GEORG EBERS

THE EMPEROR. VOLUME 06

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I

Dame Hannah had watched by Selene till sunrise and indefatigably cooled both her injured foot and the wound in her head. The old physician was not dissatisfied with the condition of his patient, but ordered the widow to lie down for a time and to leave the care of her for a few hours to her young friend. When Mary was alone with the sick girl and had laid the fresh cold handkerchief in its place, Selene turned her face towards her and said:

"Then you were at Lochias yesterday. Tell me how you found them all there. Who guided you to our lodgings and did you see my little brother and sisters?"

"You are not yet quite free of fever, and I do not know how much I ought to talk to you—but I would with all my heart."

The words were spoken kindly and there was a deep loving light in the eyes of the deformed girl as she said them. Selene excited not merely her sympathy and pity, but her admiration too, for she was so beautiful, so totally different from herself, and in every little service she rendered her, she felt like some despised beggar whom a prince might have permitted to wait

upon him. Her hump had never seemed to her so bent, nor her brown skin so ugly at any other time as it did to-day, when side by side with this symmetrical and delicate girlish form, rounded to such tender contours.

But Mary felt not the smallest movement of envy. She only felt happy to help Selene, to serve her, to be allowed to gaze at her although she was a heathen. During the night too, she had prayed fervently that the Lord might graciously draw to himself this lovely, gentle creature, that He might permit her to recover, and fill her soul with the same love for the Saviour that gave joy to her own. More than once she had longed to kiss her, but she dared not, for it seemed to her as though the sick girl were made of finer stuff than she herself.

Selene felt tired, very tired, and as the pain diminished, a comfortable sense stole over her of peace and respite in the silent and loving homeliness of her surroundings; a feeling that was new and very soothing, though it was interrupted, now and again, by her anxiety for those at home. Dame Hannah's presence did her good, for she fancied she recognized in her voice something that had been peculiar to her mother's, when she had played with her and pressed her with special affection to her heart.

In the papyrus factory, at the gumming-table, the sight of the little hunchback had disgusted Selene, but here she observed what good eyes she had, and how kind a voice, and the care with which Mary lifted the compress from her foot—as softly, as if in her own hands she felt the pain that Selene was suffering—

and then laid another on the broken ankle, aroused her gratitude. Her sister Arsinoe was a vain and thorough Alexandrian girl, and she had nicknamed the poor thing after the ugliest of the Hellenes who had besieged Troy. "Dame Thersites," and Selene herself had often repeated it. Now she forgot the insulting name altogether, and met the objections of her nurse by saying:

"The fever cannot be much now; if you tell me something I shall not think so constantly of this atrocious pain. I am longing to be at home. Did you see the children?"

"No, Selene. I went no farther than the entrance of your dwelling, and the kind gate-keeper's wife told me at once that I should find neither your father nor your sister, and that your slave-woman was gone out to buy cakes for the children."

"To buy them!" exclaimed Selene in astonishment. "The old woman told me too that the way to your apartments led through several rooms in which slaves were at work, and that her son, who happened to be with her, should accompany me, and so he did, but the door was locked, and he told me I might entrust his mother with my commission. I did so, for she looked as if she were both judicious and kind."

"That she is."

"And she is very fond of you, for when I told her of your sufferings the bright tears rolled down her cheeks, and she praised you as warmly, and was as much troubled as if you had been her own daughter."

"You said nothing about our working in the factory?" asked

Selene anxiously.

"Certainly not, you had desired me not to mention it. I was to say everything that was kind to you from the old lady."

For several minutes the two girls were silent, then Selene asked:

"Did the gate-keeper's son who accompanied you also hear of the disaster that had befallen me?

"Yes, on the way to your rooms he was full of fun and jokes, but when I told him that you had gone out with your damaged foot and now could not get home again, and were being treated by the leech, he was very angry and used blasphemous language."

"Can you remember what he said?"

"Not perfectly, but one thing I still recollect. He accused his gods of having created a beautiful work only to spoil it, nay he abused them" Mary looked down as she spoke, as if she were repeating something ill to tell, but Selene colored slightly with pleasure, and exclaimed eagerly, as if to outdo the sculptor in abuse:

"He is quite right, the powers above act in such a way—"

"That is not right," said the deformed girl reprovingly.

"What?" asked the patient. "Here you live quietly to yourselves in perfect peace and love. Many a word that I heard dame Hannah say has stuck in my mind, and I can see for myself that you act as kindly as you speak. The gods no doubt are good to you!"

"God is for each and all."

"What!" exclaimed Selene with flashing eyes. "For those

whose every pleasure they destroy? For the home of eight children whom they rob of their mother? For the poor whom they daily threaten to deprive of their bread-winner?"

"For them too, there is a merciful God," interrupted dame Hannah who had just come into the room. "I will lead you to the loving Father in Heaven who cares for us all as if we were His children; but not now—you must rest and neither talk nor hear of anything that can excite your fevered blood. Now I will rearrange the pillow under your head. Mary will wet a fresh compress and then you must try to sleep."

"I cannot," replied Selene, while Hannah shook her pillows and arranged them carefully. "Tell me about your God who loves us."

"By-and-bye, dear child. Seek Him and you will find Him, for of all His children He loves them best who suffer."

"Those who suffer?" asked Selene, in surprise. "What has a God in his Olympian joys to do with those who suffer?"

"Be quiet, child," interrupted Hannah, patting the sick girl with a soothing hand, "you soon will learn how God takes care of you and that Another loves you."

"Another," muttered Selene, and her cheeks turned crimson.

She thought at once of Pollux, and asked herself why the story of her sufferings should have moved him so deeply if he were not in love with her. Then she began to seek some colorable ground for what she had heard as she went past the screen behind which he had been working. He had never told her plainly that he loved

her. Why should he, an artist and a bright, high spirited young fellow, not be allowed to jest with a pretty girl, even if his heart belonged to another. No, she was not indifferent to him: that she had felt that night when she had stood as his model, and now—as she thought—I could guess, nay, feel sure of, from Mary's story.

The longer she thought of him, the more she began to long to see him whom she had loved so dearly even as a child. Her heart had never yet beat for any other man, but since she had met Pollux again in the hall of the Muses, his image had filled her whole soul, and what she now felt must be love—could be nothing else. Half awake, but half asleep, she pictured him to herself, entering this quiet room, sitting down by the head of her couch, and looking with his kind eyes into hers. Ah! and how could she help it—she sat up and opened her arms to him.

"Be still, my child, he still," said Hannah. "It is not good for you to move about so much."

Selene opened her eyes, but only to close them again and to dream for some time longer till she was startled from her rest by loud voices in the garden. Hannah left the room, and her voice presently mingled with those of the other persons outside, and when she returned her cheeks were flushed and she could not find fitting words in which to tell her patient what she had to say.

"A very big man, in the most outrageous dress," she said at last, "wanted to be let in; when the gatekeeper refused, he forced his way in. He asked for you."

"For me," said Selene, blushing.

"Yes, my child, he brought a large and beautiful nosegay of flowers, and said 'your friend at Lochias sends you his greeting.'"

"My friend at Lochias?" murmured thoughtfully Selene to herself. Then her eyes sparkled with gladness, and she asked quickly:

You said the man who brought the flowers was very tall."

"He was."

"Oh please, dame Hannah, let me see the flowers?" cried Selene, trying to raise herself.

"Have you a lover, child?" asked the widow.

"A lover?—no, but there is a young man with whom we always used to play when we were quite little—an artist, a kind, good man—and the nosegay must be from him."

Hannah looked with sympathy at the girl, and signing to Mary she said:

"The nosegay is a very large one. You may see it, but it must not remain in the room; the smell of so many flowers might do you harm."

Mary rose from her seat at the head of the bed, and whispered to the sick girl:

"Is that the tall gate-keeper's son?" Selene nodded, smiling, and as the women went away she changed her position from lying on one side, stretched herself out on her back, pressed her hand to her heart, and looked upwards with a deep sigh. There was a singing in her ears, and flashes of colored light seemed to dance before her closed eyes. She drew her breath with difficulty,

but still it seemed as though the air she drew in was full of the perfume of flowers.

Hannah and Mary carried in the enormous bunch of flowers. Selene's eyes shone more brightly, and she clasped her hands in admiration. Then she made them show her the lovely, richly-tinted and fragrant gift, first on one side and then on the other, buried her face in the flowers, and secretly kissed the delicate petals of a lovely, half-opened rose-bud. She felt as if intoxicated, and the bright tears flowed in slow succession down her cheeks. Mary was the first to detect the brooch stuck into the ribbons that tied the stems of the flowers. She unfastened it and showed it to Selene, who hastily took it out of her hand. Blushing deeper and deeper, she fixed her eyes on the intaglio carved on the stone of the love god sharpening his arrows. She felt her pain no more pain, she felt quite well, and at the same time glad, proud, too happy. Dame Hannah noted her excitement with much anxiety; she nodded to Mary and said:

"Now my daughter, this must do; we will place the flowers outside the window so that you may see them."

"Already," said Selene, in a regretful tone, and she broke off a few violets and roses from the crowded mass. When she was alone again, she laid the flowers down and once more tenderly contemplated the figures on the handsome gem. It had no doubt been engraved by Teuker, the brother of Pollux. How fine the carving was, how significant the choice of the subject represented! Only the heavy gold setting disturbed the poor

child, who for so many years had had to stint and contrive with her money. She said to herself that it was wrong of the young fellow, who, besides being poor, had to support his sister, to rush into such an outlay for her. But his gift gave her none the less pleasure, out of her own possessions nothing would have seemed too precious to give him. She would teach him to be saving by-and-bye.

The women presently returned after they had with much trouble set up the nosegay outside the window, and they renewed the wet handkerchief without speaking. She did not in the least want to talk, she was listening with so much pleasure to the fair promises which her fancy was making, and wherever she turned her eyes they fell on something she could love, The flowers on her bed, the brooch in her hand, the nosegay outside the window, and never dreaming that another—not the man she loved—could have sent it to her, another for whom she cared even less than for the Christians who walked up and down in Paulina's garden, under her window. There she lay, full of sweet contentment and secure of a love that had never been hers—of possessing the heart of a man who never once thought of her, but who, only a few hours since, had rushed off with her sister, intoxicated with joy and delight. Poor Selene!

And her next dreams were of untroubled happiness, but the minutes flew after each other, each bringing her nearer to waking—and what a waking!

Her father had not come, as he had intended, to see her before

going to the prefect's house with Arsinoe. His desire to conduct his daughter to Julia in a dress worthy of her prospects had detained him a long time, and even then he had not succeeded in his object. All the weavers, and the shops were closed, for every workman, whether slave or free, was taking part in the festivities, and when the hour fixed by the prefect drew near, his daughter was still sitting in her litter, in her simple white dress and her modest peplum, bound with blue ribbon, which looked even more insignificant by day than in the evening.

The nosegay which had been given to Arsinoe by Verus gave her much pleasure, for a girl is always pleased with beautiful flowers—nay, they have something in common. As she and her father approached the prefect's house Arsinoe grew frightened, and her father could not conceal his vexation at being obliged to take her to the lady Julia in so modest a garb. Nor was his gloomy humor at all enlivened when he was left to wait in the anteroom while Julia and the wife of Verus, aided by Balbilla chose for his daughter the finest colored and costliest stuffs of the softest wool, silk, and delicate bombyx tissue. This sort of occupation has this peculiarity, that the longer time it takes the more assistance is needed, and the steward had to submit to wait fully two hours in the prefect's anteroom, which gradually grew fuller and fuller of clients and visitors. At last Arsinoe came back all glowing and full of the beautiful things that were to be prepared for her.

Her father rose slowly from his easy seat, and as she hastened towards him the door opened, and through it came

Plutarch, freshly wreathed, freshly decked with flowers which were fastened to the breast-folds of his gallium, and lifted into the room by his two human crutches. Every one rose as he came in, and when Keraunus saw that the chief lawyer of the city, a man of ancient family, bowed before him, he did likewise. Plutarch's eyesight was stronger than his legs were, and where a pretty woman was to be seen, it was always very keen. He perceived Arsinoe as soon as he had crossed the threshold and waved both hands towards her, as if she were an old and favorite acquaintance.

The sweet child had quite bewitched him; in his younger days he would have given anything and everything to win her favor; now he was satisfied to make his favor pleasing to her; he touched her playfully two or three times on the arm and said gaily:

"Well pretty Roxana, has dame Julia done well with the dresses?"

"Oh! they have chosen such pretty, such really lovely things!" exclaimed the girl."

"Have they?" said Plutarch, to conceal by speech the fact that he was meditating on some subject; "Have they? and why should they not?"

Arsinoe's washed dress had caught the old man's eye, and remembering that Gabinius the curiosity-dealer had that very morning been to him to enquire whether Arsinoe were not in fact one of his work-girls, and to repeat his statement that her father was a beggarly toady, full of haughty airs, whose curiosities, of

which he contemptuously mentioned a few, were worth nothing, Plutarch was hastily asking himself how he could best defend his pretty protege against the envious tongues of her rivals; for many spiteful speeches of theirs had already come to his ears.

"Whatever the noble Julia undertakes is always admirably done," he said aloud, and he added in a whisper: "The day after to-morrow when the goldsmiths have opened their workshops again, I will see what I can find for you. I am falling in a heap, hold me up higher Antaeus and Atlas. So.—Yes, my child you look even better from up here than from a lower level. Is the stout man standing behind you your father?"

"Yes."

"Have you no mother?"

"She is dead."

"Oh!" said Plutarch in a tone of regret. Then turning to the steward he said:

"Accept my congratulations on having such a daughter Keraunus. I hear too that you have to supply a mother's place to her."

"Alas sir! she is very like my poor wife, since her death I live a joyless life."

"But I hear that you take pleasure in collecting rare and beautiful objects. This is a taste we have in common. Are you inclined to part with the cup that belonged to my namesake Plutarch? It must be a fine piece of work from what Gabinius tells me."

"That it is," replied the steward proudly. "It was a gift to the philosopher from Trajan; beautifully carved in ivory. I cannot bear to part with such a gem but," and as he spoke he lowered his voice. "I am under obligations to you, you have taken charge of my daughter's outfit and to offer you some return I will—"

"That is quite out of the question," interrupted Plutarch, who knew men, and who saw from the steward's pompous pretentiousness that the dealer had done him no injustice in describing him as overbearing. "You are doing me an honor by allowing me to contribute what I can towards decorating our Roxana. I beg you to send me the cup, and whatever price you put upon it, I, of course, shall pay, that is quite understood."

Keraunus had a brief internal conflict with himself. If he had not so sorely needed money, if he had not so keenly desired to see a young and comely slave walking behind him, he would have adhered to his purpose of presenting the cup to Plutarch; as it was he cleared his throat, looked at the ground, and said with an embarrassed manner and without a trace of his former confidence:

"I remain your debtor, and it seems you do not wish this business to be mixed up with other matters. Well then, I had two thousand drachmae for a sword that belonged to Antony."

"Then certainly," interrupted Plutarch, "the cup, the gift of Trajan, must be worth double, particularly to me who am related to the illustrious owner. May I offer you four thousand drachmae for your precious possession?"

"I am anxious to oblige you, and so I say yes," replied the steward with much dignity, and he squeezed Arsinoe's little finger, for she was standing close to him. Her hand had for some time been touching his in token of warning that he should adhere to his first intention of making the cup a present to Plutarch.

As the pair, so unlike each other, quitted the anteroom, Plutarch looked after them with a meaning smile and thought to himself: "That is well done. How little pleasure I generally have from my riches! How often when I see a sturdy porter I would willingly change places with him! But to-day I am glad to have as much money as I could wish. Sweet child! She must have a new dress of course for the sake of appearance, but really her beauty did not suffer from the washed-out rag of a dress. And she belongs to me, for I have seen her at the factory among the workwomen, of that I am certain."

Keraunus had gone out with his daughter and once outside the prefect's house, he could not help chuckling aloud, while he patted his daughter on the shoulder, and whispered to her:

"I told you so child! we shall be rich yet, we shall rise in life again and need not be behind the other citizens in any thing."

"Yes, father, but it is just because you believe that, that you ought to have given the cup to the old man."

"No," replied Keraunus, "business is business, but by and bye I will repay him tenfold for all he does for you now, by giving him my painting by Apelles. And Julia shall have the pair of sandal-straps set with cut- gems that came off a sandal of Cleopatra's."

Arsinoe looked down, for she knew what these treasures were worth, and said:

"We can consider all that later."

Then she and her father got into the litters that had been waiting for them, and without which Keraunus thought he could no longer exist, and they were carried to the garden of Pudeus' widow.

Their visit came to interrupt Selene's blissful dreams. Keraunus behaved with icy coldness to dame Hannah, for it afforded him a certain satisfaction to make a display of contempt for every thing Christian. When he expressed his regret that Selene should have been obliged to remain in her house, the widow replied:

"She is better here than in the street, at any rate." And when Keraunus went on to say that he would take nothing as a gift and would pay her for her care of his daughter, Hannah answered:

"We are happy to do all we can for your child, and Another will reward us."

"That I certainly forbid," exclaimed the steward wrathfully.

"We do not understand each other," said the Christian pleasantly. "I do not allude to any mortal being, and the reward we work for is not gold and possessions, but the happy consciousness of having mitigated the sufferings of a fellow-creature."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.