

GEORG EBERS

THE SISTERS.

VOLUME 1

Georg Ebers

The Sisters. Volume 1

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CHAPTER I

On the wide, desert plain of the Necropolis of Memphis stands the extensive and stately pile of masonry which constitutes the Greek temple of Serapis; by its side are the smaller sanctuaries of Asclepios, of Anubis and of Astarte, and a row of long, low houses, built of unburnt bricks, stretches away behind them as a troop of beggar children might follow in the train of some splendidly attired king.

The more dazzlingly brilliant the smooth, yellow sandstone walls of the temple appear in the light of the morning sun, the more squalid and mean do the dingy houses look as they crouch in the outskirts. When the winds blow round them and the hot sunbeams fall upon them, the dust rises from them in clouds as from a dry path swept by the gale. Even the rooms inside are never plastered, and as the bricks are of dried Nile-mud mixed with chopped straw, of which the sharp little ends stick out from the wall in every direction, the surface is as disagreeable to touch as it is unpleasing to look at. When they were first built on the ground between the temple itself and the wall which encloses the precincts, and which, on the eastern side, divides the acacia-grove of Serapis in half, they were concealed from the votaries visiting the temple by the back wall of a colonnade on the eastern side of the great forecourt; but a portion of this colonnade has now fallen down, and through the breach, part of these modest structures are plainly visible with their doors and windows opening towards the sanctuary—or, to speak more accurately, certain rudely constructed openings for looking out of or for entering by. Where there is a door there is no window, and where a gap in the wall serves for a window, a door is dispensed with; none of the chambers, however, of this long row of low one-storied buildings communicate with each other.

A narrow and well-trodden path leads through the breach in the wall; the pebbles are thickly strewn with brown dust, and the footway leads past quantities of blocks of stone and portions of columns destined for the construction of a new building which seems only to have been intermitted the night before, for mallets and levers lie on and near the various materials. This path leads directly to the little brick houses, and ends at a small closed wooden door so roughly joined and so ill-hung that between it and the threshold, which is only raised a few inches above the ground, a fine gray cat contrives to squeeze herself through by putting down her head and rubbing through the dust. As soon as she finds herself once more erect on her four legs she proceeds to clean and smooth her ruffled fur, putting up her back, and glancing with gleaming eyes at the house she has just left, behind which at this moment the sun is rising; blinded by its bright rays she turns away and goes on with cautious and silent tread into the court of the temple.

The hovel out of which pussy has crept is small and barely furnished; it would be perfectly dark too, but that the holes in the roof and the rift in the door admit light into this most squalid room. There is nothing standing against its rough gray walls but a wooden chest, near this a few earthen bowls stand on the ground with a wooden cup and a gracefully wrought jug of pure and shining gold, which looks strangely out of place among such humble accessories. Quite in the background lie two mats of woven bast, each covered with a sheepskin. These are the beds of the two girls who inhabit the room, one of whom is now sitting on a low stool made of palm-branches, and she yawns as she begins to arrange her long and shining brown hair. She is not particularly skilful and even less patient over this not very easy task, and presently, when a fresh tangle checks the horn comb with which she is dressing it, she tosses the comb on to the couch. She has not pulled it through her hair with any

haste nor with much force, but she shuts her eyes so tightly and sets her white teeth so firmly in her red dewy lip that it might be supposed that she had hurt herself very much.

A shuffling step is now audible outside the door; she opens wide her tawny-hazel eyes, that have a look of gazing on the world in surprise, a smile parts her lips and her whole aspect is as completely changed as that of a butterfly which escapes from the shade into the sunshine where the bright beams are reflected in the metallic lustre of its wings.

A hasty hand knocks at the ill-hung door, so roughly that it trembles on its hinges, and the instant after a wooden trencher is shoved in through the wide chink by which the cat made her escape; on it are a thin round cake of bread and a shallow earthen saucer containing a little olive-oil; there is no more than might perhaps be contained in half an ordinary egg-shell, but it looks fresh and sweet, and shines in clear, golden purity. The girl goes to the door, pulls in the platter, and, as she measures the allowance with a glance, exclaims half in lament and half in reproach:

"So little! and is that for both of us?"

As she speaks her expressive features have changed again and her flashing eyes are directed towards the door with a glance of as much dismay as though the sun and stars had been suddenly extinguished; and yet her only grief is the smallness of the loaf, which certainly is hardly large enough to stay the hunger of one young creature—and two must share it; what is a mere nothing in one man's life, to another may be of great consequence and of terrible significance.

The reproachful complaint is heard by the messenger outside the door, for the old woman who shoved in the trencher over the threshold answers quickly but not crossly.

"Nothing more to-day, Irene."

"It is disgraceful," cries the girl, her eyes filling with tears, "every day the loaf grows smaller, and if we were sparrows we should not have enough to satisfy us. You know what is due to us and I will never cease to complain and petition. Serapion shall draw up a fresh address for us, and when the king knows how shamefully we are treated—"

"Aye! when he knows," interrupted the old woman. But the cry of the poor is tossed about by many winds before it reaches the king's ear. I might find a shorter way than that for you and your sister if fasting comes so much amiss to you. Girls with faces like hers and yours, my little Irene, need never come to want."

"And pray what is my face like?" asked the girl, and her pretty features once more seemed to catch a gleam of sunshine.

"Why, so handsome that you may always venture to show it beside your sister's; and yesterday, in the procession, the great Roman sitting by the queen looked as often at her as at Cleopatra herself. If you had been there too he would not have had a glance for the queen, for you are a pretty thing, as I can tell you. And there are many girls would sooner hear those words than have a whole loaf—besides you have a mirror I suppose, look in that next time you are hungry."

The old woman's shuffling steps retreated again and the girl snatched up the golden jar, opened the door a little way to let in the daylight and looked at herself in the bright surface; but the curve of the costly vase showed her features all distorted, and she gaily breathed on the hideous travestie that met her eyes, so that it was all blurred out by the moisture. Then she smilingly put down the jar, and opening the chest took from it a small metal mirror into which she looked again and yet again, arranging her shining hair first in one way and then in another; and she only laid it down when she remembered a certain bunch of violets which had attracted her attention when she first woke, and which must have been placed in their saucer of water by her sister some time the day before. Without pausing to consider she took up the softly scented blossoms, dried their green stems on her dress, took up the mirror again and stuck the flowers in her hair.

How bright her eyes were now, and how contentedly she put out her hand for the loaf. And how fair were the visions that rose before her young fancy as she broke off one piece after another and hastily eat them after slightly moistening them with the fresh oil. Once, at the festival of the New

Year, she had had a glimpse into the king's tent, and there she had seen men and women feasting as they reclined on purple cushions. Now she dreamed of tables covered with costly vessels, was served in fancy by boys crowned with flowers, heard the music of flutes and harps and—for she was no more than a child and had such a vigorous young appetite— pictured herself as selecting the daintiest and sweetest morsels out of dishes of solid gold and eating till she was satisfied, aye so perfectly satisfied that the very last mouthful of bread and the very last drop of oil had disappeared.

But so soon as her hand found nothing more on the empty trencher the bright illusion vanished, and she looked with dismay into the empty oil- cup and at the place where just now the bread had been.

"Ah!" she sighed from the bottom of her heart; then she turned the platter over as though it might be possible to find some more bread and oil on the other side of it, but finally shaking her head she sat looking thoughtfully into her lap; only for a few minutes however, for the door opened and the slim form of her sister Klea appeared, the sister whose meagre rations she had dreamily eaten up, and Klea had been sitting up half the night sewing for her, and then had gone out before sunrise to fetch water from the Well of the Sun for the morning sacrifice at the altar of Serapis.

Klea greeted her sister with a loving glance but without speaking; she seemed too exhausted for words and she wiped the drops from her forehead with the linen veil that covered the back of her head as she seated herself on the lid of the chest. Irene immediately glanced at the empty trencher, considering whether she had best confess her guilt to the wearied girl and beg for forgiveness, or divert the scolding she had deserved by some jest, as she had often succeeded in doing before. This seemed the easier course and she adopted it at once; she went up to her sister quickly, but not quite unconcernedly, and said with mock gravity:

"Look here, Klea, don't you notice anything in me? I must look like a crocodile that has eaten a whole hippopotamus, or one of the sacred snakes after it has swallowed a rabbit. Only think when I had eaten my own bread I found yours between my teeth—quite unexpectedly—but now—"

Klea, thus addressed, glanced at the empty platter and interrupted her sister with a low-toned exclamation. "Oh! I was so hungry."

The words expressed no reproach, only utter exhaustion, and as the young criminal looked at her sister and saw her sitting there, tired and worn out but submitting to the injury that had been done her without a word of complaint, her heart, easily touched, was filled with compunction and regret. She burst into tears and threw herself on the ground before her, clasping her knees and crying, in a voice broken with sobs:

"Oh Klea! poor, dear Klea, what have I done! but indeed I did not mean any harm. I don't know how it happened. Whatever I feel prompted to do I do, I can't help doing it, and it is not till it is done that I begin to know whether it was right or wrong. You sat up and worried yourself for me, and this is how I repay you—I am a bad girl! But you shall not go hungry—no, you shall not."

"Never mind; never mind," said the elder, and she stroked her sister's brown hair with a loving hand.

But as she did so she came upon the violets fastened among the shining tresses. Her lips quivered and her weary expression changed as she touched the flowers and glanced at the empty saucer in which she had carefully placed them the day before. Irene at once perceived the change in her sister's face, and thinking only that she was surprised at her pretty adornment, she said gaily: "Do you think the flowers becoming to me?"

Klea's hand was already extended to take the violets out of the brown plaits, for her sister was still kneeling before her, but at this question her arm dropped, and she said more positively and distinctly than she had yet spoken and in a voice, whose sonorous but musical tones were almost masculine and certainly remarkable in a girl:

"The bunch of flowers belongs to me; but keep it till it is faded, by mid-day, and then return it to me."

"It belongs to you?" repeated the younger girl, raising her eyes in surprise to her sister, for to this hour what had been Klea's had been hers also. "But I always used to take the flowers you brought home; what is there special in these?"

"They are only violets like any other violets," replied Klea coloring deeply. "But the queen has worn them."

"The queen!" cried her sister springing to her feet and clasping her hands in astonishment. "She gave you the flowers? And you never told me till now? To be sure when you came home from the procession yesterday you only asked me how my foot was and whether my clothes were whole and then not another mortal word did you utter. Did Cleopatra herself give you this bunch?"

"How should she?" retorted Klea. "One of her escort threw them to me; but drop the subject pray! Give me the water, please, my mouth is parched and I can hardly speak for thirst."

The bright color dyed her cheeks again as she spoke, but Irene did not observe it, for—delighted to make up for her evil doings by performing some little service—she ran to fetch the water-jar; while Klea filled and emptied her wooden bowl she said, gracefully lifting a small foot, to show to her sister:

"Look, the cut is almost healed and I can wear my sandal again. Now I shall tie it on and go and ask Serapion for some bread for you and perhaps he will give us a few dates. Please loosen the straps for me a little, here, round the ankle, my skin is so thin and tender that a little thing hurts me which you would hardly feel. At mid-day I will go with you and help fill the jars for the altar, and later in the day I can accompany you in the procession which was postponed from yesterday. If only the queen and the great foreigner should come again to look on at it! That would be splendid! Now, I am going, and before you have drunk the last bowl of water you shall have some bread, for I will coax the old man so prettily that he can't say 'no.'"

Irene opened the door, and as the broad sunlight fell in it lighted up tints of gold in her chestnut hair, and her sister looking after her could almost fancy that the sunbeams had got entangled with the waving glory round her head. The bunch of violets was the last thing she took note of as Irene went out into the open air; then she was alone and she shook her head gently as she said to herself: "I give up everything to her and what I have left she takes from me. Three times have I met the Roman, yesterday he gave me the violets, and I did want to keep those for myself—and now—" As she spoke she clasped the bowl she still held in her hand closely to her and her lips trembled pitifully, but only for an instant; she drew herself up and said firmly: "But it is all as it should be."

Then she was silent; she set down the water-jar on the chest by her side, passed the back of her hand across her forehead as if her head were aching, then, as she sat gazing down dreamily into her lap, her weary head presently fell on her shoulder and she was asleep.

CHAPTER II

The low brick building of which the sisters' room formed a part, was called the Pastophorium, and it was occupied also by other persons attached to the service of the temple, and by numbers of pilgrims. These assembled here from all parts of Egypt, and were glad to pass a night under the protection of the sanctuary.

Irene, when she quitted her sister, went past many doors—which had been thrown open after sunrise—hastily returning the greetings of many strange as well as familiar faces, for all glanced after her kindly as though to see her thus early were an omen of happy augury, and she soon reached an outbuilding adjoining the northern end of the Pastophorium; here there was no door, but at the level of about a man's height from the ground there were six unclosed windows opening on the road. From the first of these the pale and much wrinkled face of an old man looked down on the girl as she approached. She shouted up to him in cheerful accents the greeting familiar to the Hellenes "Rejoice!" But he, without moving his lips, gravely and significantly signed to her with his lean hand and with a glance from his small, fixed and expressionless eyes that she should wait, and then handed out to her a wooden trencher on which lay a few dates and half a cake of bread.

"For the altar of the god?" asked the girl. The old man nodded assent, and Irene went on with her small load, with the assurance of a person who knows exactly what is required of her; but after going a few steps and before she had reached the last of the six windows she paused, for she plainly heard voices and steps, and presently, at the end of the Pastophorium towards which she was proceeding and which opened into a small grove of acacias dedicated to Serapis—which was of much greater extent outside the enclosing wall—appeared a little group of men whose appearance attracted her attention; but she was afraid to go on towards the strangers, so, leaning close up to the wall of the houses, she awaited their departure, listening the while to what they were saying.

In front of these early visitors to the temple walked a man with a long staff in his right hand speaking to the two gentlemen who followed, with the air of a professional guide, who is accustomed to talk as if he were reading to his audience out of an invisible book, and whom the hearers are unwilling to interrupt with questions, because they know that his knowledge scarcely extends beyond exactly what he says. Of his two remarkable-looking hearers one was wrapped in a long and splendid robe and wore a rich display of gold chains and rings, while the other wore nothing over his short chiton but a Roman toga thrown over his left shoulder.

His richly attired companion was an old man with a full and beardless face and thin grizzled hair. Irene gazed at him with admiration and astonishment, but when she had feasted her eyes on the stuffs and ornaments he wore, she fixed them with much greater interest and attention on the tall and youthful figure at his side.

"Like Hui, the cook's fat poodle, beside a young lion," thought she to herself, as she noted the bustling step of the one and the independent and elastic gait of the other. She felt irresistibly tempted to mimic the older man, but this audacious impulse was soon quelled for scarcely had the guide explained to the Roman that it was here that those pious recluses had their cells who served the god in voluntary captivity, as being consecrated to Serapis, and that they received their food through those windows—here he pointed upwards with his staff when suddenly a shutter, which the cicerone of this ill-matched pair had touched with his stick, flew open with as much force and haste as if a violent gust of wind had caught it, and flung it back against the wall.—And no less suddenly a man's head of ferocious aspect and surrounded by a shock of gray hair like a lion's mane—looked out of the window and shouted to him who had knocked, in a deep and somewhat overloud voice.

"If my shutter had been your back, you impudent rascal, your stick would have hit the right thing. Or if I had a cudgel between my teeth instead of a tongue, I would exercise it on you till it was as tired as that of a preacher who has threshed his empty straw to his congregation for three

mortal hours. Scarcely is the sun risen when we are plagued by the parasitical and inquisitive mob. Why! they will rouse us at midnight next, and throw stones at our rotten old shutters. The effects of my last greeting lasted you for three weeks—to-day's I hope may act a little longer. You, gentlemen there, listen to me. Just as the raven follows an army to batten on the dead, so that fellow there stalks on in front of strangers in order to empty their pockets—and you, who call yourself an interpreter, and in learning Greek have forgotten the little Egyptian you ever knew, mark this: When you have to guide strangers take them to see the Sphinx, or to consult the Apis in the temple of Ptah, or lead them to the king's beast-garden at Alexandria, or the taverns at Hanopus, but don't bring them here, for we are neither pheasants, nor flute-playing women, nor miraculous beasts, who take a pleasure in being stared at. You, gentlemen, ought to choose a better guide than this chatter-mag that keeps up its perpetual rattle when once you set it going. As to yourselves I will tell you one thing: Inquisitive eyes are intrusive company, and every prudent house holder guards himself against them by keeping his door shut."

Irene shrank back and flattened herself against the pilaster which concealed her, for the shutter closed again with a slam, the recluse pulling it to with a rope attached to its outer edge, and he was hidden from the gaze of the strangers; but only for an instant, for the rusty hinges on which the shutter was hanging were not strong enough to bear such violent treatment, and slowly giving way it was about to fall. The blustering hermit stretched out an arm to support it and save it; but it was heavy, and his efforts would not have succeeded had not the young man in Roman dress given his assistance and lifted up the shutter with his hand and shoulder, without any effort, as if it were made of willow laths instead of strong planks.

"A little higher still," shouted the recluse to his assistant. "Let us set the thing on its edge! so, push away, a little more. There, I have propped up the wretched thing and there it may lie. If the bats pay me a visit to-night I will think of you and give them your best wishes."

"You may save yourself that trouble," replied the young man with cool dignity. "I will send you a carpenter who shall refix the shutter, and we offer you our apologies for having been the occasion of the mischief that has happened."

The old man did not interrupt the speaker, but, when he had stared at him from head to foot, he said: "You are strong and you speak fairly, and I might like you well enough if you were in other company. I don't want your carpenter; only send me down a hammer, a wedge, and a few strong nails. Now, you can do nothing more for me, so pack off"

"We are going at once," said the more handsomely dressed visitor in a thin and effeminate voice. "What can a man do when the boys pelt him with dirt from a safe hiding-place, but take himself off"

"Be off, be off," said the person thus described, with a laugh. "As far off as Samothrace if you like, fat Eulaeus; you can scarcely have forgotten the way there since you advised the king to escape thither with all his treasure. But if you cannot trust yourself to find it alone, I recommend you your interpreter and guide there to show you the road."

The Eunuch Eulaeus, the favorite councillor of King Ptolemy—called Philometor (the lover of his mother)—turned pale at these words, cast a sinister glance at the old man and beckoned to the young Roman; he however was not inclined to follow, for the scolding old oddity had taken his fancy—perhaps because he was conscious that the old man, who generally showed no reserve in his dislikes, had a liking for him. Besides, he found nothing to object to in his opinion of his companions, so he turned to Eulaeus and said courteously:

"Accept my best thanks for your company so far, and do not let me detain you any longer from your more important occupations on my account."

Eulaeus bowed and replied, "I know what my duty is. The king entrusted me with your safe conduct; permit me therefore to wait for you under the acacias yonder."

When Eulaeus and the guide had reached the green grove, Irene hoped to find an opportunity to prefer her petition, but the Roman had stopped in front of the old man's cell, and had begun a

conversation with him which she could not venture to interrupt. She set down the platter with the bread and dates that had been entrusted to her on a projecting stone by her side with a little sigh, crossed her arms and feet as she leaned against the wall, and pricked up her ears to hear their talk.

"I am not a Greek," said the youth, "and you are quite mistaken in thinking that I came to Egypt and to see you out of mere curiosity."

"But those who come only to pray in the temple," interrupted the other, "do not—as it seems to me—choose an Eulaeus for a companion, or any such couple as those now waiting for you under the acacias, and invoking anything rather than blessings on your head; at any rate, for my own part, even if I were a thief I would not go stealing in their company. What then brought you to Serapis?"

"It is my turn now to accuse you of curiosity!"

"By all means," cried the old man, "I am an honest dealer and quite willing to take back the coin I am ready to pay away. Have you come to have a dream interpreted, or to sleep in the temple yonder and have a face revealed to you?"

"Do I look so sleepy," said the Roman, "as to want to go to bed again now, only an hour after sunrise?"

"It may be," said the recluse, "that you have not yet fairly come to the end of yesterday, and that at the fag-end of some revelry it occurred to you that you might visit us and sleep away your headache at Serapis."

"A good deal of what goes on outside these walls seems to come to your ears," retorted the Roman, "and if I were to meet you in the street I should take you for a ship's captain or a master-builder who had to manage a number of unruly workmen. According to what I heard of you and those like you in Athens and elsewhere, I expected to find you something quite different."

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