and entered the bedroom with a dignified demeanor. Not the smallest suspicion of the possibility of her escape troubled his sense of security,

when, not finding Sirona in the sleeping-room, he went into the sitting-room to carry out the meditated punishment. Here again—no one.

He paused in astonishment; but the thought that she could have fled appeared to him so insane, that he immediately and decisively dismissed it. No doubt she feared his wrath, and was hidden under her bed or behind the curtain which covered his clothes. "The dog," thought he, "is still cowering by her—" and he began to make a noise, half whistling and half hissing, which Iambe could not bear, and which always provoked her to bark angrily—but in vain. All was still in the vacant room, still as death. He was now seriously anxious; at first deliberately, and then with rapid haste, he threw the light under every vessel, into every corner, behind every cloth, and rummaged in places that not even a child—nay hardly a frightened bird could have availed itself of for concealment. At last his right hand fairly dropped the ropes, and his left, in which he held the lamp, began to tremble. He found the shutters of the sleeping-room open; where Sirona had been sitting on the seat looking at the moon, before Hermas had come upon the scene. "Then she is not here!" he muttered, and setting the lamp on the little table, from which he had just now flung Polykarp's glass, he tore open the door, and hurried into the courtyard. That she could have swung herself out into the road, and have set out in the night for the open desert, had not yet entered into his mind. He shook the door that closed in the homestead, and found it locked; the watch-dogs roused themselves, and gave tongue, when Phoebicius turned to Petrus' house, and began to knock at the door with the brazen knocker, at first softly and then with growing anger; he considered it as certain that his wife had sought and found protection under the senator's roof. He could have shouted with rage and anguish, and yet he hardly thought of his wife and the danger of losing her, but only of Polykarp and the disgrace he had wrought upon him, and the reparation he would exact from him, and his parents, who had dared to tamper with his household rights—his, the imperial centurion's.

What was Sirona to him? In the flush of an hour of excitement he had linked her destiny to his.

At Arelas, about two years since, one of his comrades had joined their circle of boon-companions, and had related that he had been the witness of a remarkable scene. A number of young fellows had surrounded a boy and had unmercifully beaten him—he himself knew not wherefore. The little one had defended himself bravely, but was at last overcome by numbers. "Then suddenly," continued the soldier, "the door of a house near the circus opened, and a young girl with long golden hair flew out, and drove the boys to flight, and released the victim, her brother, from his tormentors. She looked like a lioness," cried the narrator, "Sirona she is called, and of all the pretty girls of Arelas, she is beyond a doubt the prettiest." This opinion was confirmed on all sides, and Phoebicius, who at that time had just been admitted to the grade of "lion" among the worshippers of Mithras, and liked very well to hear himself called "the lion," exclaimed, "I have long been seeking a lioness, and here it seems to me that I have found one. Phoebicius and Sirona—the two names sound very finely together."

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