

**GEORG EBERS**

A THORNY

PATH. VOLUME

01

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**A Thorny Path. Volume 01**

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# Georg Ebers

## A Thorny Path – Volume 01

### CHAPTER I

The green screen slowly rose, covering the lower portion of the broad studio window where Heron, the gem-cutter, was at work. It was Melissa, the artist's daughter, who had pulled it up, with bended knees and outstretched arms, panting for breath.

"That is enough!" cried her father's impatient voice. He glanced up at the flood of light which the blinding sun of Alexandria was pouring into the room, as it did every autumn afternoon; but as soon as the shadow fell on his work-table the old man's busy fingers were at work again, and he heeded his daughter no more.

An hour later Melissa again, and without any bidding, pulled up the screen as before, but it was so much too heavy for her that the effort brought the blood into her calm, fair face, as the deep, rough "That is enough" was again heard from the work-table.

Then silence reigned once more. Only the artist's low whistling as he worked, or the patter and pipe of the birds in their cages by the window, broke the stillness of the spacious room, till the voice and step of a man were presently heard in the anteroom.

Heron laid by his graver and Melissa her gold embroidery, and the eyes of father and daughter met for the first time for some hours. The very birds seemed excited, and a starling, which had sat moping since the screen had shut the sun out, now cried out, "Olympias!" Melissa rose, and after a swift glance round the room she went to the door, come who might.

Ay, even if the brother she was expecting should bring a companion, or a patron of art who desired her father's work, the room need not fear a critical eye; and she was so well assured of the faultless neatness of her own person, that she only passed a hand over her brown hair, and with an involuntary movement pulled her simple white robe more tightly through her girdle.

Heron's studio was as clean and as simple as his daughter's attire, though it seemed larger than enough for the purpose it served, for only a very small part of it was occupied by the artist, who sat as if in exile behind the work-table on which his belongings were laid out: a set of small instruments in a case, a tray filled with shells and bits of onyx and other agates, a yellow ball of Cyrenian modeling-wax, pumice-stone, bottles, boxes, and bowls.

Melissa had no sooner crossed the threshold, than the sculptor drew up his broad shoulders and brawny person, and raised his hand to fling away the slender stylus he had been using; however, he thought better of it, and laid it carefully aside with the other tools. But this act of self-control must have cost the hot-headed, powerful man a great effort; for he shot a fierce look at the instrument which had had so narrow an escape, and gave it a push of vexation with the back of his hand.

Then he turned towards the door, his sunburnt face looking surly enough, in its frame of tangled gray hair and beard; and, as he waited for the visitor whom Melissa was greeting outside, he tossed back his big head, and threw out his broad, deep chest, as though preparing to wrestle.

Melissa presently returned, and the youth whose hand she still held was, as might be seen in every feature, none other than the sculptor's son. Both were dark-eyed, with noble and splendid heads, and in stature perfectly equal; but while the son's countenance beamed with hearty enjoyment, and seemed by its peculiar attractiveness to be made—and to be accustomed—to charm men and women alike, his father's face was expressive of disgust and misanthropy. It seemed, indeed, as though the newcomer had roused his ire, for Heron answered his son's cheerful greeting with no word but a reproachful "At last!" and paid no heed to the hand the youth held out to him.



Alexander was no doubt inured to such a reception; he did not disturb himself about the old man's ill-humor, but slapped him on the shoulder with rough geniality, went up to the work-table with easy composure, took up the vice which held the nearly finished gem, and, after holding it to the light and examining it carefully, exclaimed: "Well done, father! You have done nothing better than that for a long time."

"Poor stuff!" said his father. But his son laughed.

"If you will have it so. But I will give one of my eyes to see the man in Alexandria who can do the like!"

At this the old man broke out, and shaking his fist he cried: "Because the man who can find anything worth doing, takes good care not to waste his time here, making divine art a mere mockery by such trifling with toys! By Sirius! I should like to fling all those pebbles into the fire, the onyx and shells and jasper and what not, and smash all those wretched tools with these fists, which were certainly made for other work than this."

The youth laid an arm round his father's stalwart neck, and gayly interrupted his wrath. "Oh yes, Father Heron, Philip and I have felt often enough that they know how to hit hard."

"Not nearly often enough," growled the artist, and the young man went on:

"That I grant, though every blow from you was equal to a dozen from the hand of any other father in Alexandria. But that those mighty fists on human arms should have evoked the bewitching smile on the sweet lips of this Psyche, if it is not a miracle of art, is—"

"The degradation of art," the old man put in; but Alexander hastily added:

"The victory of the exquisite over the coarse."

"A victory!" exclaimed Heron, with a scornful flourish of his hand. "I know, boy, why you are trying to garland the oppressive yoke with flowers of flattery. So long as your surly old father sits over the vice, he only whistles a song and spares you his complaints. And then, there is the money his work brings in!"

He laughed bitterly, and as Melissa looked anxiously up at him, her brother exclaimed:

"If I did not know you well, master, and if it would not be too great a pity, I would throw that lovely Psyche to the ostrich in Scopas's court-yard; for, by Herakles! he would swallow your gem more easily than we can swallow such cruel taunts. We do indeed bless the Muses that work brings you some surcease of gloomy thoughts. But for the rest—I hate to speak the word gold. We want it no more than you, who, when the coffer is full, bury it or hide it with the rest. Apollodorus forced a whole talent of the yellow curse upon me for painting his men's room. The sailor's cap, into which I tossed it with the rest, will burst when Seleukus pays me for the portrait of his daughter; and if a thief robs you, and me too, we need not fret over it. My brush and your stylus will earn us more in no time. And what are our needs? We do not bet on quail-fights; we do not run races; I always had a loathing for purchased love; we do not want to wear a heap of garments bought merely because they take our fancy—indeed, I am too hot as it is under this scorching sun. The house is your own. The rent paid by Glaukias, for the work-room and garden you inherited from your father, pays for half at least of what we and the birds and the slaves eat. As for Philip, he lives on air and philosophy; and, besides, he is fed out of the great breadbasket of the Museum."

At this point the starling interrupted the youth's vehement speech with the appropriate cry, "My strength! my strength!" The brother and sister looked at each other, and Alexander went on with genuine enthusiasm:

"But it is not in you to believe us capable of such meanness. Dedicate your next finished work to Isis or Serapis. Let your masterpiece grace the goddess's head-gear, or the god's robe. We shall be quite content, and perhaps the immortals may restore your joy in life as a reward."

The bird repeated its lamentable cry, "My strength!" and the youth proceeded with increased vehemence:

"It would really be better that you should throw your vice and your graver and your burnisher, and all that heap of dainty tools, into the sea, and carve an Atlas such as we have heard you talk about ever since we could first speak Greek. Come, set to work on a colossus! You have but to speak the word, and the finest clay shall be ready on your modeling-table by to-morrow, either here or in Glaukias's work-room, which is indeed your own. I know where the best is to be found, and can bring it to you in any quantity. Scopas will lend me his wagon. I can see it now, and you valiantly struggling with it till your mighty arms ache. You will not whistle and hum over that, but sing out with all your might, as you used when my mother was alive, when you and your apprentices joined Dionysus's drunken rout. Then your brow will grow smooth again; and if the model is a success, and you want to buy marble, or pay the founder, then out with your gold, out of the coffer and its hiding-place! Then you can make use of all your strength, and your dream of producing an Atlas such as the world has not seen—your beautiful dream—will become a reality!"

Heron had listened eagerly to his son's rhapsody, but he now cast a timid glance at the table where the wax and tools lay, pushed the rough hair from his brow, and broke in with a bitter laugh: "My dream, do you say— my dream? As if I did not know too well that I am no longer the man to create an Atlas! As if I did not feel, without your words, that my strength for it is a thing of the past!"

"Nay, father," exclaimed the painter. "Is it right to cast away the sword before the battle? And even if you did not succeed—"

"You would be all the better pleased," the sculptor put in. "What surer way could there be to teach the old simpleton, once for all, that the time when he could do great work is over and gone?"

"That is unjust, father; that is unworthy of you," the young man interrupted in great excitement; but his father went on, raising his voice; "Silence, boy! One thing at any rate is left to me, as you know — my keen eyes; and they did not fail me when you two looked at each other as the starling cried, 'My strength!' Ay, the bird is in the right when he bewails what was once so great and is now a mere laughing-stock. But you—you ought to reverence the man to whom you owe your existence and all you know; you allow yourself to shrug your shoulders over your own father's humbler art, since your first pictures were fairly successful. —How puffed up he is, since, by my devoted care, he has been a painter! How he looks down on the poor wretch who, by the pinch of necessity, has come down from being a sculptor of the highest promise to being a mere gem-cutter! In the depths of your soul—and I know it—you regard my laborious art as half a handicraft. Well, perhaps it deserves no better name; but that you—both of you—should make common cause with a bird, and mock the sacred fire which still burns in an old man, and moves him to serve true and noble art and to mold something great—an Atlas such as the world has never seen on a heroic scale; that—"

He covered his face with his hands and sobbed aloud. And the strong man's passionate grief cut his children to the heart, though, since their mother's death, their father's rage and discontent had many a time ere now broken down into childish lamentation.

To-day no doubt the old man was in worse spirits than usual, for it was the day of the Nekysia—the feast of the dead kept every autumn; and he had that morning visited his wife's grave, accompanied by his daughter, and had anointed the tombstone and decked it with flowers. The young people tried to comfort him; and when at last he was more composed and had dried his tears, he said, in so melancholy and subdued a tone that the angry blusterer was scarcely recognizable: "There—leave me alone; it will soon be over. I will finish this gem to-morrow, and then I must do the Serapis I promised Theophilus, the high-priest. Nothing can come of the Atlas. Perhaps you meant it in all sincerity, Alexander; but since your mother left me, children, since then—my arms are no weaker than they were; but in here—what it was that shriveled, broke, leaked away—I can not find words for it. If you care for me—and I know you do—you must not be vexed with me if my gall rises now and then; there is too much bitterness in my soul. I can not reach the goal I strive after and was meant to win; I have lost what I loved best, and where am I to find comfort or compensation?"

His children tenderly assured him of their affection, and he allowed Melissa to kiss him, and stroked Alexander's hair.

Then he inquired for Philip, his eldest son and his favorite; and on learning that he, the only person who, as he believed, could understand him, would not come to see him this day above all others, he again broke out in wrath, abusing the degeneracy of the age and the ingratitude of the young.

"Is it a visit which detains him again?" he inquired, and when Alexander thought not, he exclaimed contemptuously: "Then it is some war of words at the Museum. And for such poor stuff as that a son can forget his duty to his father and mother!"

"But you, too, used to enjoy these conflicts of intellect," his daughter humbly remarked; but the old man broke in:

"Only because they help a miserable world to forget the torments of existence, and the hideous certainty of having been born only to die some horrible death. But what can you know of this?"

"By my mother's death-bed," replied the girl, "we, too, had a glimpse into the terrible mystery." And Alexander gravely added, "And since we last met, father, I may certainly account myself as one of the initiated."

"You have painted a dead body?" asked his father.

"Yes, father," replied the lad with a deep breath. "I warned you," said Heron, in a tone of superior experience.

And then, as Melissa rearranged the folds of his blue robe, he said he should go for a walk. He sighed as he spoke, and his children knew whither he would go. It was to the grave to which Melissa had accompanied him that morning; and he would visit it alone, to meditate undisturbed on the wife he had lost.



## CHAPTER II

The brother and sister were left together. Melissa sighed deeply; but her brother went up to her, laid his arm round her shoulder, and said: "Poor child! you have indeed a hard time of it. Eighteen years old, and as pretty as you are, to be kept locked up as if in prison! No one would envy you, even if your fellow-captive and keeper were younger and less gloomy than your father is! But we know what it all means. His grief eats into his soul, and it does him as much good to storm and scold, as it does us to laugh."

"If only the world could know how kind his heart really is!" said the girl.

"He is not the same to his friends as to us," said Alexander; but Melissa shook her head, and said sadly: "He broke out yesterday against Apion, the dealer, and it was dreadful. For the fiftieth time he had waited supper for you two in vain, and in the twilight, when he had done work, his grief overcame him, and to see him weep is quite heartbreaking! The Syrian dealer came in and found him all tearful, and being so bold as to jest about it in his flippant way—"

"The old man would give him his answer, I know!" cried her brother with a hearty laugh. "He will not again be in a hurry to stir up a wounded lion."

"That is the very word," said Melissa, and her large eyes sparkled. "At the fight in the Circus, I could not help thinking of my father, when the huge king of the desert lay with a broken spear in his loins, whining loudly, and burying his maned head between his great paws. The gods are pitiless!"

"Indeed they are," replied the youth, with deep conviction; but his sister looked up at him in surprise.

"Do you say so, Alexander? Yes, indeed—you looked just now as I never saw you before. Has misfortune overtaken you too?"

"Misfortune?" he repeated, and he gently stroked her hair. "No, not exactly; and you know my woes sit lightly enough on me. The immortals have indeed shown me very plainly that it is their will sometimes to spoil the feast of life with a right bitter draught. But, like the moon itself, all it shines on is doomed to change—happily! Many things here below seem strangely ordered. Like ears and eyes, hands and feet, many things are by nature double, and misfortunes, as they say, commonly come in couples yoked like oxen."

"Then you have had some twofold blow?" asked Melissa, clasping her hands over her anxiously throbbing bosom.

"I, child! No, indeed. Nothing has befallen your father's younger son; and if I were a philosopher, like Philip, I should be moved to wonder why a man can only be wet when the rain falls on him, and yet can be so wretched when disaster falls on another. But do not look at me with such terror in your great eyes. I swear to you that, as a man and an artist, I never felt better, and so I ought properly to be in my usual frame of mind. But the skeleton at life's festival has been shown to me. What sort of thing is that? It is an image—the image of a dead man which was carried round by the Egyptians, and is to this day by the Romans, to remind the feasters that they should fill every hour with enjoyment, since enjoyment is all too soon at an end. Such an image, child—"

"You are thinking of the dead girl—Seleukus's daughter—whose portrait you are painting?" asked Melissa.

Alexander nodded, sat down on the bench by his sister, and, taking up her needlework, exclaimed "Give us some light, child. I want to see your pretty face. I want to be sure that Diodorus did not perjure himself when, at the 'Crane,' the other day, he swore that it had not its match in Alexandria. Besides, I hate the darkness."

When Melissa returned with the lighted lamp, she found her brother, who was not wont to keep still, sitting in the place where she had left him. But he sprang up as she entered, and prevented her further greeting by exclaiming:

"Patience! patience! You shall be told all. Only I did not want to worry you on the day of the festival of the dead. And besides, to-morrow perhaps he will be in a better frame of mind, and next day—"

Melissa became urgent. "If Philip is ill—" she put in.

"Not exactly ill," said he. "He has no fever, no ague-fit, no aches and pains. He is not in bed, and has no bitter draughts to swallow. Yet is he not well, any more than I, though but just now, in the dining-hall at the Elephant, I ate like a starving wolf, and could at this moment jump over this table. Shall I prove it?"

"No, no," said his sister, in growing distress. "But, if you love me, tell me at once and plainly —" "At once and plainly," sighed the painter.

"That, in any case, will not be easy. But I will do my best. You knew Korinna?"

"Seleukus's daughter?"

"She herself—the maiden from whose corpse I am painting her portrait."

"No. But you wanted—"

"I wanted to be brief, but I care even more to be understood; and if you have never seen with your own eyes, if you do not yourself know what a miracle of beauty the gods wrought when they molded that maiden, you are indeed justified in regarding me as a fool and Philip as a madman—which, thank the gods, he certainly is not yet."

"Then he too has seen the dead maiden?"

"No, no. And yet—perhaps. That at present remains a mystery. I hardly know what happened even to myself. I succeeded in controlling myself in my father's presence; but now, when it all rises up before me, before my very eyes, so distinct, so real, so tangible, now—by Sirius! Melissa, if you interrupt me again—"

"Begin again. I will be silent," she cried. "I can easily picture your Korinna as a divinely beautiful creature."

Alexander raised his hands to heaven, exclaiming with passionate vehemence: "Oh, how would I praise and glorify the gods, who formed that marvel of their art, and my mouth should be full of their grace and mercy, if they had but allowed the world to sun itself in the charm of that glorious creature, and to worship their everlasting beauty in her who was their image! But they have wantonly destroyed their own masterpiece, have crushed the scarce-opened bud, have darkened the star ere it has risen! If a man had done it, Melissa, a man what would his doom have been! If he—"

Here the youth hid his face in his hands in passionate emotion; but, feeling his sister's arm round his shoulder, he recovered himself, and went on more calmly: "Well, you heard that she was dead. She was of just your age; she is dead at eighteen, and her father commissioned me to paint her in death.—Pour me out some water; then I will proceed as coldly as a man crying the description of a runaway slave." He drank a deep draught, and wandered restlessly up and down in front of his sister, while he told her all that had happened to him during the last few days.

The day before yesterday, at noon, he had left the inn where he had been carousing with friends, gay and careless, and had obeyed the call of Seleukus. Just before raising the knocker he had been singing cheerfully to himself. Never had he felt more fully content—the gayest of the gay. One of the first men in the town, and a connoisseur, had honored him with a fine commission, and the prospect of painting something dead had pleased him. His old master had often admired the exquisite delicacy of the flesh-tones of a recently deceased body. As his glance fell on the implements that his slave carried after him, he had drawn himself up with the proud feeling of having before him a noble task, to which he felt equal. Then the porter, a gray-bearded Gaul, had opened the door to him, and as he looked into his care-worn face and received from him a silent permission to step in, he had already become more serious.

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