

GEORG EBERS

THE SISTERS.

VOLUME 3

Georg Ebers
The Sisters. Volume 3

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Georg Ebers

The Sisters – Volume 3

CHAPTER XII

While, in the vast peristyle, many a cup was still being emptied, and the carousers were growing merrier and noisier—while Cleopatra was abusing the maids and ladies who were undressing her for their clumsiness and unreadiness, because every touch hurt her, and every pin taken out of her dress pricked her—the Roman and his friend Lysias walked up and down in their tent in violent agitation.

"Speak lower," said the Greek, "for the very griffins woven into the tissue of these thin walls seem to me to be lying in wait, and listening.

"I certainly was not mistaken. When I came to fetch the gems I saw a light gleaming in the doorway as I approached it; but the intruder must have been warned, for just as I got up to the lantern in front of the servants' tent, it disappeared, and the torch which usually burns outside our tent had not been lighted at all; but a beam of light fell on the road, and a man's figure slipped across in a black robe sprinkled with gold ornaments which I saw glitter as the pale light of the lantern fell upon them—just as a slimy, black newt glides through a pool. I have good eyes as you know, and I will give one of them at this moment, if I am mistaken, and if the cat that stole into our tent was not Eulaeus."

"And why did you not have him caught?" asked Publius, provoked.

"Because our tent was pitch-dark," replied Lysias, and that stout villain is as slippery as a badger with the dogs at his heels, Owls, bats and such vermin which seek their prey by night are all hideous to me, and this Eulaeus, who grins like a hyaena when he laughs—"

"This Eulaeus," said Publius, interrupting his friend, "shall learn to know me, and know too by experience that a man comes to no good, who picks a quarrel with my father's son."

"But, in the first instance, you treated him with disdain and discourtesy," said Lysias, "and that was not wise."

"Wise, and wise, and wise!" the Roman broke out. "He is a scoundrel. It makes no difference to me so long as he keeps out of my way; but when, as has been the case for several days now, he constantly sticks close to me to spy upon me, and treats me as if he were my equal, I will show him that he is mistaken. He has no reason to complain of my want of frankness; he knows my opinion of him, and that I am quite inclined to give him a thrashing. If I wanted to meet his cunning with cunning I should get the worst of it, for he is far superior to me in intrigue. I shall fare better with him by my own unconcealed mode of fighting, which is new to him and puzzles him; besides it is better suited to my own nature, and more consonant to me than any other. He is not only sly, but is keen-witted, and he has at once connected the complaint which I have threatened to bring against him with the manuscript which Serapion, the recluse, gave me in his presence. There it lies—only look.

"Now, being not merely crafty, but a daring rascal too—two qualities which generally contradict each other, for no one who is really prudent lives in disobedience to the laws—he has secretly untied the strings which fastened it. But, you see, he had not time enough to tie the roll up again! He has read it all or in part, and I wish him joy of the picture of himself he will have found painted there. The anchorite wields a powerful pen, and paints with a firm outline and strongly marked coloring. If he has read the roll to the end it will spare me the trouble of explaining to him what I purpose to charge him with; if you disturbed him too soon I shall have to be more explicit in my accusation. Be that as it may, it is all the same to me."

"Nay, certainly not," cried Lysias, "for in the first case Eulaeus will have time to meditate his lies, and bribe witnesses for his defence. If any one entrusted me with such important papers—and

if it had not been you who neglected to do it—I would carefully seal or lock them up. Where have you put the despatch from the Senate which the messenger brought you just now?"

"That is locked up in this casket," replied Publius, moving his hand to press it more closely over his robe, under which he had carefully hidden it.

"May I not know what it contain?" asked the Corinthian.

"No, there is not time for that now, for we must first, and at once, consider what can be done to repair the last mischief which you have done. Is it not a disgraceful thing that you should betray the sweet creature whose childlike embarrassment charmed us this morning—of whom you yourself said, as we came home, that she reminded you of your lovely sister—that you should betray her, I say, into the power of the wildest of all the profligates I ever met—to this monster, whose pleasures are the unspeakable, whose boast is vice? What has Euergetes—"

"By great Poseidon!" cried Lysias, eagerly interrupting his friend. "I never once thought of this second Alcibiades when I mentioned her. What can the manager of a performance do, but all in his power to secure the applause of the audience? and, by my honor! it was for my own sake that I wanted to bring Irene into the palace—I am mad with love for her—she has undone me."

"Aye! like Callista, and Phryne, and the flute-player Stephanion," interrupted the Roman, shrugging his shoulders.

"How should it be different?" asked the Corinthian, looking at his friend in astonishment. "Eros has many arrows in his quiver; one strikes deeply, another less deeply; and I believe that the wound I have received to-day will ache for many a week if I have to give up this child, who is even more charming than the much-admired Hebe on our cistern."

"I advise you however to accustom yourself to the idea, and the sooner the better," said Publius gravely, as he set himself with his arms crossed, directly in front of the Greek. "What would you feel inclined to do to me if I took a fancy to lure your pretty sister—whom Irene, I repeat it, is said to resemble—to tempt her with base cunning from your parents' house?"

"I protest against any such comparison," cried the Corinthian very positively, and more genuinely exasperated than the Roman had ever seen him.

"You are angry without cause," replied Publius calmly and gravely. "Your sister is a charming girl, the ornament of your illustrious house, and yet I dare compare the humble Irene—"

"With her! do you mean to say?" Lysias shouted again. "That is a poor return for the hospitality which was shown to you by my parents and of which you formally sang the praises. I am a good-natured fellow and will submit to more from you than from any other man—I know not why, myself;—but in a matter like this I do not understand a joke! My sister is the only daughter of the noblest and richest house in Corinth and has many suitors. She is in no respect inferior to the child of your own parents, and I should like to know what you would say if I made so bold as to compare the proud Lucretia with this poor little thing, who carries water like a serving-maid."

"Do so, by all means!" interrupted Publius coolly, "I do not take your rage amiss, for you do not know who these two sisters are, in the temple of Serapis. Besides, they do not fill their jars for men but in the service of a god. Here—take this roll and read it through while I answer the despatch from Rome. Here! Spartacus, come and light a few more lamps."

In a few minutes the two young men were sitting opposite each other at the table which stood in the middle of their tent. Publius wrote busily, and only looked up when his friend, who was reading the anchorite's document, struck his hand on the table in disgust or sprang from his seat ejaculating bitter words of indignation. Both had finished at the same moment, and when Publius had folded and sealed his letter, and Lysias had flung the roll on to the table, the Roman said slowly, as he looked his friend steadily in the face: "Well?"

"Well!" repeated Lysias. "I now find myself in the humiliating position of being obliged to deem myself more stupid than you—I must own you in the right, and beg your pardon for having thought you insolent and arrogant! Never, no never did I hear a story so infernally scandalous as that in that

roll, and such a thing could never have occurred but among these accursed Egyptians! Poor little Irene! And how can the dear little girl have kept such a sunny look through it all! I could thrash myself like any school-boy to think that I—a fool among fools—should have directed the attention of Euergetes to this girl, and he, the most powerful and profligate man in the whole country. What can now be done to save Irene from him? I cannot endure the thought of seeing her abandoned to his clutches, and I will not permit it to happen.

"Do not you think that we ought to take the water-bearers under our charge?"

"Not only we ought but we must," said Publius decisively; "and if we did not we should be contemptible wretches. Since the recluse took me into his confidence I feel as if it were my, duty to watch over these girls whose parents have been stolen from them, as if I were their guardian—and you, my Lysias, shall help me. The elder sister is not now very friendly towards me, but I do not esteem her the less for that; the younger one seems less grave and reserved than Klea; I saw how she responded to your smile when the procession broke up. Afterwards, you did not come home immediately any more than I did, and I suspect that it was Irene who detained you. Be frank, I earnestly beseech you, and tell me all; for we must act in unison, and with thorough deliberation, if we hope to succeed in spoiling Euergetes' game."

"I have not much to tell you," replied the Corinthian. "After the procession I went to the Pastophorium—naturally it was to see Irene, and in order not to fail in this I allowed the pilgrims to tell me what visions the god had sent them in their dreams, and what advice had been given them in the temple of Asclepius as to what to do for their own complaints, and those of their cousins, male and female.

"Quite half an hour had passed so before Irene came. She carried a little basket in which lay the gold ornaments she had worn at the festival, and which she had to restore to the keeper of the temple-treasure. My pomegranate-flower, which she had accepted in the morning, shone upon me from afar, and then, when she caught sight of me and blushed all over, casting down her eyes, then it was that it first struck me 'just like the Hebe on our cistern.'

"She wanted to pass me, but I detained her, begging her to show me the ornaments in her hand; I said a number of things such as girls like to hear, and then I asked her if she were strictly watched, and whether they gave her delicate little hands and feet—which were worthy of better occupation than water-carrying—a great deal to do. She did not hesitate to answer, but with all she said she rarely raised her eyes. The longer you look at her the lovelier she is—and yet she is still a mere child—though a child certainly who no longer loves staying at home, who has dreams of splendor, and enjoyment, and freedom while she is kept shut up in a dismal, dark place, and left to starve.

"The poor creatures may never quit the temple excepting for a procession, or before sunrise. It sounded too delightful when she said that she was always so horribly tired, and so glad to go to sleep again after she was waked, and had to go out at once just when it is coldest, in the twilight before sunrise. Then she has to draw water from a cistern called the Well of the Sun."

"Do you know where that cistern lies?" asked Publius.

"Behind the acacia-grove," answered Lysias. "The guide pointed it out to me. It is said to hold particularly sacred water, which must be poured as a libation to the god at sunrise, unmixed with any other. The girls must get up so early, that as soon as dawn breaks water from this cistern shall not be lacking at the altar of Serapis. It is poured out on the earth by the priests as a drink-offering."

Publius had listened attentively, and had not lost a word of his friend's narrative. He now quitted him hastily, opened the tent-door, and went out into the night, looking up to discover the hour from the stars which were silently pursuing their everlasting courses in countless thousands, and sparkling with extraordinary brilliancy in the deep blue sky. The moon was already set, and the morning-star was slowly rising—every night since the Roman had been in the land of the Pyramids he had admired its magnificent size and brightness.

A cold breeze fanned the young man's brow, and as he drew his robe across his breast with a shiver, he thought of the sisters, who, before long, would have to go out in the fresh morning air. Once more he raised his eyes from the earth to the firmament over his head, and it seemed to him that he saw before his very eyes the proud form of Klea, enveloped in a mantle sown over with stars. His heart throbbed high, and he felt as if the breeze that his heaving breast inhaled in deep breaths was as fresh and pure as the ether that floats over Elysium, and of a strange potency withal, as if too rare to breathe. Still he fancied he saw before him the image of Klea, but as he stretched out his hand towards the beautiful vision it vanished—a sound of hoofs and wheels fell upon his ear. Publius was not accustomed to abandon himself to dreaming when action was needed, and this reminded him of the purpose for which he had come out into the open air. Chariot after chariot came driving past as he returned into his tent. Lysias, who during his absence had been pacing up and down and reflecting, met him with the question:

"How long is it yet till sunrise?"

Hardly two hours," replied the Roman. "And we must make good use of them if we would not arrive too late."

"So I think too," said the Corinthian. "The sisters will soon be at the Well of the Sun outside the temple walls, and I will persuade Irene to follow me. You think I shall not be successful? Nor do I myself—but still perhaps she will if I promise to show her something very pretty, and if she does not suspect that she is to be parted from her sister, for she is like a child."

"But Klea," interrupted Publius thoughtfully, "is grave and prudent; and the light tone which you are so ready to adopt will be very little to her taste, Consider that, and dare the attempt—no, you dare not deceive her. Tell her the whole truth, out of Irene's hearing, with the gravity the matter deserves, and she will not hinder her sister when she knows how great and how imminent is the danger that threatens her."

"Good!" said the Corinthian. "I will be so solemnly earnest that the most wrinkled and furrowed graybeard among the censors of your native city shall seem a Dionysiac dancer compared with me. I will speak like your Cato when he so bitterly complained that the epicures of Rome paid more now for a barrel of fresh herrings than for a yoke of oxen. You shall be perfectly satisfied with me!—But whither am I to conduct Irene? I might perhaps make use of one of the king's chariots which are passing now by dozens to carry the guests home."

"I also had thought of that," replied Publius. "Go with the chief of the Diadoches, whose splendid house was shown to us yesterday. It is on the way to the Serapeum, and just now at the feast you were talking with him incessantly. When there, indemnify the driver by the gift of a gold piece, so that he may not betray us, and do not return here but proceed to the harbor. I will await you near the little temple of Isis with our travelling chariot and my own horses, will receive Irene, and conduct her to some new refuge while you drive back Fuergetes' chariot, and restore it to the driver."

"That will not satisfy me by any means," said Lysias very gravely; "I was ready to give up my pomegranate-flower to you yesterday for Irene, but herself—"

"I want nothing of her," exclaimed Publius annoyed. "But you might—it seems to me—be rather more zealous in helping me to preserve her from the misfortune which threatens her through your own blunder. We cannot bring her here, but I think that I have thought of a safe hiding-place for her."

"Do you remember Apollodorus, the sculptor, to whom we were recommended by my father, and his kind and friendly wife who set before us that capital Chios wine? The man owes me a service, for my father commissioned him and his assistants to execute the mosaic pavement in the new arcade he was having built in the capitol; and subsequently, when the envy of rival artists threatened his life, my father saved him. You yourself heard him say that he and his were all at my disposal."

"Certainly, certainly," said Lysias. "But say, does it not strike you as most extraordinary that artists, the very men, that is to say, who beyond all others devote themselves to ideal aims and efforts, are particularly ready to yield to the basest impulses; envy, detraction, and—"

"Man!" exclaimed Publius, angrily interrupting the Greek, "can you never for ten seconds keep on the same subject, and never keep anything to yourself that comes into your head? We have just now, as it seems to me, more important matters to discuss than the jealousy of each other shown by artists—and in my opinion, by learned men too. The sculptor Apollodorus, who is thus beholden to me, has been living here for the last six months with his wife and daughters, for he has been executing for Philometor the busts of the philosophers, and the animal groups to decorate the open space in front of the tomb of Apis. His sons are managers of his large factory in Alexandria, and when he next goes there, down the Nile in his boat, as often happens, he can take Irene with him, and put her on board a ship.

"As to where we can have her taken to keep her safe from Euergetes, we will talk that over afterwards with Apollodorus."

"Good, very good," agreed the Corinthian. "By Heracles! I am not suspicious—still it does not altogether please me that you should yourself conduct Irene to Apollodorus, for if you are seen in her company our whole project may be shipwrecked. Send the sculptor's wife, who is little known in Memphis, to the temple of Isis, and request her to bring a veil and cloak to conceal the girl. Greet the gay Milesian from me too, and tell her—no, tell her nothing—I shall see her myself afterwards at the temple of Isis."

During the last words of this conversation, slaves had been enveloping the two young men in their mantles. They now quitted the tent together, wished each other success, and set out at a brisk pace; the Roman to have his horses harnessed, and Lysias to accompany the chief of the Diadoches in one of the king's chariots, and then to act on the plan he had agreed upon with Publius.

CHAPTER XIII

Chariot after chariot hurried out of the great gate of the king's palace and into the city, now sunk in slumber. All was still in the great banqueting-hall, and dark-hued slaves began with brooms and sponges to clean the mosaic pavement, which was strewn with rose leaves and with those that had fallen from the faded garlands of ivy and poplar; while here and there the spilt wine shone with a dark gleam in the dim light of the few lamps that had not been extinguished.

A young flute-player, overcome with sleep and wine, still sat in one corner. The poplar wreath that had crowned his curls had slipped over his pretty face, but even in sleep he still held his flute clasped fast in his fingers. The servants let him sleep on, and bustled about without noticing him; only an overseer pointed to him, and said laughing:

"His companions went home no more sober than that one. He is a pretty boy, and pretty Chloes lover besides—she will look for him in vain this morning."

"And to-morrow too perhaps," answered another; "for if the fat king sees her, poor Damon will have seen the last of her."

But the fat king, as Euergetes was called by the Alexandrians, and, following their example, by all the rest of Egypt, was not just then thinking of Chloe, nor of any such person; he was in the bath attached to his splendidly fitted residence. Divested of all clothing, he was standing in the tepid fluid which completely filled a huge basin of white marble. The clear surface of the perfumed water mirrored statues of nymphs fleeing from the pursuit of satyrs, and reflected the shimmering light of numbers of lamps suspended from the ceiling. At the upper end of the bath reclined the bearded and stalwart statue of the Nile, over whom the sixteen infant figures—representing the number of ells to which the great Egyptian stream must rise to secure a favorable inundation—clambered and played to the delight of their noble father Nile and of themselves. From the vase which supported the arm of the venerable god flowed an abundant stream of cold water, which five pretty lads received in slender alabaster vases, and poured over the head and the enormously prominent muscles of the breast, the back and the arms of the young king who was taking his bath.

"More, more—again and again," cried Euergetes, as the boys began to pause in bringing and pouring the water; and then, when they threw a fresh stream over him, he snorted and plunged with satisfaction, and a perfect shower of jets splashed off him as the blast of his breath sputtered away the water that fell over his face.

At last he shouted out: "Enough!" flung himself with all his force into the water, that spurted up as if a huge block of stone had been thrown into it, held his head for a long time under water, and then went up the marble steps of the bath shaking his head violently and mischievously in his boyish insolence, so as thoroughly to wet his friends and servants who were standing round the margin of the basin; he suffered himself to be wrapped in snowy-white sheets of the thinnest and finest linen, to be sprinkled with costly essences of delicate odor, and then he withdrew into a small room hung all round with gaudy hangings.

There he flung himself on a mound of soft cushions, and said with a deep-drawn breath: "Now I am happy; and I am as sober again as a baby that has never tasted anything but its mother's milk. Pindar is right! there is nothing better than water! and it slakes that raging fire which wine lights up in our brain and blood. Did I talk much nonsense just now, Hierax?"

The man thus addressed, the commander-in-chief of the royal troops, and the king's particular friend, cast a hesitating glance at the bystanders; but, Euergetes desiring him to speak without reserve, he replied:

"Wine never weakens the mind of such as you are to the point of folly, but you were imprudent. It would be little short of a miracle if Philometor did not remark—"

"Capital!" interrupted the king sitting up on his cushions. "You, Hierax, and you, Komanus, remain here—you others may go. But do not go too far off, so as to be close at hand in case I should need you. In these days as much happens in a few hours as usually takes place in as many years."

Those who were thus dismissed withdrew, only the king's dresser, a Macedonian of rank, paused doubtfully at the door, but Euergetes signed to him to retire immediately, calling after him:

"I am very merry and shall not go to bed. At three hours after sunrise I expect Aristarchus—and for work too. Put out the manuscripts that I brought. Is the Eunuch Eulaeus waiting in the anteroom? Yes—so much the better!

"Now we are alone, my wise friends Hierax and Komanus, and I must explain to you that on this occasion, out of pure prudence, you seem to me to have been anything rather than prudent. To be prudent is to have the command of a wide circle of thought, so that what is close at hand is no more an obstacle than what is remote. The narrow mind can command only that which lies close under observation; the fool and visionary only that which is far off. I will not blame you, for even the wisest has his hours of folly, but on this occasion you have certainly overlooked that which is at hand, in gazing at the distance, and I see you stumble in consequence. If you had not fallen into that error you would hardly have looked so bewildered when, just now, I exclaimed 'Capital!'

"Now, attend to me. Philometor and my sister know very well what my humor is, and what to expect of me. If I had put on the mask of a satisfied man they would have been surprised, and have scented mischief, but as it was I showed myself to them exactly what I always am and even more reckless than usual, and talked of what I wanted so openly that they may indeed look forward to some deed of violence at my hands but hardly to a treacherous surprise, and that tomorrow; for he who falls on his enemy in the rear makes no noise about it.

"If I believed in your casuistry, I might think that to attack the enemy from behind was not a particularly fine thing to do, for even I would rather see a man's face than his rear—particularly in the case of my brother and sister, who are both handsome to look upon. But what can a man do? After all, the best thing to do is what wins the victory and makes the game. Indeed, my mode of warfare has found supporters among the wise. If you want to catch mice you must waste bacon, and if we are to tempt men into a snare we must know what their notions and ideas are, and begin by endeavoring to confuse them.

"A bull is least dangerous when he runs straight ahead in his fury; while his two-legged opponent is least dangerous when he does not know what he is about and runs feeling his way first to the right and then to the left. Thanks to your approval—for I have deserved it, and I hope to be able to return it, my friend Hierax. I am curious as to your report. Shake up the cushion here under my head—and now you may begin."

"All appears admirably arranged," answered the general. "The flower of our troops, the Diadoches and Hetairoi, two thousand-five hundred men, are on their way hither, and by to-morrow will encamp north of Memphis. Five hundred will find their way into the citadel, with the priests and other visitors to congratulate you on your birthday, the other two thousand will remain concealed in the tents. The captain of your brother Philometor's Philobasilistes is bought over, and will stand by us; but his price was high—Komanus was forced to offer him twenty talents before he would bite."

"He shall have them," said the king laughing, "and he shall keep them too, till it suits me to regard him as suspicious, and to reward him according to his deserts by confiscating his estates. Well! proceed."

"In order to quench the rising in Thebes, the day before yesterday Philometor sent the best of the mercenaries with the standards of Desilaus and Arsinoe to the South. Certainly it cost not a little to bribe the ringleaders, and to stir up the discontent to an outbreak."

"My brother will repay us for this outlay," interrupted the king, "when we pour his treasure into our own coffers. Go on."

"We shall have most difficulty with the priests and the Jews. The former cling to Philometor, because he is the eldest son of his father, and has given large bounties to the temples, particularly of Apollinopolis and Philae; the Jews are attached to him, because he favors them more than the Greeks, and he, and his wife—your illustrious sister—trouble themselves with their vain religious squabbles; he disputes with them about the doctrines contained in their book, and at table too prefers conversing with them to any one else."

"I will salt the wine and meat for them that they fatten on here," cried Euergetes vehemently, "I forbade to-day their presence at my table, for they have good eyes and wits as sharp as their noses. And they are most dangerous when they are in fear, or can reckon on any gains."

"At the same time it cannot be denied that they are honest and tenacious, and as most of them are possessed of some property they rarely make common cause with the shrieking mob—particularly here in Alexandria."

"Envy alone can reproach them for their industry and enterprise, for the activity of the Hellenes has improved upon the example set by them and their Phoenician kindred."

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