

GEORG EBERS

A THORNY

PATH, VOLUME

05

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A Thorny Path. Volume 05

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CHAPTER XV

Nothing delighted old Dido more than to dress the daughter of her beloved mistress in all her best, for she had helped to bring her up; but to-day it was a cruel task; tears dimmed her old eyes. It was not till she had put the finishing touches to braiding the girl's abundant brown hair, pinned her peplos on the shoulders with brooches, and set the girdle straight, that her face cleared, as she looked at the result. Never had she seen her darling look so fair. Nothing, indeed, remained of the child-like timidity and patient submissiveness which had touched Dido only two days since, as she plaited Melissa's hair. The maiden's brow was grave and thoughtful, the lips firmly set; but she seemed to Dido to have grown, and to have gained something of her mother's mature dignity. She looked, the old woman told her, like the image of Pallas Athene; adding, to make her smile, that if she wanted an owl, she, Dido, could fill the part. Jestings had never been the old woman's strong point, and to-day it was less easy than ever; for, if the worst befell, and she were sent in her old age to a strange house—and Argutis, no doubt, to another—she would have to turn the handmill for the rest of her days.

But it was a hard task which the motherless—and now fatherless—girl had set herself, and she must try to cheer her darling. While she was dressing her, she never ceased praying to all the gods and goddesses she could think of to come to the maiden's aid and move the souls of those who could help her. And though she was, as a rule, ready to expect the worst, this time she hoped for the best; for Seleukus's wife must have a heart of stone if she could close it to such innocence, such beauty, and the pathetic glance of those large, imploring eyes.

When at length Melissa quitted the house, deeply veiled, with Argutis to escort her, she took his arm; and he, wearing his master's mantle, and exempted long since from keeping his hair cropped, was so proud of this that he walked with all the dignity of a freeman, and no one could have guessed that he was a slave. Melissa's face was completely hidden, and she, like her companion, was safe from recognition. Argutis, nevertheless, led her through the quietest and darkest lanes to the Kanopic way. Both were silent, and looked straight before them. Melissa, as she walked on, could not think with her usual calm. Like a suffering man who goes to the physician's house to die or be cured by the knife, she felt that she was on her way to something terrible in itself, to remedy, if possible, something still more dreadful. Her father—Alexander, so reckless and so good-hearted—Philip, whom she pitied—and her sick lover, came in turn before her fancy. But she could not control her mind to dwell on either for long. Nor could she, as usual, when she had any serious purpose in hand, put up a prayer to her mother's manes or the immortals; and all the while an inner voice made itself heard, confidently promising her that Caesar, for whom she had sacrificed, and who might be kinder and more merciful than others fancied, would at once grant all she should ask. But she would not listen; and when she nevertheless ventured to consider how she could make her way into Caesar's presence, a cold shiver ran down her back, and again Philip's last words sounded in her ears, "Death rather than dishonor!"

Other thoughts and feelings filled the slave's soul. He, who had always watched over his master's children with far more anxious care than Heron himself, had not said a word to dissuade Melissa from her perilous expedition. Her plan had, indeed, seemed to him the only one which promised any success. He was a man of sixty years, and a shrewd fellow, who might easily have found a better master than Heron had been; but he gave not a thought to his own prospects—only to Melissa's, whom he loved as a child of his own. She had placed herself under his protection, and he felt responsible for her fate. Thus he regarded it as great good fortune that he could be of use in procuring her admission to the house of Seleukus, for the door-keeper was a fellow-countryman of his, whom Fate had brought

hither from the banks of the Moselle. At every festival, which secured a few hours' liberty to all the slaves, they had for years been boon companions, and Argutis knew that his friend would do for him and his young mistress all that lay in his power. It would, of course, be difficult to get an audience of the mistress of a house where Caesar was a guest, but the door-keeper was clever and ingenious, and would do anything short of the impossible.

So he walked with his head high and his heart full of pride, and it confirmed his courage when one of Zminis's men, whom they passed in the brightly illuminated Kanopic street, and who had helped to secure Philip, looked at him without recognizing him.

There was a great stir in this, the handsomest road through the city. The people were waiting for Caesar; but stricter order was observed than on the occasion of his arrival. The guard prohibited all traffic on the southern side of the way, and only allowed the citizens to walk up and down the footpath, shaded by trees, between the two roadways paved with granite flags, and the arcades in front of the houses on either side. The free inhabitants, unaccustomed to such restrictions, revenged themselves by cutting witticisms at Caesar's expense, "for clearing the streets of Alexandria by his men-at-arms as he did those of Rome by the executioner. He seemed to have forgotten, as he kept the two roads open, that he only needed one, now that he had murdered his brother and partner."

Melissa and her companion were ordered to join the crowd on the footway; but Argutis managed to convince a man on guard that they were two of the mimes who were to perform before Caesar—the door-keeper at the house of Seleukus would confirm the fact—and the official himself made way for them into the vestibule of this splendid dwelling.

But Melissa was as little in the humor to admire all the lavish magnificence which surrounded her as Alexander had been a few days since. Still veiled, she modestly took a place among the choir who stood on each side of the hall ready to welcome Caesar with singing and music. Argutis stopped to speak with his friend. She dimly felt that the whispering and giggling all about her was at her expense; and when an elderly, man, the choir-master, asked her what she wanted, and desired her to remove her veil, she obeyed at once, saying: "Pray let me stand here, the Lady Berenike will send for me."

"Very well," replied the musician; and he silenced the singers, who were hazarding various impertinent guesses as to the arrival of so pretty a girl just when Caesar was expected.

As Melissa dropped her veil the splendor of the scene, lighted up by numberless tapers and lamps, forced itself on her attention. She now perceived that the porphyry columns of the great hall were wreathed with flowers, and that garlands swung in graceful curves from the open roof; while at the farther end, statues had been placed of Septimus Severus and Julia Domna, Caracalla's parents. On each side of these works of art stood bowers of plants, in which gay-plumaged birds were fluttering about, excited by the lights. But all these glories swam before her eyes, and the first question which the artist's daughter was wont to ask herself, "is it really beautiful or no?" never occurred to her mind. She did not even notice the smell of incense, until some fresh powder was thrown on, and it became oppressive.

She was fully conscious only of two facts, when at last Argutis returned: that she was the object of much curious examination and that every one was wondering what detained Caesar so long.

At last, after she had waited many long minutes, the door-keeper approached her with a young woman in a rich but simple dress, in whom she recognized Johanna, the Christian waiting-maid of whom Alexander had spoken. She did not speak, but beckoned her to come.

Breathing anxiously, and bending her head low, Melissa, following her guide, reached a handsome impluvium, where a fountain played in the midst of a bed of roses. Here the moon and starlight mingled with that of lamps without number, and the ruddy glare of a blaze; for all round the basin, from which the playing waters danced skyward, stood marble genii, carrying in their hands or on their heads silver dishes, in which the leaping flames consumed cedar chips and aromatic resins.

At the back of this court, where it was as light as day, at the top of three steps, stood the statues of Alexander the Great and Caracalla. They were of equal size; and the artist, who had wrought the

second in great haste out of the slightest materials, had been enjoined to make Caesar as like as possible in every respect to the hero he most revered. Thus they looked like brothers. The figures were lighted up by the fires which burned on two altars of ivory and gold. Beautiful boys, dressed as armed Erotes, fed the flames.

The whole effect was magical and bewildering; but, as she followed her guide, Melissa only felt that she was in the midst of a new world, such as she might perhaps have seen in a dream; till, as they passed the fountain, the cool drops sprinkled her face.

Then she suddenly remembered what had brought her hither. In a minute she must appear as a supplicant in the presence of Korinna's mother— perhaps even in that of Caesar himself—and the fate of all dear to her depended on her demeanor. The sense of fulfilling a serious duty was uppermost in her mind. She drew herself up, and replaced a stray lock of hair; and her heart beat almost to bursting as she saw a number of, men standing on the platform at the top of the steps, round a lady who had just risen from her ivory seat. Giving her hand to a Roman senator, distinguished by the purple edge to his toga, she descended the steps, and advanced to meet Melissa.

This dignified matron, who was awaiting the ruler of the world and yet could condescend to come forward to meet a humble artist's daughter, was taller by half a head than her illustrious companion; and the few minutes during which Berenike was coming toward her were enough to fill Melissa with thankfulness, confidence, and admiration. And even in that short time, as she gazed at the magnificent dress of blue brocade shot with gold and sparkling with precious stones which draped the lady's majestic figure, she thought how keen a pang it must cost the mother, so lately bereft of her only child, to maintain a kindly, nay, a genial aspect, in the midst of this display, toward Caesar and a troop of noisy guests.

The sincerest pity for this woman, rich and preeminent as she was, filled the soul of the girl, who herself was so much to be pitied. But when the lady had come up to her, and asked, in her deep voice, what was the danger that threatened her brother, Melissa, with unembarrassed grace, and although it was the first time she had ever addressed a lady of such high degree, answered simply, with a full sense of the business in hand:

"My name is Melissa; I am the sister of Alexander the painter. I know it is overbold to venture into your presence just now, when you have so much else to think of; but I saw no other way of saving my brother's life, which is in peril."

At this Berenike seemed surprised. She turned to her companion, who was her sister's husband, and the first Egyptian who had been admitted to the Roman Senate, and said, in a tone of gentle reproach:

"Did not I say so, Coeranus? Nothing but the most urgent need would have brought Alexander's sister to speak with me at such an hour."

And the senator, whose black eyes had rested with pleasure on Melissa's rare beauty, promptly replied, "And if she had come for the veriest trifle she would be no less welcome to me."

"Let me hear no more of such speeches," Berenike exclaimed with some annoyance.—"Now, my child, be quick. What about your brother?"

Melissa briefly and truthfully reported Alexander's heedless crime and the results to her father and Philip. She ended by beseeching the noble lady with fervent pathos to intercede for her father and brothers.

Meanwhile the senator's keen face had darkened, and the lady Berenike's large eyes, too, were downcast. She evidently found it hard to come to a decision; and for the moment she was relieved of the necessity, for runners came hurrying up, and the senator hastily desired Melissa to stand aside.

He whispered to his sister-in-law:

"It will never do to spoil Caesar's good-humor under your roof for the sake of such people," and Berenike had only time to reply, "I am not afraid of him," when the messenger explained to

her that Caesar himself was prevented from coming, but that his representatives, charged with his apologies, were close at hand.

On this Coeranus exclaimed, with a sour smile: "Admit that I am a true prophet! You have to put up with the same treatment that we senators have often suffered under."

But the matron scarcely heard him. She cast her eyes up to heaven with sincere thanksgiving as she murmured with a sigh of relief, "For this mercy the gods be praised!"

She unclasped her hands from her heaving bosom, and said to the steward who had followed the messengers:

"Caesar will not be present. Inform your lord, but so that no one else may hear. He must come here and receive the imperial representatives with me. Then have my couch quietly removed and the banquet served at once. O Coeranus, you can not imagine the misery I am thus spared!"

"Berenike!" said the senator, in a warning voice, and he laid his finger on his lips. Then turning to the young supplicant, he said to her in a tone of regret: "So your walk is for nothing, fair maid. If you are as sensible as you are pretty, you will understand that it is too much to ask any one to stand between the lion and the prey which has roused his ire."

The lady, however, did not heed the caution which her brother-in-law intended to convey. As Melissa's imploring eyes met her own, she said, with clear decision:

"Wait here. We shall see who it is that Caesar sends. I know better than my lord here what it is to see those dear to us in peril. How old are you, child?"

"Eighteen," replied Melissa.

"Eighteen?" repeated Berenike, as if the word were a pain to her, for her daughter had been just of that age. Then she said, louder and with encouraging kindness:

"All that lies in my power shall be done for you and yours.—And you, Coeranus, must help me."

"If I can," he replied, "with all the zeal of my reverence for you and my admiration for beauty. But here come the envoys. The elder, I see, is our learned Philostratus, whose works are known to you; the younger is Theocritus, the favorite of fortune of whom I was telling you. If the charm of that face might but conquer the omnipotent youth—"

"Coeranus!" she exclaimed, with stern reproof; but she failed to hear the senator's excuses, for her husband, Seleukus, followed her down the steps, and with a hasty sign to her, advanced to meet his guests.

Theocritus was spokesman, and notwithstanding the mourning toga which wrapped him in fine folds, his gestures did not belie his origin as an actor and dancer. When Seleukus presented him to his wife, Theocritus assured her that when, but an hour since, his sovereign lord, who was already dressed and wreathed for the banquet, had learned that the gods had bereft of their only child the couple whose hospitality had promised him such a delightful evening, he had been equally shocked and grieved. Caesar was deeply distressed at the unfortunate circumstance that he should have happened in his ignorance to intrude on the seclusion which was the prerogative of grief. He begged to assure her and her husband of the high favor of the ruler of the world. As for himself, Theocritus, he would not fail to describe the splendor with which they had decorated their princely residence in Caesar's honor. His imperial master would be touched, indeed, to hear that even the bereaved mother, who, like Niobe, mourned for her offspring, had broken the stony spell which held her to Sipylos, and had decked herself to receive the greatest of all earthly guests as radiant as Juno at the golden table of the gods.

The lady succeeded in controlling herself and listening to the end of these pompous phrases without interrupting the speaker. Every word which flowed so glibly from his tongue fell on her ear as bitter mockery; and he himself was so repugnant to her, that she felt it a release when, after exchanging a few words with the master of the house, he begged leave to retire, as important business called him away. And this, indeed, was the truth. For no consideration would he have left this duty to another, for it was to communicate to Titianus, who had offended him, the intelligence that Caesar had deprived him of the office of prefect, and intended to examine into certain complaints of his administration.

The second envoy, however, remained, though he refused Seleukus's invitation to fill his place at the banquet. He exchanged a few words with the lady Berenike, and presently found himself taken aside by the senator, and, after a short explanation, led up to Melissa, whom Coeranus desired to appeal for help to Philostratus, the famous philosopher, who enjoyed Caesar's closest confidence.

Coeranus then obeyed a sign from Berenike, who wished to know whether he would be answerable for introducing this rarely pretty girl, who had placed herself under their protection—and whom she, for her part, meant to protect—to a courtier of whom she knew nothing but that he was a writer of taste.

The question seemed to amuse Coeranus, but, seeing that his sister-in-law was very much in earnest, he dropped his flippant tone and admitted that Philostratus, as a young man, had been one of the last with whom he would trust a girl. His far-famed letters sufficiently proved that the witty philosopher had been a devoted and successful courtier of women. But that was all a thing of the past. He still, no doubt, did homage to female beauty, but he led a regular life, and had become one of the most ardent and earnest upholders of religion and virtue. He was one of the learned circle which gathered round Julia Domna, and it was by her desire that he had accompanied Caracalla, to keep his mad passions in check when it might be possible.

The conversation between Melissa and the philosopher had meanwhile taken an unexpected turn. At his very first address the reply had died on her lips, for in Caesar's representative she had recognized the Roman whom she had seen in the Temple of Asklepios, and who had perhaps overheard her there. Philostratus, too, seemed to remember the meeting; for his shrewd face—a pleasing mixture of grave and gay—lighted up at once with a subtle smile as he said:

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