

GEORG EBERS

THE EMPEROR.

VOLUME 09

Georg Ebers

The Emperor. Volume 09

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Содержание

CHAPTER XIV	5
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	11

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The Emperor – Volume 09

CHAPTER XIV

The entertainment which Verus was giving on the eve of his birthday seemed to be far from drawing to an end, even at the beginning of the third hour of the morning. Besides the illustrious and learned Romans who had accompanied the Emperor to Alexandria, the most famous and distinguished Alexandrians had also been invited by the praetor. The splendid banquet had long been ended, but jar after jar of mixed wine was still being filled and emptied. Verus himself had been unanimously chosen as the king and leader of the feast. Crowned with a rich garland, he reclined on a couch strewn with rose-leaves, an invention of his own, and formed of four cushions piled one on another. A curtain of transparent gauze screened him from flies and gnats, and a tightly-woven mat of lilies and other flowers covered his feet and exhaled sweet odors for him and for the pretty singer who sat by his side.

Pretty boys dressed as little cupids watched every sign of the 'sham Eros.'

How indolently he lay on the deep, soft cushions! And yet his eyes were every where, and though he had not failed to give due consideration to the preparations for his feast, he devoted all the powers of his mind to the present management of it. As at the entertainments which Hadrian was accustomed to give in Rome, first of all short selections from new essays or poems were recited by their authors, then a gay comedy was performed; then Glycera, the most famous singer in the city, had sung a dithyramb to her harp, in a voice as sweet as a bell, and Alexander, a skilled performer on the trigonon, had executed a piece. Finally a troop of female dancers had rushed into the room and swayed and balanced themselves to the music of the double-flute and tambourine.

Each fresh amusement had been more loudly applauded than the last. With every jar of wine a new torrent of merriment went up through the opening in the roof, by which the scent of the flowers and of the perfume burnt on beautiful little altars found an exit into the open air. The wine offered in libations to the gods already lay in broad pools upon the hard pavement of the hall, the music and singing were drowned in shouts the feast had become an orgy.

Verus was inciting the more quiet or slothful of his guests to a freer enjoyment and encouraging the noisiest in their extravagant recklessness to still more unbridled license. At the same time he bowed to each one who drank to his health, entertained the singer who sat by his side, flung a sparkling jest into one and another silent group, and proved to the learned men who reclined on their couches near to his that whenever it was possible he took an interest in their discussions. Alexandria, the focus of all the learning of the East and the West, had seen other festivals than this riotous banquet. Indeed, even here a vein of grave and wise discourse flavored the meal of the circle that belonged to the Museum; but the senseless revelry of Rome had found its way into the houses of the rich, and even the noblest achievements of the human mind had been made, unawares, subservient to mere enjoyment. A man was a philosopher only that he might be prompt to discuss and always ready to take his share in the talk; and at a banquet a well-told anecdote was more heartily welcome than some profound idea that gave rise to a reflection or provoked a subtle discussion.

What a noise, what a clatter was storming in the hall by the second hour after midnight! How the lungs of the feasters were choked with overpowering perfumes! What repulsive exhibitions met the eye! How shamelessly was all decency trodden under foot! The poisonous breath of unchecked license had blasted the noble moderation of the vapor of wine which floated round this chaos of riotous toppers slowly rose the pale image of Satiety watching for victims on the morrow.

The circle of couches on which lay Florus, Favorinus and their Alexandrian friends stood like an island in the midst of the surging sea of the orgy. Even here the cup had been bravely passed round, and Florus was beginning to speak somewhat indistinctly, but conversation had hitherto had the upper hand.

Two days before, the Emperor had visited the Museum and had carried on learned discussions with the most prominent of the sages and professors there, in the presence of their assembled disciples. At last a formal disputation had arisen, and the dialectic keenness and precision with which Hadrian, in the purest Attic Greek, had succeeded in driving his opponents into a corner had excited the greatest admiration. The Sovereign had quitted the famous institution with a promise to reopen the contest at an early date. The philosophers, Pancrates and Dionysius and Apollonius, who took no wine at all, were giving a detailed account of the different phases of this remarkable disputation and praising the admirable memory and the ready tongue of the great monarch.

"And you did not even see him at his best," exclaimed Favorinus, the Gaul, the sophist and rhetorician. "He has received an unfavorable oracle and the stars seem to confirm the prophecy. This puts him out of tune. Between ourselves let me tell you I know a few who are his superiors in dialectic, but in his happiest moments he is irresistible—irresistible. Since we made up our quarrel he is like a brother to me. I will defend him against all comers, for, as I say, Hadrian is my brother."

The Gaul had poured out this speech in a defiant tone and with flashing eyes. He grew pale in his cups, touchy, boastful and very talkative.

"No doubt you are right," replied Apollonius, "but it seemed to us that he was bitter in discussion. His eyes are gloomy rather than gay."

"He is my brother," repeated Favorinus, "and as for his eyes, I have seen them flash—by Hercules! like the radiant sun, or merry twinkling stars! And his mouth! I know him well! He is my brother, and I will wager that while he condescended—it is too comical—condescended to dispute with you—with you, there was a sly smile at each corner of his mouth—so—look now—like this he smiled."

"I repeat, he seemed to us gloomy rather than gay," retorted Apollonius, with annoyance; and Pancrates added:

"If he does really know how to jest he certainly did not prove it to us."

"Not out of ill-will," laughed the Gaul, "you do not know him, but I—I am his friend and may follow wherever—he goes. Now only wait and I will tell you a few stories about him. If I chose I could describe his whole soul to you as if it lay there on the surface of the wine in my cup. Once in Rome he went to inspect the newly-decorated baths of Agrippa, and in the undressing-room he saw an old man, a veteran who had fought with him somewhere or other. My memory is greatly admired, but his is in no respect inferior. Scaurus was the old man's name—yes—yes, Scaurus. He did not observe Caesar at first, for after his bath his wounds were burning and he was rubbing his back against the rough stone of a pillar. Hadrian however called to him: 'Why are you scratching yourself, my friend?' and Scaurus, not at once recognizing Caesar's voice, answered without turning round: 'Because I have no slave to do it for me.' You should have heard Caesar laugh! Liberal as he is sometimes—I say sometimes—he gave Scaurus a handsome sum of money and two sturdy slaves. The story soon got abroad, and when Caesar, who—as you believe—cannot jest, a short time after again visited the bath, two old soldiers at once placed themselves in his way, scrubbed their backs against the wall like Scaurus, and called out to him 'Great Caesar, we have no slaves.'—'Then scratch each other,' cried he, and left the soldiers to rub themselves."

"Capital!" laughed Dionysius. "Now one more true story," interrupted the loquacious Gaul. "Once upon a time a man with white hair begged of him. The wretch was a low fellow, a parasite who wandered round from one man's table to another, feeding himself out of other folks' wallets and dishes. Caesar knew his man and warned him off. Then the creature had his hair dyed that he might not be recognized, and tried his luck a second time with the Emperor. But Hadrian has good eyes;

he pointed to the door, saying, with the gravest face: 'I have just lately refused to give your father anything.' And a hundred such jokes pass from mouth to mouth in Rome, and if you like I can give you a dozen of the best."

"Tell us, go on, out with your stories. They are all old friends!" stammered Florus. "But while Favorinus chatters we can drink."

The Gaul cast a contemptuous glance at the Roman, and answered promptly:

"My stories are too good for a drunken man."

Florus paused to think of an answer, but before he could find one, the praetor's body-slave rushed into the hall crying out: "The palace at Lochias is on fire."

Verus kicked the mat of lilies off his feet on to the floor, tore down the net that screened him in, and shouted to the breathless runner.

"My chariot-quick, my chariot! To our next merry meeting another evening my friends, with many thanks for the honor you have done me. I must be off to Lochias."

Verus flew out of the hall, without throwing on his cloak and hot as he was, into the cold night, and at the same time most of his guests had started up to hurry into the open air, to see the fire and to hear the latest news; but only very few went to the scene of the conflagration to help the citizens to extinguish it, and many heavily intoxicated drinkers remained lying on the couches.

As Favorinus and the Alexandrians raised themselves on their pillows Florus cried:

"No god shall make me stir from this place, not if the whole house is burnt down and Alexandria and Rome, and for aught I care every nest and nook on the face of the earth. It may all burn together. The Roman Empire can never be greater or more splendid than under Caesar! It may burn down like a heap of straw, it is all the same to me—I shall lie here and drink."

The turmoil and confusion on the scene of the interrupted feast seemed inextricable, while Verus hurried off to Sabina to inform her of what had occurred. But Balbilla had been the first to discover the fire and quite at the beginning, for after sitting industriously at her studies, and before going to bed, she had looked out toward the sea. She had instantly run out, cried "Fire!" and was now seeking for a chamberlain to awake Sabina.

The whole of Lochias flared and shone in a purple and golden glow. It formed the nucleus of a wide spreading radiance of tender red of which the extent and intensity alternately grew and diminished. Verus met the poetess at the door that led from the garden into the Empress' apartments. He omitted on this occasion to offer his customary greeting, but hastily asked her:

"Has Sabina been told?"

"I think not yet."

"Then have her called. Greet her from me—I must go to Lochias"

"We will follow you."

"No, stay here; you will be in the way there."

"I do not take much room and I shall go. What a magnificent spectacle."

"Eternal gods! the flames are breaking out too below the palace, by the King's harbor. Where can the chariots be?"

"Take me with you."

"No you must wake the Empress."

"And Lucilla?"

"You women must stay where you are."

"For my part I certainly will not. Caesar will be in no danger?"

"Hardly—the old stones cannot burn."

"Only look! how splendid! the sky is one crimson tent. I entreat you, Verus, let me go with you."

"No, no, pretty one. Men are wanted down there."

"How unkind you are."

"At last! here are the chariots! You women stay here; do you understand me?"

"I will not take any orders; I shall go to Lochias."

"To see Antinous in the flames! such a sight is not to be seen every day, to be sure!" cried Verus, ironically, as he sprang into his chariot, and took the reins into his own hand.

Balbilla stamped with rage.

She went to Sabina's rooms fully resolved to go to the scene of the fire. The Empress would not let herself be seen by any one, not even by Balbilla, till she was completely dressed. A waiting-woman told Balbilla that Sabina would get up certainly, but that for the sake of her health she could not venture out in the night-air.

The poetess then sought Lucilla and begged her to accompany her to Lochias; she was perfectly willing and ready, but when she heard that her husband had wished that the women should remain at the Caesareum she declared that she owed him obedience and tried to keep back her friend. But the perverse curly-haired girl was fully determined, precisely because Verus had forbidden her—and forbidden her with mocking words, to carry out her purpose. After a short altercation with Lucilla she left her, sought her companion Claudia, told her what she intended doing, dismissed that lady's remonstrance with a very positive command, gave orders herself to the house-steward to have horses put to a chariot and reached the imperilled palace an hour and a half after Verus.

An endless, many-headed crowd of people besieged the narrow end of Lochias on the landward side and the harbor wharves below, where some stores and shipyards were in flames. Boats innumerable were crowded round the little peninsula. An attempt was being made, with much shouting, and by the combined exertions of an immense number of men, to get the larger ships afloat which lay at anchor close to the quay of the King's harbor and to place them in security. Every thing far and wide was lighted up as brightly as by day, but with a ruddier and more restless light. The north-east breeze fanned the fire, aggravating the labors of the men who were endeavoring to extinguish it and snatching flakes of flame off every burning mass. Each blazing storehouse was a gigantic torch throwing a broad glare into the darkness of the night. The white marble of the tallest beacon tower in the world, on the island of Pharos, reflected a rosy hue, but its far gleaming light shone pale and colorless. The dark hulls of the larger ships and the flotilla of boats in the background were afloat in a fiery sea, and the still water under the shore mirrored the illumination in which the whole of Lochias was wrapped.

Balbilla could not tire of admiring this varying scene, in which the most gorgeous hues vied with each other and the intensest light contrasted with the deepest shadows. And she had ample time to dwell on the marvellous picture before her eyes, for her chariot could only proceed slowly, and at a point where the street led up from the King's harbor to the palace, lictors stood in her way and declared positively that any farther advance was out of the question. The horses, much scared by the glare of the fire and the crowd that pressed round them, could hardly be controlled, first rearing and then kicking at the front board of the chariot. The charioteer declared he could no longer be answerable. The people who had hurried to the rescue now began to abuse the women, who ought to have staid at home at the loom rather than come stopping the way for useful citizens.

"There is time enough to go out driving by daylight!" cried one man; and another: "If a spark falls in those curls another conflagration will break out."

The position of the ladies was becoming every instant more unendurable and Balbilla desired the charioteer to turn round; but in the swarming mass of men that filled the street this was easier said than done. One of the horses broke the strap which fastened the yoke that rested on his withers to the pole, started aside and forced back the crowd which now began to scold and scream loudly. Balbilla wanted to spring out of the chariot, but Claudia clung tightly to her and conjured her not to leave her in the lurch in the midst of the danger. The spoilt patrician's daughter was not timid, but on this occasion she would have given much not to have followed Verus. At first she thought, "A delightful adventure! still, it will not be perfect till it is over." But presently her bold experiment lost every trace

of charm, and repentance that she had ever undertaken it filled her mind. She was far nearer weeping than laughing already, when a man's deep voice said behind her, in tones of commanding decision:

"Make way there for the pumps; push aside whatever stops the way."

These terrible words reduced Claudia to sinking on to her knees, but Balbilla's quelled courage found fresh wings as she heard them, for she had recognized the voice of Pontius. Now he was close behind the chariot, high on a horse. He then was the man on horseback whom she had seen dashing from the sea-shore up to the higher storehouses that were burning, down to the lake, and hither and thither.

She turned full upon him and called him by his name. He recognized her, tried to pull up his horse as it was dashing forward, and smilingly shook his head at her, as much as to say: "She is a giddy creature and deserves a good scolding; but who could be angry with her?" And then he gave his orders to his subordinates just as if she had been a mere chattel, a bale of goods or something of the kind, and not an heiress of distinction.

"Take out the horses," he cried to the municipal guards; "we can use them for carrying water."—"Help the ladies out of the chariot."—"Take them between you Nonnus and Lucanus."—"Now, stow the chariot in there among the bushes."—"Make way there in front, make way for our pumps." And each of these orders was obeyed as promptly as if it was the word of command given by a general to his well-drilled soldiers.

After the pumps had been fairly started Pontius rode close up to Balbilla and said:

"Caesar is safe and sound. You no doubt wished to see the progress of the fire from a spot near it, and in fact the colors down there are magnificent. I have not time to escort you back to the Caesareum; but follow me. You will be safe in the harbor-guard's stone house, and from the roof you can command a view of Lochias and the whole peninsula. You will have a rare feast for the eye, noble Balbilla; but I beg you not to forget at the same time how many days of honest labor, what rich possessions, how many treasures earned by bitter hardship are being destroyed at this moment. What may delight you will cost bitter tears to many others, and so let us both hope that this splendid spectacle may now have reached its climax, and soon may come to an end."

"I hope so—I hope it with all my heart!" cried the girl.

"I was sure you would. As soon as possible I will come to look after you. You Nonnus and Lucanus, conduct these noble ladies to the harbor-guard's house.

"Tell him they are intimate friends of the Empress. Only keep the pumps going! Till we meet again Balbilla!" and with these words the architect gave his horse the bridle and made his way through the crowd.

A quarter of an hour later Balbilla was standing on the roof of the little stone guard-house. Claudia was utterly exhausted and incapable of speech. She sat in the dark little parlor below on a rough-hewn wooden bench. But the young Roman now gazed at the fire with different eyes than before. Pontius had made her feel a foe to the flames which only a short time before had filled her with delight as they soared up to the sky, wild and fierce. They still flared up violently, as though they had to climb above the roof; but soon they seemed to be quelled and exhausted, to find it more and more difficult to rise above the black smoke which welled up from the burning mass. Balbilla had looked out for the architect and had soon discovered him, for the man on horseback towered above the crowd. He halted now by one and now by another burning storehouse. Once she lost sight of him for a whole hour, for he had gone to Lochias. Then again he reappeared, and wherever he stayed for a while, the raging element abated its fury.

Without her having perceived it, the wind had changed and the air had become still and much warmer. This circumstance favored the efforts of the citizens trying to extinguish the fire, but Balbilla ascribed it to the foresight of her clever friend when the flames subsided in some places and in others were altogether extinguished. Once she saw that he had a building completely torn down which divided a burning granary from some other storehouses that had been spared, and she understood

the object of this order; it cut off the progress of the flames. Another time she saw him high on the top of a rise in the ground. Close before him in a sheet of flame was a magazine in which were kept tow and casks of resin and pitch. He turned his face full towards it and gave his orders, now on this side, now on that. His figure and that of his horse, which reared uneasily beneath him, were flooded in a crimson glow—a splendid picture! She trembled for him, she gazed in admiration at this calm, resolute, energetic man, and when a blazing beam fell close in front of him and after his frightened horse had danced round and round with him, he forced it to submit to his guidance, the praetor's insinuation recurred to her mind, that she clung to her determination to go to Lochias because she hoped to enjoy the spectacle of Antinous in the flames. Here, before her, was a nobler display, and yet her lively imagination which often, sometimes indeed against her will, gave shape to her formless thoughts—called up the image of the beautiful youth surrounded by the glowing glory which still painted the horizon.

Hour after hour slipped by; the efforts of the thousands who endeavored to extinguish the blaze were crowned by increasing success; one burning mass after another was quenched, if not extinguished, and instead of flames smoke, mingled with sparks, rose from Lochias blacker and blacker- and still Pontius came not to look after her. She could not see any stars for the sky was overcast with clouds, but the beginning of a new day could not be far distant. She was shivering with cold, and her friend's long absence began to annoy her. When, presently, it began to rain in large drops, she went down the ladder that led from the roof and sat down by the fire in the little room where her companion had gone fast asleep.

She had been sitting quite half an hour and gazing dreamily into the warming glow, when she heard the sound of hoofs and Pontius appeared. His face was begrimed, and his voice hoarse with shouting commands for hours. As soon as she saw him Balbilla forgot her vexation, greeted him warmly, and told him how she had watched his every movement; but the eager girl, so readily fired to enthusiasm, could only with the greatest difficulty bring out a few words to express the admiration that his mode of proceeding had so deeply excited in her mind.

She heard him say that his mouth was quite parched and his throat was longing for a draught of some drink, and she—who usually had every pin she needed handed to her by a slave, and on whom fate had bestowed no living creature whom she could find a pleasure in serving—she, with her own hand dipped a cup of water out of the large clay jar that stood in a corner of the room and offered it to him with a request that he would drink it. He eagerly swallowed the refreshing fluid, and when the little cup was empty Balbilla took it from his hand, refilled it, and gave it him again.

Claudia, who woke up when the architect came in, looked on at her foster-child's unheard-of proceedings with astonishment, shaking her head. When Pontius had drained the third cupful that Balbilla fetched for him he exclaimed, drawing a deep breath:

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