

GEORG EBERS

THE EMPEROR.

VOLUME 04

Georg Ebers

The Emperor. Volume 04

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The Emperor – Volume 04

CHAPTER XV

After the Emperor's body-slave had started up to go to the aid of Selene, who was attacked by his sovereign's dog, something had happened to him which he could not forget; he had received an impression which he could not wipe out, and words and tones had stirred his mind and soul which incessantly echoed in them, so that it was in a preoccupied and half-dreamy way that he had done his master those little services which he was accustomed to perform every morning, briskly and with complete attention.

Summer and winter Mastor was accustomed to leave his master's bedroom before sunrise to prepare everything that Hadrian could need when he rose from his slumbers. There was the gold plating to clean on the narrow greaves and the leather straps which belonged to his master's military boots, his clothes to air and to perfume with the slight, hardly perceptible scent that he liked, but the preparations for Hadrian's bath were what took up most of his time. At Lochias there were not as yet—as there were in the imperial palace at Rome—properly-filled baths; still his servant knew that here, as there, his master would use a due abundance of water. He had been told that if he required anything for his master he was to apply to Pontius. Him he found, without seeking him, outside the room meant for Hadrian's sitting-room, to which, while the Emperor still slept, he was endeavoring, with the help of his assistants, to give a comfortable and pleasing aspect. The architect referred the slave to the workmen who were busy laying the pavement in the forecourt of the palace; these men would carry in for him as much water as ever he could need. The body-servant's position relieved him of such humble duties, still, when on the chase, when travelling, or as need arose, he was accustomed to perform them unasked, and very willingly.

The sun had not yet risen when he went out into the court, a number of slaves were lying on their mats asleep, others had camped round a fire and were waiting for their early broth, which was being stirred with wooden sticks by an old man and a boy. Mastor would not disturb either group; he went up to a party of workmen, who seemed to be talking together, and yet remained attentive to the speech of an old man who was evidently telling them a story.

The poor fellow's heart was heavy and his mind was little bent on tales and amusements. All life was embittered. The services required of him usually seemed to him of paramount importance, beyond everything else; but to-day it was different. He had an obscure feeling as though fate herself had released him from all his duties, as if misfortune had cut the bonds which bound him to his service to the Emperor, and had made him an isolated and lonely being. It even came into his head whether he should not take in his hand all the gold pieces given him sometimes by Hadrian, or which the wealthy folks who wished to be the foremost of those introduced into the Emperor's presence, after waiting in the antechamber, had flung to him or slipped into his hand—make his escape and carouse away all that he possessed in the taverns of the great city, in wine and the gay company of women. It was all the same to him what might happen to him.

If he were caught he would probably be flogged to death; but he had had kicks and blows in plenty before he had got into the Emperor's service, nay; when he was brought to Rome he had once even been hunted with dogs. If he lost his life, after all what would it matter? He would have done with it then, once for all, and the future offered him no prospect but perpetual fatigue in the service of a restless master, anxiety and contempt. He was a thoroughly good-hearted being who could not bear to hurt any one, and who found it equally hard to disturb a fellow-man in his pleasures or amusement. He felt particularly disinclined to do so just now, for a wounded soul is keenly alive to the moods

and feelings of others; so, as he approached the group of workmen, from among whom he proposed to choose his water-carrier, he determined that he would not interrupt the story-teller, on whose lips the gaze of his audience was riveted with interest.

The glare of the blaze under the soup-kettle fell full on the speaker's face. He was an old laborer, but his long hair proclaimed him a freeman. His abundant white beard induced Mastor to suppose that he must be a Jew or a Phoenician, but there was nothing remarkable in the old man, who was dressed in a poor and scanty tunic, excepting his peculiarly brilliant eyes, which were immovably fixed on the heavens, and the oblique position in which he held his head, supporting it on the left side with his raised hands.

"And now," said the speaker, dropping his arms, "let us go back to our labors, my brethren. 'In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread,' it is written. It is often hard to us old men to heave stones and bend our stiff backs for so long together, but we are nearer than you younger ones to the happy future. Life is not easy to all of us, but it is we who labor and are heavy laden—we above all others—that the Lord has bidden to be his guests, and not last among us the slaves."

"Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you," interrupted one of the younger men repeating the words of Christ.

"Yea, thus saith the Saviour," said the old man approvingly, "and he surely then was thinking of us. I said just now our load is not light, but how much heavier was the burden he took upon him of his own free will to release us from woe. Every one must work, nay even Caesar himself, but he who could dwell in the glory of his Father let himself be mocked and scorned and spit in the face, let the crown of thorns be pressed on his suffering head, bore his heavy cross, sinking under its weight, and endured a death of torment, and all for our sakes, without a murmur. But he suffered not in vain, for God accepted the sacrifice of his Son, and did his will and said, 'All that believe on Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.' And though a new and weary day is now beginning, and though it should be followed by a thousand wearier still, though death is the end of life—still we believe in our Redeemer, we have God's word bidding us out of sorrows and sufferings into his Heaven, promising us for a brief time of misery in this world, endless ages of joy.—Now go to work. Our sturdy friend Krates will work for you dear Knakias until your finger is healed. When the bread is distributed remember, each of you, the children of our poor deceased brother Philammon. You, poor Gibbus, will find your labors bitter to-day. This man's master, my dear brethren, sold both his daughters yesterday to a dealer from Smyrna; but if you never see them again in Egypt, or in any other country, my friend, you will meet them in the home of your Heavenly Father—of that you may rest assured. Our life on earth is but a pilgrimage, and Heaven is the goal, and the Guide who teaches us never to miss the way, is our Saviour. Weariness and toil, sorrow and suffering are easy to bear, to him who knows that when the solemn hour is near, the King of Kings shall throw open his dwelling-place, and invite him to enter as a favored guest to inhabit there, where all we have loved have found joy and rest."

"Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you," said a man's loud voice again from the circle that sat round the old man. The old man stood up, signed to a boy who distributed the bread in equal shares to the workmen, and took up a jar with handles, out of which he filled a large wooden cup with wine.

Not a word of this discourse had escaped Mastor, and the often repeated verse, "Come unto me all ye that labor," dwelt in his mind like the invitation of a hospitable friend bidding him to happy days of freedom and enjoyment. A distant gleam shone through the weight of his troubles, seeming to promise the dawn of a new day, and he reverently went up to the old man, in the first place to ask him if he was the overseer of the workmen who stood round him.

"I am," replied the old man, and as soon as he learnt what Mastor required as a commission from the controlling architect, he pointed out some young slaves who quickly brought the water that he needed.

Pontius met the Emperor's servant and his water-carriers and remarked, loudly enough for Mastor to understand him, to Pollux who was with him:

"The architect's servant is getting Christians to wait upon his master to-day. They are regular and sober workmen who do their duty silently and well."

While Mastor was giving his master towels, and helping to dry and dress him, he was far less attentive than usual, for he could not get the words he had heard from the overseer's lips out of his mind. He had not understood them all, but he had fully comprehended that there was a kind and loving God who had suffered in his own person the utmost torments, who was especially gracious to the poor, the miserable, and the bondsman, and who promised to refresh them and comfort them, and to re-unite them to those who had once been dear to them. "Come unto me," sounded again and again in his ears, and struck so warmly to his heart that he could not help thinking first of his mother, who, so many a time, when he was a child, had called to him only to clasp him in her arms as he ran towards her, and to press him to her heart. Just so had he often called his poor little dead son, and the feeling that there could be any one who might still call to him—the forsaken lonely man—with loving words to release him from his griefs, to reunite him to his mother, his father, and all the dear ones left behind in his lost and distant home, took half the bitterness from his pain.

He was accustomed to listen to all that was said in the Emperor's presence, and year by year he had learnt to understand more of what he heard. He had often heard the Christians discussed, and usually as deluded but dangerous fools. Many of his fellow-slaves, too, he had heard called Christian idiots, but still not unfrequently very reasonable men, and sometimes even Hadrian himself, had taken the part of the Christians.

This was the first time that Mastor had heard from their own lips what they believed and hoped, and now, while fulfilling his duties he could hardly bear the delay before he could once more seek out the old pavement-worker, to enquire of him, and to have the hopes confirmed which his words had aroused in his soul.

No sooner had Hadrian and Antinous gone into the living-room than Mastor had hastened off across the court to find the Christians. There he tried to open a conversation with the overseer concerning his faith, but the old man answered that there was a season for everything; just now he could not interrupt the work, but that he might come again after sundown, and that he then would tell him of Him who had promised to refresh the sorrow-laden.

Mastor thought no more of making his escape. When he appeared again in his master's presence there was such a sunny light in his blue eyes that Hadrian left the angry words he had prepared for him unspoken, and cried to Antinous, laughing and pointing to the slave:

"I really believe the rascal has consoled himself already, and found a new mate. Let us, too, follow the precept of Horace, so far as we may, and enjoy the present day. The poet may let the future go as it will, but I cannot, for, unfortunately, I am the Emperor."

"And Rome may thank the gods that you are," replied Antinous.

"What happy phrases the boy hits upon sometimes," said Hadrian with a laugh, and he stroked the lad's brown curls. "Now till noon I must work with Phlegon and Titianus, whom I am expecting, and then perhaps we may find something to laugh at. Ask the tall sculptor there behind the screens, at what hour Balbilla is to sit to him for her bust. We must also inspect the architect's work, and that of the Alexandrian artists by daylight; that, their zeal has well deserved."

Hadrian retired to the room where his private secretary had ready for him the despatches and papers for Rome and the provinces, which the Emperor was required to read and to sign. Antinous remained alone in the sitting-room, and for an hour he continued to gaze at the ships which came to anchor in the harbor, or sailed out of the roads, and amused himself with watching the swift boats which swarmed round the larger vessels, like wasps round ripe fruit. He listened to the songs of the sailors, and the music of the flute-players, to the measured beat of the oars, which came up from the triremes in the private harbor of the Emperor as they went out to sea. Even the pure blue of the sky

and the warmth of the delicious morning were a pleasure to him, and he asked himself whether the smell of tar, which pervaded the seaport, were agreeable or not.

Presently as the sun mounted in the sky, its bright sphere dazzled him; he left the window with a yawn, stretched himself on a couch, and stared absently up at the ceiling of the room without thinking of the subject which the faded picture on it was intended to represent.

Idleness had long since grown to be the occupation of his life; but accustomed to it as he was, he was sometimes conscious of its dark attendant shadow ennui—as of a disagreeable and intrusive interruption to the enjoyment of life. Generally in such lonely hours of idle reverie his thoughts reverted to his belongings in Bithynia, of whom he never dared to speak before the Emperor, or perhaps of the hunting excursions he had made with Hadrian, of the slaughtered game, of the fish he—an experienced angler—had caught, or such like. What the future might bring him troubled him not, for to the love of creativeness, to ambition—to all, in short, that bore any resemblance to a passionate excitement his soul had, so far, remained a stranger. The admiration which was universally excited by his beauty gave him no pleasure, and many a time he felt as though it was not worth while to stir a limb or draw a breath. Almost everything he saw was indifferent to him excepting a kind word from the lips of the Emperor, whom he regarded as great above all other men, whom he feared as Destiny incarnate, and to whom he felt himself bound as intimately as the flower to the tree, the blossom that must die when the stem is broken, on which it flaunts as an ornament and a grace.

But, to-day, as he flung himself on the divan his visions took a new direction. He could not help thinking of the pale girl whom he had saved from the jaws of the blood-hound—of the white cold hand which for an instant had clung to his neck—of the cold words with which she had afterwards repelled him.

Antinous began to long violently to see Selene. That same Antinous, to whom in all the cities he had visited with the Emperor, and in Rome particularly, the noble fair ones had sent branches of flowers and tender letters, and who nevertheless, since the day when he left his home, had never felt for any woman or girl half so tender a sentiment, as for the hunter the Emperor had given him, or for the big dog. This girl stood before his memory like breathing marble. Perchance the man might be doomed to death who should rest on her cold breast, but such a death must be full of ecstasy, and it seemed to him that it would be far more blissful to die with the blood frozen in his veins, than of the too rapid throbbing of his heart.

"Selene," he murmured, now and again, with soft hesitation; a strange unrest foreign to his calm nature seemed to propagate itself through all his limbs, and he who commonly would be stretched on a couch for hours without stirring, lost in dreams, now sprang up and paced the room, sighing deeply, and with long strides.

It was a passionate longing for Selene that drove him up and down, and his wish to see her again crystallized into resolve, and prompted him to contrive the ways and means of meeting her once more before the Emperor's return.

Simply to invade her father's lodging without farther ceremony, seemed to him out of the question, and yet he was certain of finding her there, since her injured foot would of course keep her at home. Should he once more go to the steward with a request for bread and salt? But he dared not ask anything of Keraunus in Hadrian's name after the scene which had so recently taken place. Should he go there to carry her a new pitcher in the place of the broken one? But that would only freshly enrage the arrogant official.

Should he—should he—should he not? But no, it was quite impossible—still, that no doubt—that was the right idea. In his medicine-chest there were a few extracts which had been given to him by the Emperor; he would offer her one of these to dilute with water and apply to her bruised foot. And this act of sympathy could not displease even his master, who liked to prove his healing art on the sick or suffering. He at once called Mastor, and desired him to take charge of the hound which had followed his steps as he paced the room, then he went into his sleeping-room, took out a phial

of a most costly essence, which Hadrian had given him on his last birthday, and which had formerly belonged to Trajan's wife, Kotina, and then proceeded to the steward's rooms. On the steps where he had found Selene, he found the black slave with some children. The old man had sat down them and got no farther for fear of the Roman's dog. Antinous went up to him and begged him to guide him to his master's quarters, and the negro immediately showed him the way, opened the door of the antechamber, and pointing to the living-room said:

"There—but Keraunus is absent."

Without troubling himself any further about Antinous the slave went back to the children, but the Bithyman stood irresolute, with his flask in his hand, for besides Selene's voice he heard that of another girl and the deeper tones of a man. He was still hesitating when Arsinoe's loud exclamation of "Who's there?" obliged him to advance.

In the sitting-room Selene was standing dressed in a long light-colored robe with a veil over her head, as if prepared to go out, but Arsinoe was perched on the edge of a table, in such a way as that the tips of her toes only touched the ground, and on the table lay a quantity of old-fashioned things. Before her stood a Phoenician, of middle age, holding in his hand a finely-carved cup; apparently he was in treaty for it with the young girl.

Keraunus had been again to-day to a dealer in curiosities, but he had not found him at home, so he had left word at his shop that Hiram might call upon him in his rooms at Lochias, where he could show him several valuable rarities. The Phoenician had arrived before the return of the steward himself, who had been detained at a meeting of the town council, and Arsinoe was displaying her father's treasures, whose beauties she was extolling with much eloquence. Hiram unfortunately offered a no higher price than Gabinus, whom the steward had sent off so indignantly the previous evening.

Selene had been convinced from the first of the bootlessness of the attempt, and was now anxious to bring the transaction to a speedy conclusion, as the hour was approaching when she and Arsinoe had to go to the papyrus factory. To her sister's refusal to accompany her, and to the old slave-woman's entreaty that she would rest her foot, at any rate for to-day, she had responded only with a resolute, "I am going."

The appearance of the youth on the scene occasioned the girls some embarrassment. Selene recognized him at once, Arsinoe thought him handsome but awkward, while the curiosity-dealer gazed at him in perfect admiration, and was the first to offer him a greeting. Antinous returned it, bowed to the sisters, and then said turning to Selene:

"We heard that your head was cut, and your foot hurt, and as we were guilty of your mishap, we venture to offer you this phial which contains a good remedy for such injuries."

"Thank you," replied the girl. "But I feel already so well that I shall try to go out."

"That you certainly ought not to do," said Antinous, beseechingly.

"I must," replied Selene, gravely.

"Then, at any rate, take the phial to use for a lotion when you return. Ten drops in such a cup as that, full of water."

"I can try it when I come in."

"Do so, and you will see how healing it is. You are not vexed with us any longer?"

"No."

"I am glad of that!" cried the boy, fixing his large dreamy eyes on Selene with silent passion. This gaze displeased her, and she said more coldly than before to the Bithyman.

"To whom shall I give the phial when I have used the stuff in it?"

"Keep it, pray keep it," begged Antinous. "It is pretty, and will be twice as precious in my eyes when it belongs to you."

"It is pretty-but I do not wish for presents."

"Then destroy it when you have done with it. You have not forgiven us our dog's bad behavior, and we are sincerely sorry that our dog—"

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