

GEORG EBERS

UARDA : A ROMANCE OF
ANCIENT EGYPT.

VOLUME 06

Georg Ebers

**Uarda : a Romance of
Ancient Egypt. Volume 06**

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CHAPTER XXIV

This eventful day had brought much that was unexpected to our friends in Thebes, as well as to those who lived in the Necropolis.

The Lady Katuti had risen early after a sleepless night. Nefert had come in late, had excused her delay by shortly explaining to her mother that she had been detained by Bent-Anat, and had then affectionately offered her brow for a kiss of "good-night."

When the widow was about to withdraw to her sleeping-room, and Nemu had lighted her lamp, she remembered the secret which was to deliver Paaker into Ani's hands. She ordered the dwarf to impart to her what he knew, and the little man told her at last, after sincere efforts at resistance — for he feared for his mother's safety—that Paaker had administered half of a love-philter to Nefert, and that the remainder was still in his hands.

A few hours since this information would have filled Katuti with indignation and disgust; now, though she blamed the Mohar, she asked eagerly whether such a drink could be proved to have any actual effect.

"Not a doubt of it," said the dwarf, "if the whole were taken, but Nefert only had half of it."

At a late hour Katuti was still pacing her bedroom, thinking of Paaker's insane devotion, of Mena's faithlessness, and of Nefert's altered demeanor; and when she went to bed, a thousand conjectures, fears, and anxieties tormented her, while she was distressed at the change which had come over Nefert's love to her mother, a sentiment which of all others should be the most sacred, and the most secure against all shock.

Soon after sunrise she went into the little temple attached to the house, and made an offering to the statue, which, under the form of Osiris, represented her lost husband; then she went to the temple of Anion, where she also prayed a while, and nevertheless, on her return home, found that her daughter had not yet made her appearance in the hall where they usually breakfasted together.

Katuti preferred to be undisturbed during the early morning hours, and therefore did not interfere with her daughter's disposition to sleep far into the day in her carefully-darkened room.

When the widow went to the temple Nefert was accustomed to take a cup of milk in bed, then she would let herself be dressed, and when her mother returned, she would find her in the veranda or hall, which is so well known to the reader.

To-day however Katuti had to breakfast alone; but when she had eaten a few mouthfuls she prepared Nefert's breakfast—a white cake and a little wine in a small silver beaker, carefully guarded from dust and insects by a napkin thrown over it—and went into her daughter's room.

She was startled at finding it empty, but she was informed that Nefert had gone earlier than was her wont to the temple, in her litter.

With a heavy sigh she returned to the veranda, and there received her nephew Paaker, who had come to enquire after the health of his relatives, followed by a slave, who carried two magnificent bunches of flowers, and by the great dog which had formerly belonged to his father. One bouquet he said had been cut for Nefert, and the other for her mother.

[Pictures on the monuments show that in ancient Egypt, as at the present time, bouquets of flowers were bestowed as tokens of friendly feeling.]

Katuti had taken quite a new interest in Paaker since she had heard of his procuring the philter.

No other young man of the rank to which they belonged, would have allowed himself to be so mastered by his passion for a woman as this Paaker was, who went straight to his aim with stubborn determination, and shunned no means that might lead to it. The pioneer, who had grown up under her eyes, whose weaknesses she knew, and whom she was accustomed to look down upon, suddenly appeared to her as a different man—almost a stranger—as the deliverer of his friends, and the merciless antagonist of his enemies.

These reflections had passed rapidly through her mind. Now her eyes rested on the sturdy, strongly-knit figure of her nephew, and it struck her that he bore no resemblance to his tall, handsome father. Often had she admired her brother-in-law's slender hand, that nevertheless could so effectually wield a sword, but that of his son was broad and ignoble in form.

While Paaker was telling her that he must shortly leave for Syria, she involuntarily observed the action of this hand, which often went cautiously to his girdle as if he had something concealed there; this was the oval phial with the rest of the philter. Katuti observed it, and her cheeks flushed when it occurred to her to guess what he had there.

The pioneer could not but observe Katuti's agitation, and he said in a tone of sympathy:

"I perceive that you are in pain, or in trouble. The master of Mena's stud at Hermonthis has no doubt been with you—No? He came to me yesterday, and asked me to allow him to join my troops. He is very angry with you, because he has been obliged to sell some of Mena's gold-bays. I have bought the finest of them. They are splendid creatures! Now he wants to go to his master 'to open his eyes,' as he says. Lie down a little while, aunt, you are very pale."

Katuti did not follow this prescription; on the contrary she smiled, and said in a voice half of anger and half of pity:

"The old fool firmly believes that the weal or woe of the family depends on the gold-bays. He would like to go with you? To open Mena's eyes? No one has yet tried to bind them!"

Katuti spoke the last words in a low tone, and her glance fell. Paaker also looked down, and was silent; but he soon recovered his presence of mind, and said:

"If Nefert is to be long absent, I will go."

"No—no, stay," cried the widow. "She wished to see you, and must soon come in. There are her cake and her wine waiting for her."

With these words she took the napkin off the breakfast-table, held up the beaker in her hand, and then said, with the cloth still in her hand:

"I will leave you a moment, and see if Nefert is not yet come home."

Hardly had she left the veranda when Paaker, having convinced himself that no one could see him, snatched the flask from his girdle, and, with a short invocation to his father in Osiris, poured its whole contents into the beaker, which thus was filled to the very brim. A few minutes later Nefert and her mother entered the hall.

Paaker took up the nosegay, which his slave had laid down on a seat, and timidly approached the young woman, who walked in with such an aspect of decision and self-confidence, that her mother looked at her in astonishment, while Paaker felt as if she had never before appeared so beautiful and brilliant. Was it possible that she should love her husband, when his breach of faith troubled her so little? Did her heart still belong to another? Or had the love-philter set him in the place of Mena? Yes! yes! for how warmly she greeted him. She put out her hand to him while he was still quite far off, let it rest in his, thanked him with feeling, and praised his fidelity and generosity.

Then she went up to the table, begged Paaker to sit down with her, broke her cake, and enquired for her aunt Setchern, Paaker's mother.

Katuti and Paaker watched all her movements with beating hearts.

Now she took up the beaker, and lifted it to her lips, but set it down again to answer Paaker's remark that she was breakfasting late.

"I have hitherto been a real lazy-bones," she said with a blush. But this morning I got up early, to go and pray in the temple in the fresh dawn. You know what has happened to the sacred ram of Amion. It is a frightful occurrence. The priests were all in the greatest agitation, but the venerable Bek el Chunsu received me himself, and interpreted my dream, and now my spirit is light and contented."

"And you did all this without me?" said Katuti in gentle reproof.

"I would not disturb you," replied Nefert. "Besides," she added coloring, "you never take me to the city and the temple in the morning."

Again she took up the wine-cup and looked into it, but without drinking any, went on:

"Would you like to hear what I dreamed, Paaker? It was a strange vision."

The pioneer could hardly breathe for expectation, still he begged her to tell her dream.

"Only think," said Nefert, pushing the beaker on the smooth table, which was wet with a few drops which she had spilt, "I dreamed of the Neha- tree, down there in the great tub, which your father brought me from Punt, when I was a little child, and which since then has grown quite a tall tree. There is no tree in the garden I love so much, for it always reminds me of your father, who was so kind to me, and whom I can never forget!"

Paaker bowed assent.

Nefert looked at him, and interrupted her story when she observed his crimson cheeks.

"It is very hot! Would you like some wine to drink—or some water?"

With these words she raised the wine-cup, and drank about half of the contents; then she shuddered, and while her pretty face took a comical expression, she turned to her mother, who was seated behind her and held the beaker towards her.

"The wine is quite sour to-day!" she said. "Taste it, mother."

Katuti took the little silver-cup in her hand, and gravely put it to her lips, but without wetting them. A smile passed over her face, and her eyes met those of the pioneer, who stared at her in horror. The picture flashed before her mind of herself languishing for the pioneer, and of his terror at her affection for him! Her selfish and intriguing spirit was free from coarseness, and yet she could have laughed with all her heart even while engaged in the most shameful deed of her whole life. She gave the wine back to her daughter, saying good-humoredly:

"I have tasted sweeter, but acid is refreshing in this heat."

"That is true," said the wife of Mena; she emptied the cup to the bottom, and then went on, as if refreshed, "But I will tell you the rest of my dream. I saw the Neha-tree, which your father gave me, quite plainly; nay I could have declared that I smelt its perfume, but the interpreter assured me that we never smell in our dreams. I went up to the beautiful tree in admiration. Then suddenly a hundred axes appeared in the air, wielded by unseen hands, and struck the poor tree with such violence that the branches one by one fell to the ground, and at last the trunk itself was felled. If you think it grieved me you are mistaken. On the contrary, I was delighted with the flashing hatchets and the flying splinters. When at last nothing was left but the roots in the tub of earth, I perceived that the tree was rising to new life. Suddenly my arms became strong, my feet active, and I fetched quantities of water from the tank, poured it over the roots, and when, at last, I could exert myself no longer, a tender green shoot showed itself on the wounded root, a bud appeared, a green leaf unfolded itself, a juicy stem sprouted quickly, it became a firm trunk, sent out branches and twigs, and these became covered with leaves and flowers, white, red and blue; then various birds came and settled on the top of the tree, and sang. Ah! my heart sang louder than the birds at that moment, and I said to myself that without me the tree would have been dead, and that it owed its life to me."

"A beautiful dream," said Katuti; "that reminds me of your girlhood, when you would be awake half the night inventing all sorts of tales. What interpretation did the priest give you?"

"He promised me many things," said Nefert, "and he gave me the assurance that the happiness to which I am predestined shall revive in fresh beauty after many interruptions."

"And Paaker's father gave you the Neha-tree?" asked Katuti, leaving the veranda as she spoke and walking out into the garden.

"My father brought it to Thebes from the far east," said Paaker, in confirmation of the widow's parting words.

"And that is exactly what makes me so happy," said Nefert. "For your father was as kind, and as dear to me as if he had been my own. Do you remember when we were sailing round the pond, and the boat upset, and you pulled me senseless out of the water? Never shall I forget the expression with which the great man looked at me when I woke up in its arms; such wise true eyes no one ever had but he."

"He was good, and he loved you very much," said Paaker, recalling, for his part, the moment when he had dared to press a kiss on the lips of the sweet unconscious child.

"And I am so glad," Nefert went on, "that the day has come at last when we can talk of him together again, and when the old grudge that lay so heavy in my heart is all forgotten. How good you are to us, I have already learned; my heart overflows with gratitude to you, when I remember my childhood, and I can never forget that I was indebted to you for all that was bright and happy in it. Only look at the big dog—poor Descher!—how he rubs against me, and shows that he has not forgotten me! Whatever comes from your house fills my mind with pleasant memories."

"We all love you dearly," said Paaker looking at her tenderly.

"And how sweet it was in your garden!" cried Nefert. "The nosegay here that you have brought me shall be placed in water, and preserved a long time, as greeting from the place in which once I could play carelessly, and dream so happily."

With these words she pressed the flowers to her lips; Paaker sprang forward, seized her hand, and covered it with burning kisses.

Nefert started and drew away her hand, but he put out his arm to clasp her to him. He had touched her with his trembling hand, when loud voices were heard in the garden, and Nemu hurried in to announce the arrival of the princess Bent-Anat.

At the same moment Katuti appeared, and in a few minutes the princess herself.

Paaker retreated, and quitted the room before Nefert had time to express her indignation. He staggered to his chariot like a drunken man. He supposed himself beloved by Mena's wife, his heart was full of triumph, he proposed rewarding Hekt with gold, and went to the palace without delay to crave of Ani a mission to Syria. There it should be brought to the test—he or Mena.

CHAPTER XXV

While Nefert, frozen with horror, could not find a word of greeting for her royal friend, Bent-Anat with native dignity laid before the widow her choice of Nefert to fill the place of her lost companion, and desired that Mena's wife should go to the palace that very day.

She had never before spoken thus to Katuti, and Katuti could not overlook the fact that Bent-Anat had intentionally given up her old confidential tone.

"Nefert has complained of me to her," thought she to herself, "and she considers me no longer worthy of her former friendly kindness."

She was vexed and hurt, and though she understood the danger which threatened her, now her daughter's eyes were opened, still the thought of losing her child inflicted a painful wound. It was this which filled her eyes with tears, and sincere sorrow trembled in her voice as she replied:

"Thou hast required the better half of my life at my hand; but thou hast but to command, and I to obey." Bent-Anat waved her hand proudly, as if to confirm the widow's statement; but Nefert went up to her mother, threw her arms round her neck, and wept upon her shoulder.

Tears glistened even in the princess's eyes when Katuti at last led her daughter towards her, and pressed yet one more kiss on her forehead.

Bent-Anat took Nefert's hand, and did not release it, while she requested the widow to give her daughter's dresses and ornaments into the charge of the slaves and waiting-women whom she would send for them.

"And do not forget the case with the dried flowers, and my amulets, and the images of the Gods," said Nefert. "And I should like to have the Neha tree which my uncle gave me."

Her white cat was playing at her feet with Paaker's flowers, which she had dropped on the floor, and when she saw her she took her up and kissed her.

"Bring the little creature with you," said Bent-Anat. "It was your favorite plaything."

"No," replied Nefert coloring.

The princess understood her, pressed her hand, and said while she pointed to Nemu:

"The dwarf is your own too: shall he come with you?"

"I will give him to my mother," said Nefert. She let the little man kiss her robe and her feet, once more embraced Katuti, and quitted the garden with her royal friend.

As soon as Katuti was alone, she hastened into the little chapel in which the figures of her ancestors stood, apart from those of Mena. She threw herself down before the statue of her husband, half weeping, half thankful.

This parting had indeed fallen heavily on her soul, but at the same time it released her from a mountain of anxiety that had oppressed her breast. Since yesterday she had felt like one who walks along the edge of a precipice, and whose enemy is close at his heels; and the sense of freedom from the ever threatening danger, soon got the upperhand of her maternal grief. The abyss in front of her had suddenly closed; the road to the goal of her efforts lay before her smooth and firm beneath her feet.

The widow, usually so dignified, hastily and eagerly walked down the garden path, and for the first time since that luckless letter from the camp had reached her, she could look calmly and clearly at the position of affairs, and reflect on the measures which Ani must take in the immediate future. She told herself that all was well, and that the time for prompt and rapid action was now come.

When the messengers came from the princess she superintended the packing of the various objects which Nefert wished to have, with calm deliberation, and then sent her dwarf to Ani, to beg that he would visit her. But before Nemu had left Mena's grounds he saw the out-runners of the Regent, his chariot, and the troop of guards following him.

Very soon Katuti and her noble friend were walking up and down in the garden, while she related to him how Bent-Anat had taken Nefert from her, and repeated to him all that she had planned and considered during the last hour.

"You have the genius of a man," said Ani; "and this time you do not urge me in vain. Ameni is ready to act, Paaker is to-day collecting his troops, to-morrow he will assist at the feast of the Valley, and the next day he goes to Syria."

"He has been with you?" Katuti asked.

"He came to the palace on leaving your house," replied Ani, "with glowing cheeks, and resolved to the utmost; though he does not dream that I hold him in my hand."

Thus speaking they entered the veranda, in which Nemu had remained, and he now hid himself as usual behind the ornamental shrubs to overhear them. They sat down near each other, by Nefert's breakfast table, and Ani asked Katuti whether the dwarf had told her his mother's secret. Katuti feigned ignorance, listened to the story of the love-philter, and played the part of the alarmed mother very cleverly. The Regent was of opinion, while he tried to soothe her, that there was no real love-potion in the case; but the widow exclaimed:

"Now I understand, now for the first time I comprehend my daughter. Paaker must have poured the drink into her wine, for she had no sooner drunk it this morning than she was quite altered her words to Paaker had quite a tender ring in them; and if he placed himself so cheerfully at your disposal it is because he believes himself certainly to be beloved by my daughter. The old witch's potion was effectual."

"There certainly are such drinks—" said Ani thoughtfully. "But will they only win hearts to young men! If that is the case, the old woman's trade is a bad one, for youth is in itself a charm to attract love. If I were only as young as Paaker! You laugh at the sighs of a man—say at once of an old man! Well, yes, I am old, for the prime of life lies behind me. And yet Katuti, my friend, wisest of women—explain to me one thing. When I was young I was loved by many and admired many women, but not one of them—not even my wife, who died young, was more to me than a toy, a plaything; and now when I stretch out my hand for a girl, whose father I might very well be—not for her own sake, but simply to serve my purpose—and she refuses me, I feel as much disturbed, as much a fool as— as that dealer in love-philters, Paaker."

"Have you spoken to Bent-Anat?" asked Katuti.

"And heard again from her own lips the refusal she had sent me through you. You see my spirit has suffered!"

"And on what pretext did she reject your suit?" asked the widow.

"Pretext!" cried Ani. "Bent-Anat and pretext! It must be owned that she has kingly pride, and not Ma—[The Goddess of Truth]—herself is more truthful than she. That I should have to confess it! When I think of her, our plots seem to me unutterably pitiful. My veins contain, indeed, many drops of the blood of Thotmes, and though the experience of life has taught me to stoop low, still the stooping hurts me. I have never known the happy feeling of satisfaction with my lot and my work; for I have always had a greater position than I could fill, and constantly done less than I ought to have done. In order not to look always resentful, I always wear a smile. I have nothing left of the face I was born with but the mere skin, and always wear a mask. I serve him whose master I believe I ought to be by birth; I hate Rameses, who, sincerely or no, calls me his brother; and while I stand as if I were the bulwark of his authority I am diligently undermining it. My whole existence is a lie."

"But it will be truth," cried Katuti, "as soon as the Gods allow you to be—as you are—the real king of this country."

"Strange!" said Ani smiling, Ameni, this very day, used almost exactly the same words. The wisdom of priests, and that of women, have much in common, and they fight with the same weapons. You use words instead of swords, traps instead of lances, and you cast not our bodies, but our souls, into irons."

"Do you blame or praise us for it?" said the widow. "We are in any case not impotent allies, and therefore, it seems to me, desirable ones."

Indeed you are," said Ani smiling. "Not a tear is shed in the land, whether it is shed for joy or for sorrow, for which in the first instance a priest or a woman is not responsible. Seriously, Katuti—in nine great events out of ten you women have a hand in the game. You gave the first impulse to all that is plotting here, and I will confess to you that, regardless of all consequences, I should in a few hours have given up my pretensions to the throne, if that woman Bent-Anat had said 'yes' instead of 'no.'"

"You make me believe," said Katuti, "that the weaker sex are gifted with stronger wills than the nobler. In marrying us you style us, 'the mistress of the house,' and if the elders of the citizens grow infirm, in this country it is not the sons but the daughters that must be their mainstay. But we women have our weaknesses, and chief of these is curiosity.—May I ask on what ground Bent-Anat dismissed you?"

"You know so much that you may know all," replied Ani. "She admitted me to speak to her alone. It was yet early, and she had come from the temple, where the weak old prophet had absolved her from uncleanness; she met me, bright, beautiful and proud, strong and radiant as a Goddess, and a princess. My heart throbbed as if I were a boy, and while she was showing me her flowers I said to myself: 'You are come to obtain through her another claim to the throne.' And yet I felt that, if she consented to be mine, I would remain the true brother, the faithful Regent of Rameses, and enjoy happiness and peace by her side before it was too late. If she refused me then I resolved that fate must take its way, and, instead of peace and love, it must be war for the crown snatched from my fathers. I tried to woo her, but she cut my words short, said I was a noble man, and a worthy suitor but—"

"There came the but."

"Yes—in the form of a very frank 'no.' I asked her reasons. She begged me to be content with the 'no;' then I pressed her harder, till she interrupted me, and owned with proud decision that she preferred some one else. I wished to learn the name of the happy man—that she refused. Then my blood began to boil, and my desire to win her increased; but I had to leave her, rejected, and with a fresh, burning, poisoned wound in my heart."

"You are jealous!" said Katuti, "and do you know of whom?"

"No," replied Ani. "But I hope to find out through you. What I feel it is impossible for me to express. But one thing I know, and that is this, that I entered the palace a vacillating man—that I left it firmly resolved. I now rush straight onwards, never again to turn back. From this time forward you will no longer have to drive me onward, but rather to hold me back; and, as if the Gods had meant to show that they would stand by me, I found the high-priest Ameni, and the chief pioneer Paaker waiting for me in my house. Ameni will act for me in Egypt, Paaker in Syria. My victorious troops from Ethiopia will enter Thebes to-morrow morning, on their return home in triumph, as if the king were at their head, and will then take part in the Feast of the Valley. Later we will send them into the north, and post them in the fortresses which protect Egypt against enemies coming from the east Tanis, Daphne, Pelusium, Migdol. Rameses, as you know, requires that we should drill the serfs of the temples, and send them to him as auxiliaries. I will send him half of the body-guard, the other half shall serve my own purposes. The garrison of Memphis, which is devoted to Rameses, shall be sent to Nubia, and shall be relieved by troops that are faithful to me. The people of Thebes are led by the priests, and tomorrow Ameni will point out to them who is their legitimate king, who will put an end to the war and release them from taxes. The children of Rameses will be excluded from the solemnities, for Ameni, in spite of the chief-priest of Anion, still pronounces Bent-Anat unclean. Young Rameri has been doing wrong and Ameni, who has some other great scheme in his mind, has forbidden him the temple of Seti; that will work on the crowd! You know how things are going on in Syria: Rameses has suffered much at the hands of the Cheta and their allies; whole legions are weary of eternally lying in the field, and if things came to extremities would join us; but, perhaps,

especially if Paaker acquits himself well, we may be victorious without fighting. Above all things now we must act rapidly."

"I no longer recognize the timid, cautious lover of delay!" exclaimed Katuti.

"Because now prudent hesitation would be want of prudence," said Ani.

"And if the king should get timely information as to what is happening here?" said Katuti.

"I said so!" exclaimed Ani; "we are exchanging parts."

"You are mistaken," said Katuti. "I also am for pressing forwards; but I would remind you of a necessary precaution. No letters but yours must reach the camp for the next few weeks."

"Once more you and the priests are of one mind," said Ani laughing; 'for Ameni gave me the same counsel. Whatever letters are sent across the frontier between Pelusium and the Red Sea will be detained. Only my letters—in which I complain of the piratical sons of the desert who fall upon the messengers—will reach the king."

"That is wise," said the widow; "let the seaports of the Red Sea be watched too, and the public writers. When you are king, you can distinguish those who are affected for or against you."

Ani shook his head and replied:

"That would put me in a difficult position; for if I were to punish those who are now faithful to their king, and exalt the others, I should have to govern with unfaithful servants, and turn away the faithful ones. You need not color, my kind friend, for we are kin, and my concerns are yours."

Katuti took the hand he offered her and said:

"It is so. And I ask no further reward than to see my father's house once more in the enjoyment of its rights."

"Perhaps we shall achieve it," said Ani; "but in a short time if—if— Reflect, Katuti; try to find out, ask your daughter to help you to the utmost. Who is it that she—you know whom I mean—Who is it that BentAnat loves?"

The widow started, for Ani had spoken the last words with a vehemence very foreign to his usual courtliness, but soon she smiled and repeated to the Regent the names of the few young nobles who had not followed the king, and remained in Thebes. "Can it be Chamus?" at last she said, "he is at the camp, it is true, but nevertheless—"

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