

GEORG EBERS

UARDA : A ROMANCE OF
ANCIENT EGYPT.

VOLUME 05

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Uarda : a Romance of
Ancient Egypt. Volume 05

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CHAPTER XX

As Nemu, on his way back from his visit to Ani, approached his mistress's house, he was detained by a boy, who desired him to follow him to the stranger's quarter. Seeing him hesitate, the messenger showed him the ring of his mother Hekt, who had come into the town on business, and wanted to speak with him.

Nemu was tired, for he was not accustomed to walking; his ass was dead, and Katuti could not afford to give him another. Half of Mena's beasts had been sold, and the remainder barely sufficed for the field-labor.

At the corners of the busiest streets, and on the market-places, stood boys with asses which they hired out for a small sum;

[In the streets of modern Egyptian towns asses stand saddled for hire. On the monuments only foreigners are represented as riding on asses, but these beasts are mentioned in almost every list of the possessions of the nobles, even in very early times, and the number is often considerable. There is a picture extant of a rich old man

who rides on a seat supported on the backs of two donkeys.
Lepsius, Denkmaler, part ii. 126.]

but Nemu had parted with his last money for a garment and a new wig, so that he might appear worthily attired before the Regent. In former times his pocket had never been empty, for Mena had thrown him many a ring of silver, or even of gold, but his restless and ambitious spirit wasted no regrets on lost luxuries. He remembered those years of superfluity with contempt, and as he puffed and panted on his way through the dust, he felt himself swell with satisfaction.

The Regent had admitted him to a private interview, and the little man had soon succeeded in riveting his attention; Ani had laughed till the tears rolled down his cheeks at Nemu's description of Paaker's wild passion, and he had proved himself in earnest over the dwarf's further communications, and had met his demands half-way. Nemu felt like a duck hatched on dry land, and put for the first time into water; like a bird hatched in a cage, and that for the first time is allowed to spread its wings and fly. He would have swum or have flown willingly to death if circumstances had not set a limit to his zeal and energy.

Bathed in sweat and coated with dust, he at last reached the gay tent in the stranger's quarter, where the sorceress Hekt was accustomed to alight when she came over to Thebes.

He was considering far-reaching projects, dreaming of possibilities, devising subtle plans—rejecting them as too subtle, and supplying their place with others more feasible and less

dangerous; altogether the little diplomatist had no mind for the motley tribes which here surrounded him. He had passed the temple in which the people of Kaft adored their goddess Astarte, and the sanctuary of Seth, where they sacrificed to Baal, without letting himself be disturbed by the dancing devotees or the noise of cymbals and music which issued from their enclosures. The tents and slightly-built wooden houses of the dancing girls did not tempt him. Besides their inhabitants, who in the evening tricked themselves out in tinsel finery to lure the youth of Thebes into extravagance and folly, and spent their days in sleeping till sundown, only the gambling booths drove a brisk business; and the guard of police had much trouble to restrain the soldier, who had staked and lost all his prize money, or the sailor, who thought himself cheated, from such outbreaks of rage and despair as must end in bloodshed. Drunken men lay in front of the taverns, and others were doing their utmost, by repeatedly draining their beakers, to follow their example.

Nothing was yet to be seen of the various musicians, jugglers, fire-eaters, serpent-charmers, and conjurers, who in the evening displayed their skill in this part of the town, which at all times had the aspect of a never ceasing fair. But these delights, which Nemu had passed a thousand times, had never had any temptation for him. Women and gambling were not to his taste; that which could be had simply for the taking, without trouble or exertion, offered no charms to his fancy, he had no fear of the ridicule of the dancing-women, and their associates—indeed, he occasionally

sought them, for he enjoyed a war of words, and he was of opinion that no one in Thebes could beat him at having the last word. Other people, indeed, shared this opinion, and not long before Paaker's steward had said of Nemu:

"Our tongues are cudgels, but the little one's is a dagger."

The destination of the dwarf was a very large and gaudy tent, not in any way distinguished from a dozen others in its neighborhood. The opening which led into it was wide, but at present closed by a hanging of coarse stuff.

Nemu squeezed himself in between the edge of the tent and the yielding door, and found himself in an almost circular tent with many angles, and with its cone-shaped roof supported on a pole by way of a pillar.

Pieces of shabby carpet lay on the dusty soil that was the floor of the tent, and on these squatted some gaily-clad girls, whom an old woman was busily engaged in dressing. She painted the finger and toenails of the fair ones with orange-colored Henna, blackened their brows and eye-lashes with Mestem—[Antimony.]—to give brilliancy to their glance, painted their cheeks with white and red, and anointed their hair with scented oil.

It was very hot in the tent, and not one of the girls spoke a word; they sat perfectly still before the old woman, and did not stir a finger, excepting now and then to take up one of the porous clay pitchers, which stood on the ground, for a draught of water, or to put a pill of Kyphi between their painted lips.

Various musical instruments leaned against the walls of the tent, hand- drums, pipes and lutes and four tambourines lay on the ground; on the vellum of one slept a cat, whose graceful kittens played with the bells in the hoop of another.

An old negro-woman went in and out of the little back-door of the tent, pursued by flies and gnats, while she cleared away a variety of earthen dishes with the remains of food—pomegranate-peelings, breadcrumbs, and garlic-tops—which had been lying on one of the carpets for some hours since the girls had finished their dinner.

Old Hekt sat apart from the girls on a painted trunk, and she was saying, as she took a parcel from her wallet:

"Here, take this incense, and burn six seeds of it, and the vermin will all disappear—" she pointed to the flies that swarmed round the platter in her hand. "If you like I will drive away the mice too and draw the snakes out of their holes better than the priests."

[Recipes for exterminating noxious creatures are found in the papyrus in my possession.]

"Keep your magic to yourself," said a girl in a husky voice. "Since you muttered your words over me, and gave me that drink to make me grow slight and lissom again, I have been shaken to pieces with a cough at night, and turn faint when I am dancing."

"But look how slender you have grown," answered Hekt, "and your cough will soon be well."

"When I am dead," whispered the girl to the old woman. "I

know that most of us end so."

The witch shrugged her shoulders, and perceiving the dwarf she rose from her seat.

The girls too noticed the little man, and set up the indescribable cry, something like the cackle of hens, which is peculiar to Eastern women when something tickles their fancy. Nemu was well known to them, for his mother always stayed in their tent whenever she came to Thebes, and the gayest of them cried out:

"You are grown, little man, since the last time you were here."

"So are you," said the dwarf sharply; "but only as far as big words are concerned."

"And you are as wicked as you are small," retorted the girl.

"Then my wickedness is small too," said the dwarf laughing, "for I am little enough! Good morning, girls—may Besa help your beauty. Good day, mother—you sent for me?"

The old woman nodded; the dwarf perched himself on the chest beside her, and they began to whisper together.

"How dusty and tired you are," said Hekt. "I do believe you have come on foot in the burning sun."

"My ass is dead," replied Nemu, "and I have no money to hire a steed."

"A foretaste of future splendor," said the old woman with a sneer. "What have you succeeded in doing?"

"Paaker has saved us," replied Nemu, "and I have just come from a long interview with the Regent."

"Well?"

"He will renew your letter of freedom, if you will put Paaker into his power."

"Good-good. I wish he would make up his mind to come and seek me—in disguise, of course—I would—"

"He is very timid, and it would not suggest to him anything so unpracticable."

"Hm—" said Hekt, "perhaps you are right, for when we have to demand a good deal it is best only to ask for what is feasible. One rash request often altogether spoils the patron's inclination for granting favors."

"What else has occurred?"

"The Regent's army has conquered the Ethiopians, and is coming home with rich spoils."

"People may be bought with treasure," muttered the old woman, "I good— good!"

"Paaker's sword is sharpened; I would give no more for my master's life, than I have in my pocket—and you know why I came on foot through the dust."

"Well, you can ride home again," replied his mother, giving the little man a small silver ring. "Has the pioneer seen Nefert again?"

"Strange things have happened," said the dwarf, and he told his mother what had taken place between Katuti and Nefert. Nemu was a good listener, and had not forgotten a word of what he had heard.

The old woman listened to his story with the most eager attention.

"Well, well," she muttered, "here is another extraordinary thing. What is common to all men is generally disgustingly similar in the palace and in the hovel. Mothers are everywhere she-apes, who with pleasure let themselves be tormented to death by their children, who repay them badly enough, and the wives generally open their ears wide if any one can tell them of some misbehavior of their husbands! But that is not the way with your mistress."

The old woman looked thoughtful, and then she continued:

"In point of fact this can be easily explained, and is not at all more extraordinary than it is that those tired girls should sit yawning. You told me once that it was a pretty sight to see the mother and daughter side by side in their chariot when they go to a festival or the Panegyrai; Katuti, you said, took care that the colors of their dresses and the flowers in their hair should harmonize. For which of them is the dress first chosen on such occasions?"

"Always for the lady Katuti, who never wears any but certain colors," replied Nemu quickly.

"You see," said the witch laughing, "Indeed it must be so. That mother always thinks of herself first, and of the objects she wishes to gain; but they hang high, and she treads down everything that is in her way— even her own child—to reach them. She will contrive that Paaker shall be the ruin of Mena,

as sure as I have ears to hear with, for that woman is capable of playing any tricks with her daughter, and would marry her to that lame dog yonder if it would advance her ambitious schemes."

"But Nefert!" said Nemu. "You should have seen her. The dove became a lioness."

"Because she loves Mena as much as her mother loves herself," answered Hekt. "As the poets say, 'she is full of him.' It is really true of her, there is no room for any thing else. She cares for one only, and woe to those who come between him and her!"

"I have seen other women in love," said Nemu, "but—"

"But," exclaimed the old witch with such a sharp laugh that the girls all looked up, "they behaved differently to Nefert—I believe you, for there is not one in a thousand that loves as she does. It is a sickness that gives raging pain—like a poisoned arrow in an open wound, and devours all that is near it like a fire-brand, and is harder to cure than the disease which is killing that coughing wench. To be possessed by that demon of anguish is to suffer the torture of the damned—or else," and her voice sank to softness, "to be more blest than the Gods, happy as they are. I know—I know it all; for I was once one of the possessed, one of a thousand, and even now—"

"Well?" asked the dwarf.

"Folly!" muttered the witch, stretching herself as if awaking from sleep. "Madness! He—is long since dead, and if he were not it would be all the same to me. All men are alike, and Mena will be like the rest."

"But Paaker surely is governed by the demon you describe?" asked the dwarf.

"May be," replied his mother; "but he is self-willed to madness. He would simply give his life for the thing because it is denied him. If your mistress Nefert were his, perhaps he might be easier; but what is the use of chattering? I must go over to the gold tent, where everyone goes now who has any money in their purse, to speak to the mistress—"

"What do you want with her?" interrupted Nemu. "Little Uarda over there," said the old woman, "will soon be quite well again. You have seen her lately; is she not grown beautiful, wonderfully beautiful? Now I shall see what the good woman will offer me if I take Uarda to her? the girl is as light-footed as a gazelle, and with good training would learn to dance in a very few weeks."

Nemu turned perfectly white.

"That you shall not do," said he positively.

"And why not?" asked the old woman, "if it pays well."

"Because I forbid it," said the dwarf in a choked voice.

"Bless me," laughed the woman; "you want to play my lady Nefert, and expect me to take the part of her mother Katuti. But, seriously, having seen the child again, have you any fancy for her?"

"Yes," replied Nemu. "If we gain our end, Katuti will make me free, and make me rich. Then I will buy Pinem's grandchild, and take her for my wife. I will build a house near the hall of

justice, and give the complainants and defendants private advice, like the hunch-back Sent, who now drives through the streets in his own chariot."

"Hm—" said his mother, "that might have done very well, but perhaps it is too late. When the child had fever she talked about the young priest who was sent from the House of Seti by Ameni. He is a fine tall fellow, and took a great interest in her; he is a gardener's son, named Pentaur."

"Pentaur?" said the dwarf. "Pentaur? He has the haughty air and the expression of the old Mohar, and would be sure to rise; but they are going to break his proud neck for him."

"So much the better," said the old woman. "Uarda would be just the wife for you, she is good and steady, and no one knows —"

"What?" said Nemu.

"Who her mother was—for she was not one of us. She came here from foreign parts, and when she died she left a trinket with strange letters on it. We must show it to one of the prisoners of war, after you have got her safe; perhaps they could make out the queer inscription. She comes of a good stock, that I am certain; for Uarda is the very living image of her mother, and as soon as she was born, she looked like the child of a great man. You smile, you idiot! Why thousands of infants have been in my hands, and if one was brought to me wrapped in rags I could tell if its parents were noble or base-born. The shape of the foot shows it—and other marks. Uarda may stay where she is, and I will help you.

If anything new occurs let me know."

CHAPTER XXI

When Nemu, riding on an ass this time, reached home, he found neither his mistress nor Nefert within.

The former was gone, first to the temple, and then into the town; Nefert, obeying an irresistible impulse, had gone to her royal friend Bent-Anat.

The king's palace was more like a little town than a house. The wing in which the Regent resided, and which we have already visited, lay away from the river; while the part of the building which was used by the royal family commanded the Nile.

It offered a splendid, and at the same time a pleasing prospect to the ships which sailed by at its foot, for it stood, not a huge and solitary mass in the midst of the surrounding gardens, but in picturesque groups of various outline. On each side of a large structure, which contained the state rooms and banqueting hall, three rows of pavilions of different sizes extended in symmetrical order. They were connected with each other by colonnades, or by little bridges, under which flowed canals, that watered the gardens and gave the palace-grounds the aspect of a town built on islands.

The principal part of the castle of the Pharaohs was constructed of light Nile-mud bricks and elegantly carved woodwork, but the extensive walls which surrounded it were ornamented and fortified with towers, in front of which heavily

armed soldiers stood on guard.

The walls and pillars, the galleries and colonnades, even the roofs, blazed in many colored paints, and at every gate stood tall masts, from which red and blue flags fluttered when the king was residing there. Now they stood up with only their brass spikes, which were intended to intercept and conduct the lightning.— [According to an inscription first interpreted by Dumichen.]

To the right of the principal building, and entirely surrounded with thick plantations of trees, stood the houses of the royal ladies, some mirrored in the lake which they surrounded at a greater or less distance. In this part of the grounds were the king's storehouses in endless rows, while behind the centre building, in which the Pharaoh resided, stood the barracks for his body guard and the treasuries. The left wing was occupied by the officers of the household, the innumerable servants and the horses and chariots of the sovereign.

In spite of the absence of the king himself, brisk activity reigned in the palace of Rameses, for a hundred gardeners watered the turf, the flower-borders, the shrubs and trees; companies of guards passed hither and thither; horses were being trained and broken; and the princess's wing was as full as a beehive of servants and maids, officers and priests.

Nefert was well known in this part of the palace. The gate-keepers let her litter pass unchallenged, with low bows; once in the garden, a lord in waiting received her, and conducted her to the chamberlain, who, after a short delay, introduced her into the

sitting-room of the king's favorite daughter.

Bent-Anat's apartment was on the first floor of the pavilion, next to the king's residence. Her dead mother had inhabited these pleasant rooms, and when the princess was grown up it made the king happy to feel that she was near him; so the beautiful house of the wife who had too early departed, was given up to her, and at the same time, as she was his eldest daughter, many privileges were conceded to her, which hitherto none but queens had enjoyed.

The large room, in which Nefert found the princess, commanded the river. A doorway, closed with light curtains, opened on to a long balcony with a finely-worked balustrade of copper-gilt, to which clung a climbing rose with pink flowers.

When Nefert entered the room, Bent-Anat was just having the rustling curtain drawn aside by her waiting-women; for the sun was setting, and at that hour she loved to sit on the balcony, as it grew cooler, and watch with devout meditation the departure of Ra, who, as the grey-haired Turn, vanished behind the western horizon of the Necropolis in the evening to bestow the blessing of light on the under-world.

Nefert's apartment was far more elegantly appointed than the princess's; her mother and Mena had surrounded her with a thousand pretty trifles. Her carpets were made of sky-blue and silver brocade from Damascus, the seats and couches were covered with stuff embroidered in feathers by the Ethiopian women, which looked like the breasts of birds. The images of

the Goddess Hathor, which stood on the house-altar, were of an imitation of emerald, which was called Mafkat, and the other little figures, which were placed near their patroness, were of lapis-lazuli, malachite, agate and bronze, overlaid with gold. On her toilet-table stood a collection of salve-boxes, and cups of ebony and ivory finely carved, and everything was arranged with the utmost taste, and exactly suited Nefert herself.

Bent-Anat's room also suited the owner.

It was high and airy, and its furniture consisted in costly but simple necessaries; the lower part of the wall was lined with cool tiles of white and violet earthen ware, on each of which was pictured a star, and which, all together, formed a tasteful pattern. Above these the walls were covered with a beautiful dark green material brought from Sais, and the same stuff was used to cover the long divans by the wall. Chairs and stools, made of cane, stood round a very large table in the middle of this room, out of which several others opened; all handsome, comfortable, and harmonious in aspect, but all betraying that their mistress took small pleasure in trifling decorations. But her chief delight was in finely-grown plants, of which rare and magnificent specimens, artistically arranged on stands, stood in the corners of many of the rooms. In others there were tall obelisks of ebony, which bore saucers for incense, which all the Egyptians loved, and which was prescribed by their physicians to purify and perfume their dwellings. Her simple bedroom would have suited a prince who loved floriculture, quite as well as a princess.

Before all things Bent-Anat loved air and light. The curtains of her windows and doors were only closed when the position of the sun absolutely required it; while in Nefert's rooms, from morning till evening, a dim twilight was maintained.

The princess went affectionately towards the charioteer's wife, who bowed low before her at the threshold; she took her chin with her right hand, kissed her delicate narrow forehead, and said:

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