

GEORG EBERS

THE EMPEROR.

VOLUME 01

Georg Ebers

The Emperor. Volume 01

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Georg Ebers

The Emperor – Volume 01

PREFACE

It is now fourteen years since I planned the story related in these volumes, the outcome of a series of lectures which I had occasion to deliver on the period of the Roman dominion in Egypt. But the pleasures of inventive composition were forced to give way to scientific labors, and when I was once more at leisure to try my wings with increase of power I felt more strongly urged to other flights. Thus it came to pass that I did not take the time of Hadrian for the background of a tale till after I had dealt with the still later period of the early monastic move in "Homo Sum." Since finishing that romance my old wish to depict, in the form of a story, the most important epoch of the history of that venerable nation to which I have devoted nearly a quarter century of my life, has found its fulfilment. I have endeavored to give a picture of the splendor of the Pharaonic times in "Uarda," of the subjection of Egypt to the new Empire of the Persians in "An Egyptian Princess," of the Hellenic period under the Lagides in "The Sisters," of the Roman dominion and the early growth of Christianity in "The Emperor," and of the anchorite spirit—in the deserts and rocks of the Sinaitic Peninsula—in "Homo Sum." Thus the present work is the last of which the scene will be laid in Egypt. This series of romances will not only have introduced the reader to a knowledge of the history of manners and culture in Egypt, but will have facilitated his comprehension of certain dominant ideas which stirred the mind of the Ancients. How far I may have succeeded in rendering the color of the times I have described and in producing pictures that realize the truth, I myself cannot venture to judge; for since even present facts are differently reflected in different minds, this must be still more emphatically the case with things long since past and half-forgotten. Again and again, when historical investigation has refused to afford me the means of resuscitating some remotely ancient scene, I have been obliged to take counsel of imagination and remember the saying that 'the Poet must be a retrospective Seer,' and could allow my fancy to spread her wings, while I remained her lord and knew the limits up to which I might permit her to soar. I considered it my lawful privilege to paint much that was pure invention, but nothing that was not possible at the period I was representing. A due regard for such possibility has always set the bounds to fancy's flight; wherever existing authorities have allowed me to be exact and faithful I have always been so, and the most distinguished of my fellow-professors in Germany, England, France and Holland, have more than once borne witness to this. But, as I need hardly point out, poetical and historical truth are not the same thing; for historical truth must remain, as far as possible, unbiassed by the subjective feeling of the writer, while poetical truth can only find expression through the medium of the artist's fancy.

As in my last two romances, so in "The Emperor," I have added no notes: I do this in the pleasant conviction of having won the confidence of my readers by my historical and other labors. Nothing has encouraged me to fresh imaginative works so much as the fact that through these romances the branch of learning that I profess has enlisted many disciples whose names are now mentioned with respect among Egyptologists. Every one who is familiar with the history of Hadrian's time will easily discern by trifling traits from what author or from which inscription or monument the minor details have been derived, and I do not care to interrupt the course of the narrative and so spoil the pleasure of the larger class of readers. It would be a happiness to me to believe that this tale deserves to be called a real work of art, and, as such, its first function should be to charm and elevate the mind. Those who at the same time enrich their knowledge by its study ought not to detect the fact that they are learning.

Those who are learned in the history of Alexandria under the Romans may wonder that I should have made no mention of the Therapeutai on Lake Mareotis. I had originally meant to devote a

chapter to them, but Luca's recent investigations led me to decide on leaving it unwritten. I have given years of study to the early youth of Christianity, particularly in Egypt, and it affords me particular satisfaction to help others to realize how, in Hadrian's time, the pure teaching of the Saviour, as yet little sullied by the contributions of human minds, conquered—and could not fail to conquer—the hearts of men. Side by side with the triumphant Faith I have set that noble blossom of Greek life and culture—Art which in later ages, Christianity absorbed in order to dress herself in her beautiful forms. The statues and bust of Antinous which remain to us of that epoch, show that the drooping tree was still destined to put forth new leaves under Hadrian's rule.

The romantic traits which I have attributed to the character of my hero, who travelled throughout the world, climbing mountains to rejoice in the splendor of the rising sun, are authentic. One of the most difficult tasks I have ever set myself was to construct from the abundant but essentially contradictory accounts of Hadrian a human figure in which I could myself at all believe; still, how gladly I set to work to do so! There was much to be considered in working out this narrative, but the story itself has flowed straight from the heart of the writer; I can only hope it may find its way to that of the reader.

LEIPZIG, November, 1880.

GEORG EBERS.

CHAPTER I

The morning twilight had dawned into day, and the sun had risen on the first of December of the year of our Lord 129, but was still veiled by milk-white mists which rose from the sea, and it was cold.

Kasius, a mountain of moderate elevation, stands on a tongue of land that projects from the coast between the south of Palestine and Egypt. It is washed on the north by the sea which, on this day, is not gleaming, as is its wont, in translucent ultramarine; its more distant depths slowly surge in blue-black waves, while those nearer to shore are of quite a different hue, and meet their sisters that lie nearer to the horizon in a dull greenish-grey, as dusty plains join darker lava beds. The northeasterly wind, which had risen as the sun rose, now blew more keenly, wreaths of white foam rode on the crests of the waves, though these did not beat wildly and stormily on the mountain-foot, but rolled heavily to the shore in humped ridges, endlessly long, as if they were of molten lead. Still the clear bright spray splashed up when the gulls dipped their pinions in the water as they floated above it, hither and thither, restless and uttering shrill little cries, as though driven by terror.

Three men were walking slowly along the causeway which led from the top of the hill down into the valley, but it was only the eldest, who walked in front of the other two, who gave any heed to the sky, the sea, the gulls, and the barren plain that lay silent at his feet. He stopped, and as soon as he did so, the others followed his example. The landscape below him seemed to rivet his gaze, and it justified the disapproval with which he gently shook his head, which was somewhat sunk into his beard. A narrow strip of desert stretched westward before him as far as the eye could reach, dividing two levels of water. Along this natural dyke a caravan was passing, and the elastic feet of the camels fell noiselessly on the road they trod. The leader, wrapped in his white mantle, seemed asleep, and the camel-drivers to be dreaming; the dull-colored eagles by the road-side did not stir at their approach. To the right of the stretch of flat coast along which the road ran from Syria to Egypt, lay the gloomy sea, overhung by grey clouds; to the left lay the desert, a strange and mysterious feature in the landscape, of which the eye could not see the end, either to the east or to the west, and which looked here like a stretch of snow, there like standing water, and again like a thicket of rushes.

The eldest of our travellers gazed constantly towards heaven or into the distance; the second, a slave who carried rugs and cloaks on his broad shoulders, never took his eyes off his master; and the third, a young, free-man, looked wearily and dreamily down the road.

A broad path, leading to a stately temple, crossed that which led from the summit of the mountain to the coast, and the bearded pedestrian turned up it; but he followed it only for a few steps, then he turned his head with a dissatisfied air, muttered a few unintelligible words into his beard, turned round and hastily retraced his steps to the narrow way, down which he went towards the valley. His young companion followed him without raising his head or interrupting his reverie, as if he were his shadow, but the slave lifted his cropped fair head and a stolen smile crossed his lips as on the left hand side of the Kasius road he caught sight of a black kid, and close beside it an old woman who, at the approach of the three men covered her wrinkled face in alarm with her dark blue veil.

"That is the reason then!" said the slave to himself with a nod, and blowing a kiss into the air to a black-haired girl who crouched at the old woman's feet. But she, for whom the greeting was intended, did not observe this mute courtship, for her eyes followed the travellers, and especially the young man, as if spellbound. As soon as the three were far enough off not to hear her, the girl asked with a shiver, as if some desert-spectre had passed by-and in a low voice "Grandmother, who was that?"

The old woman raised her veil, laid her hand on her grandchild's mouth, and whispered:

"It was he."

"The Emperor?"

The old woman answered with a significant nod, but the girl squeezed herself up, against her grandmother, with vehement curiosity stretching out her dusky head to see better, and asked softly: "The young one?"

"Silly child! the one in front with a grey beard."

"He? Oh, I wish the young one was the Emperor!"

It was in fact Hadrian, the Roman Emperor, who walked on in silence before his escort, and it seemed as though his advent had given life to the desert, for as he approached the reed-swamp, the kites flew up in the air, and from behind a sand-hill on the edge of the broader road which Hadrian had avoided, came two men in priestly robes. They both belonged to the temple of Baal of Kariotis, a small structure of solid stone, which faced the sea, and which the Emperor had yesterday visited.

"Do you think he has lost his way?" said one to the other, in the Phoenician tongue.

"Hardly," was the answer. "Master said that he could always find a road again by which he had once gone, even in the dark."

"And yet he is gazing more at the clouds than at the road."

"Still, he promised us yesterday."

"He promised nothing for certain," interrupted the other.

"Indeed he did; at parting he called out—and I heard him distinctly: 'Perhaps I shall return and consult your oracle.'"

"Perhaps."

"I think he said 'probably.'"

"Who knows whether some sign he has seen up in the sky may not have turned him back; he is going to the camp by the sea."

"But the banquet is standing ready for him in our great hall."

"He will find what he needs down there. Come, it is a wretched morning, and I am being frozen."

"Wait a little longer—look there."

"What?"

"He does not even wear a hat to cover his grey hair."

"He has never yet been seen to travel with anything on his head."

"And his grey cloak is not very imperial looking."

"He always wears the purple at a banquet."

"Do you know who his walk and appearance remind me of?"

"Who?"

"Of our late high-priest, Abibaal; he used to walk in that ponderous, meditative way, and wear a beard like the Emperor's."

"Yes, yes—and had the same piercing grey eye."

"He too used often to gaze up at the sky. They have both the same broad forehead, too; but Abibaal's nose was more aquiline, and his hair curled less closely."

"And our governor's mouth was grave and dignified, while Hadrian's lips twitch and curl at all he says and hears, as if he were laughing at it all."

"Look, he is speaking now to his favorite—Antonius I think they call the pretty boy."

"Antinous, not Antonius. He picked him up in Bithynia, they say."

"He is a beautiful youth."

"Incomparably beautiful! What a figure and what a face! Still, I cannot wish that he were my son."

"The Emperor's favorite!"

"For that very reason. Why, he looks already as if he had tried every pleasure, and could never know any farther enjoyment."

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On a little level close to the sea-shore, and sheltered by crumbling cliffs from the east wind, stood a number of tents. Between them fires were burning, round which were gathered groups of Roman soldiers and imperial servants. Half-naked boys, the children of the fishermen and camel-drivers who dwelt in this wilderness, were running busily hither and thither, feeding the flames with dry stems of sea-grass and dead desert-shrubs; but though the blaze flew high, the smoke did not rise; but driven here and there by the squalls of wind, swirled about close to the ground in little clouds, like a flock of scattered sheep. It seemed as though it feared to rise in the grey, damp, uninviting atmosphere. The largest of the tents, in front of which Roman sentinels paced up and down, two and two, on guard, was wide open on the side towards the sea. The slaves who came out of the broad doorway with trays on their cropped heads-loaded with gold and silver vessels, plates, wine-jars, goblets, and the remains of a meal had to hold them tightly with both hands that they might not be blown over.

The inside of the tent was absolutely unadorned. The Emperor lay on a couch near the right wall, which was blown in and bulged by the wind; his bloodless lips were tightly set, his arms crossed over his breast, and his eyes half closed. But he was not asleep, for he often opened his mouth and smacked his lips, as if tasting the flavor of some viand. From time to time he raised his eyelids—long, finely wrinkled, and blue-veined—turning his eyes up to heaven or rolling them to one side and then downwards towards the middle of the tent. There, on the skin of a huge bear trimmed with blue cloth, lay Hadrian's favorite Antinous. His beautiful head rested on that of the beast, which had been slain by his sovereign, and its skull and skin skilfully preserved, his right leg, supported on his left knee, he flourished freely in the air, and his hands were caressing the Emperor's bloodhound, which had laid its sage-looking head on the boy's broad, bare breast, and now and then tried to lick his soft lips to show its affection. But this the youth would not allow; he playfully held the beast's muzzle close with his hands or wrapped its head in the end of his mantle, which had slipped back from his shoulders.

The dog seemed to enjoy the game, but once when Antinous had drawn the cloak more tightly round its head and it strove in vain to be free from the cloth that impeded its breathing, it set up a loud howl, and this doleful cry made the Emperor change his attitude and cast a glance of displeasure at the boy lying on the bear-skin, but only a glance, not a word of blame. And soon the expression, even of his eyes, changed, and he fixed them on the lad's figure with a gaze of loving contemplation, as though it were some noble work of art that he could never tire of admiring. And truly the Immortals had moulded this child of man to such a type; every muscle of that throat, that chest, those arms and legs was a marvel of softness and of power; no human countenance could be more regularly chiselled. Antinous observing that his master's attention had been attracted to his play with the dog, let the animal go and turned his large, but not very brilliant, eyes on the Emperor.

"What are you doing here?" asked Hadrian kindly.

"Nothing," said the boy.

"No one can do nothing. Even if we fancy we have succeeded in doing nothing we still continue to think that we are unoccupied, and to think is a good deal."

"But I cannot even think."

Every one can think; besides you were not doing nothing, for you were playing."

"Yes, with the dog." With these words Antinous stretched out his legs on the ground, pushed away the dog, and raised his curly head on both hands.

"Are you tired?" asked the Emperor.

"Yes."

"We both kept watch for an equal portion of the night, and I, who am so much older, feel quite wide awake."

"It was only yesterday that you were saying that old soldiers were the best for night-watches."

The Emperor nodded, and then said:

"At your age while we are awake we live three times as fast as at mine, and so we need to sleep twice as long. You have every right to be tired. To be sure it was not till three hours after midnight that we climbed the mountain, and how often a supper party is not over before that."

"It was very cold and uncomfortable up there."

"Not till after the sun had risen."

"Ah! before that you did not notice it, for till then you were busy thinking of the stars."

"And you only of yourself—very true."

"I was thinking of your health too when that cold wind rose before Helios appeared."

"I was obliged to await his rising."

"And can you discern future events by the way and manner of the rising of the sun?"

Hadrian looked in surprise at the speaker, shook his head in negation, looked up at the top of the tent, and after a long pause said, in abrupt sentences, with frequent interruptions:

"Day is the present merely, and the future is evolved out of darkness; the corn grows from the clods of the field; the rain falls from the darkest clouds; a new generation is born of the mother's womb; the limbs recover their vigor in sleep. And what is begotten of the darkness of death—who can tell?"

When, after saying this, the Emperor had remained for some time silent, the youth asked him:

"But if the sunrise teaches you nothing concerning the future why should you so often break your night's rest and climb the mountain to see it?"

"Why? Why?" repeated Hadrian, slowly and meditatively, stroking his grizzled beard; then he went on as if speaking to himself:

"That is a question which reason fails to answer, before which my lips find no words; and, if I had them at my command, who among the rabble would understand me? Such questions can best be answered by means of parables. Those who take part in life are actors, and the world is their stage. He who wants to look tall on it wears the cothurnus, and is not a mountain the highest vantage ground that a man can find for the sole of his foot? Kasius there is but a hill, but I have stood on greater giants than he, and seen the clouds rise below me, like Jupiter on Olympus."

"But you need climb no mountains to feel yourself a god," cried Antinous; "the godlike is your title—you command and the world must obey. With a mountain beneath his feet a man is nearer to heaven no doubt than he is on the plain."

"Well?"

"I dare not say what came into my mind."

"Speak out."

"I knew a little girl who when I took her on my shoulder would stretch out her arms and exclaim, 'I am so tall!' She fancied that she was taller than I then, and yet was only little Panthea."

"But in her own conception of herself, it was she who was tall, and that decides the issue, for to each of us a thing is only that which it seems to us. It is true they call me godlike, but I feel every day, and a hundred times a day, the limitations of the power and nature of man, and I cannot get beyond them. On the top of a mountain I cease to feel them; there I feel as if I were great, for nothing is higher than my head, far or near. And when, as I stand there, the night vanishes before my eyes, when the splendor of the young sun brings the world into new life for me, by restoring to my consciousness all that just before had been engulfed in gloom, then a deeper breath swells my breast, and my lungs fill with the purer and lighter air of the heights. Up there, alone and in silence, no hint can reach me of the turmoil below, and I feel myself one with the great aspect of nature spread before me. The surges of the sea come and go, the tree-tops in the forest bow and rise, fog and mist roll away and part asunder hither and thither, and up there I feel myself so merged with the creation that surrounds me that often it even seems as though it were my own breath that gives it life. Like the storks and the

swallows, I yearn for the distant land, and where should the human eye be more likely to be permitted, at least in fancy, to discern the remote goal than from the summit of a mountain?

"The limitless distance which the spirit craves for seems there to assume a form tangible to the senses, and the eye detects its border line. My whole being feels not merely elevated, but expanded, and that vague longing which comes over me as soon as I mix once more in the turmoil of life, and when the cares of state demand my strength, vanishes. But you cannot understand it, boy. These are things which no other mortal can share with me."

"And it is only to me that you do not scorn to reveal them!" cried Antinous, who had turned round to face the Emperor, and who with wide eyes had not lost one word.

"You?" said Hadrian, and a smile, not absolutely free from mockery, parted his lips. "From you I should no more have a secret than from the Cupid by Praxiteles, in my study at Rome."

The blood mounted to the lad's cheeks and dyed them flaming crimson. The Emperor observed this and said kindly:

"You are more to me than the statue, for the marble cannot blush. In the time of the Athenians Beauty governed life, but in you I can see that the gods are pleased to give it a bodily existence, even in our own days, and to look at you reconciles me to the discords of existence. It does me good. But how should I expect to find that you understand me; your brow was never made to be furrowed by thought; or did you really understand one word of all I said?"

Antinous propped himself on his left arm, and lifting his right hand, he said emphatically:

"Yes."

"And which," asked Hadrian.

"I know what longing is."

"For what?"

"For many things."

"Tell me one."

"Some enjoyment that is not followed by depression. I do not know of one."

"That is a desire you share with all the youth of Rome, only they are apt to postpone the reaction. Well, and what next?"

"I cannot tell you."

"What prevents your speaking openly to me?"

"You, yourself did."

"I?"

"Yes, you; for you forbid me to speak of my home, my mother, and my people."

The Emperor's brow darkened, and he answered sternly:

"I am your father and your whole soul should be given to me."

"It is all yours," answered the youth, falling back on to the bear-skin, and drawing the pallium closely over his shoulders, for a gust blew coldly in at the side of the tent, through which Phlegon, the Emperor's private secretary, now entered and approached his master. He was followed by a slave with several sealed rolls under his arms.

"Will it be agreeable to you, Caesar, to consider the despatches and letters that have just arrived?" asked the official, whose carefully-arranged hair had been tossed by the sea-breeze.

"Yes, and then we can make a note of what I was able to observe in the heavens last night. Have you the tablets ready?"

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