

GEORG EBERS

UARDA : A ROMANCE OF
ANCIENT EGYPT.

VOLUME 03

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CHAPTER IX

It was noon: the rays of the sun found no way into the narrow shady streets of the city of Thebes, but they blazed with scorching heat on the broad dyke-road which led to the king's castle, and which at this hour was usually almost deserted.

To-day it was thronged with foot-passengers and chariots, with riders and litter-bearers.

Here and there negroes poured water on the road out of skins, but the dust was so deep, that, in spite of this, it shrouded the streets and the passengers in a dry cloud, which extended not only over the city, but down to the harbor where the boats of the inhabitants of the Necropolis landed their freight.

The city of the Pharaohs was in unwonted agitation, for the storm-swift breath of rumor had spread some news which excited both alarm and hope in the huts of the poor as well as in the palaces of the great.

In the early morning three mounted messengers had arrived from the king's camp with heavy letter-bags, and had dismounted

at the Regent's palace.

[The Egyptians were great letter-writers, and many of their letters have come down to us, they also had established postmen, and had a word for them in their language "fai chat."]

As after a long drought the inhabitants of a village gaze up at the black thunder-cloud that gathers above their heads promising the refreshing rain—but that may also send the kindling lightning-flash or the destroying hail-storm—so the hopes and the fears of the citizens were centred on the news which came but rarely and at irregular intervals from the scene of war; for there was scarcely a house in the huge city which had not sent a father, a son, or a relative to the fighting hosts of the king in the distant northeast.

And though the couriers from the camp were much oftener the heralds of tears than of joy; though the written rolls which they brought told more often of death and wounds than of promotion, royal favors, and conquered spoil, yet they were expected with soul-felt longing and received with shouts of joy.

Great and small hurried after their arrival to the Regent's palace, and the scribes—who distributed the letters and read the news which was intended for public communication, and the lists of those who had fallen or perished—were closely besieged with enquirers.

Man has nothing harder to endure than uncertainty, and generally, when in suspense, looks forward to bad rather than to

good news. And the bearers of ill ride faster than the messengers of weal.

The Regent Ani resided in a building adjoining the king's palace. His business-quarters surrounded an immensely wide court, and consisted of a great number of rooms opening on to this court, in which numerous scribes worked with their chief. On the farther side was a large, veranda-like hall open at the front, with a roof supported by pillars.

Here Ani was accustomed to hold courts of justice, and to receive officers, messengers, and petitioners. To-day he sat, visible to all comers, on a costly throne in this hall, surrounded by his numerous followers, and overlooking the crowd of people whom the guardians of the peace guided with long staves, admitting them in troops into the court of the "High Gate," and then again conducting them out.

What he saw and heard was nothing joyful, for from each group surrounding a scribe arose a cry of woe. Few and far between were those who had to tell of the rich booty that had fallen to their friends.

An invisible web woven of wailing and tears seemed to envelope the assembly.

Here men were lamenting and casting dust upon their heads, there women were rending their clothes, shrieking loudly, and crying as they waved their veils "oh, my husband! oh, my father! oh, my brother!"

Parents who had received the news of the death of their son

fell on each other's neck weeping; old men plucked out their grey hair and beard; young women beat their forehead and breast, or implored the scribes who read out the lists to let them see for themselves the name of the beloved one who was for ever torn from them.

The passionate stirring of a soul, whether it be the result of joy or of sorrow, among us moderns covers its features with a veil, which it had no need of among the ancients.

Where the loudest laments sounded, a restless little being might be seen hurrying from group to group; it was Nemu, Katuti's dwarf, whom we know.

Now he stood near a woman of the better class, dissolved in tears because her husband had fallen in the last battle.

"Can you read?" he asked her; "up there on the architrave is the name of Rameses, with all his titles. Dispenser of life,' he is called. Aye indeed; he can create—widows; for he has all the husbands killed."

Before the astonished woman could reply, he stood by a man sunk in woe, and pulling his robe, said "Finer fellows than your son have never been seen in Thebes. Let your youngest starve, or beat him to a cripple, else he also will be dragged off to Syria; for Rameses needs much good Egyptian meat for the Syrian vultures."

The old man, who had hitherto stood there in silent despair, clenched his fist. The dwarf pointed to the Regent, and said: "If he there wielded the sceptre, there would be fewer orphans and

beggars by the Nile. To-day its sacred waters are still sweet, but soon it will taste as salt as the north sea with all the tears that have been shed on its banks."

It almost seemed as if the Regent had heard these words, for he rose from his seat and lifted his hands like a man who is lamenting.

Many of the bystanders observed this action; and loud cries of anguish filled the wide courtyard, which was soon cleared by soldiers to make room for other troops of people who were thronging in.

While these gathered round the scribes, the Regent Ani sat with quiet dignity on the throne, surrounded by his suite and his secretaries, and held audiences.

He was a man at the close of his fortieth year and the favorite cousin of the king.

Rameses I., the grandfather of the reigning monarch, had deposed the legitimate royal family, and usurped the sceptre of the Pharaohs. He descended from a Semitic race who had remained in Egypt at the time of the expulsion of the Hyksos,

[These were an eastern race who migrated from Asia into Egypt, conquered the lower Nile-valley, and ruled over it for nearly 500 years, till they were driven out by the successors of the old legitimate Pharaohs, whose dominion had been confined to upper Egypt.]

and had distinguished itself by warlike talents under Thotmes and Amenophis. After his death he was succeeded by his son

Seti, who sought to earn a legitimate claim to the throne by marrying Tuaa, the grand-daughter of Amenophis III. She presented him with an only son, whom he named after his father Rameses. This prince might lay claim to perfect legitimacy through his mother, who descended directly from the old house of sovereigns; for in Egypt a noble family—even that of the Pharaohs—might be perpetuated through women.

Seti proclaimed Rameses partner of his throne, so as to remove all doubt as to the validity of his position. The young nephew of his wife Tuaa, the Regent Ani, who was a few years younger than Rameses, he caused to be brought up in the House of Seti, and treated him like his own son, while the other members of the dethroned royal family were robbed of their possessions or removed altogether.

Ani proved himself a faithful servant to Seti, and to his son, and was trusted as a brother by the warlike and magnanimous Rameses, who however never disguised from himself the fact that the blood in his own veins was less purely royal than that which flowed in his cousin's.

It was required of the race of the Pharaohs of Egypt that it should be descended from the Sun-god Ra, and the Pharaoh could boast of this high descent only through his mother—Ani through both parents.

But Rameses sat on the throne, held the sceptre with a strong hand, and thirteen young sons promised to his house the lordship over Egypt to all eternity.

When, after the death of his warlike father, he went to fresh conquests in the north, he appointed Ani, who had proved himself worthy as governor of the province of Kush, to the regency of the kingdom.

A vehement character often over estimates the man who is endowed with a quieter temperament, into whose nature he cannot throw himself, and whose excellences he is unable to imitate; so it happened that the deliberate and passionless nature of his cousin impressed the fiery and warlike Rameses.

Ani appeared to be devoid of ambition, or the spirit of enterprise; he accepted the dignity that was laid upon him with apparent reluctance, and seemed a particularly safe person, because he had lost both wife and child, and could boast of no heir.

He was a man of more than middle height; his features were remarkably regular—even beautifully, cut, but smooth and with little expression. His clear blue eyes and thin lips gave no evidence of the emotions that filled his heart; on the contrary, his countenance wore a soft smile that could adapt itself to haughtiness, to humility, and to a variety of shades of feeling, but which could never be entirely banished from his face.

He had listened with affable condescension to the complaint of a landed proprietor, whose cattle had been driven off for the king's army, and had promised that his case should be enquired into. The plundered man was leaving full of hope; but when the scribe who sat at the feet of the Regent enquired to whom

the investigation of this encroachment of the troops should be entrusted, Ani said: "Each one must bring a victim to the war; it must remain among the things that are done, and cannot be undone."

The Nomarch—[Chief of a Nome or district.]—of Suan, in the southern part of the country, asked for funds for a necessary, new embankment. The Regent listened to his eager representation with benevolence, nay with expressions of sympathy; but assured him that the war absorbed all the funds of the state, that the chests were empty; still he felt inclined—even if they had not failed—to sacrifice a part of his own income to preserve the endangered arable land of his faithful province of Suan, to which he desired greeting.

As soon as the Nomarch had left him, he commanded that a considerable sum should be taken out of the Treasury, and sent after the petitioner.

From time to time in the middle of conversation, he arose, and made a gesture of lamentation, to show to the assembled mourners in the court that he sympathized in the losses which had fallen on them.

The sun had already passed the meridian, when a disturbance, accompanied by loud cries, took possession of the masses of people, who stood round the scribes in the palace court.

Many men and women were streaming together towards one spot, and even the most impassive of the Thebans present turned their attention to an incident so unusual in this place.

A detachment of constabulary made a way through the crushing and yelling mob, and another division of Lybian police led a prisoner towards a side gate of the court. Before they could reach it, a messenger came up with them, from the Regent, who desired to be informed as to what happened.

The head of the officers of public safety followed him, and with eager excitement informed Ani, who was waiting for him, that a tiny man, the dwarf of the Lady Katuti, had for several hours been going about in the court, and endeavoring to poison the minds of the citizens with seditious speeches.

Ani ordered that the misguided man should be thrown into the dungeon; but so soon as the chief officer had left him, he commanded his secretary to have the dwarf brought into his presence before sundown.

While he was giving this order an excitement of another kind seized the assembled multitude.

As the sea parted and stood on the right hand and on the left of the Hebrews, so that no wave wetted the foot of the pursued fugitives, so the crowd of people of their own free will, but as if in reverent submission to some high command, parted and formed a broad way, through which walked the high-priest of the House of Seti, as, full robed and accompanied by some of the "holy fathers," he now entered the court.

The Regent went to meet him, bowed before him, and then withdrew to the back of the hall with him alone. It is nevertheless incredible," said Ameni, "that our serfs are to follow the militia!"

"Rameses requires soldiers—to conquer," replied the Regent.

"And we bread—to live," exclaimed the priest.

"Nevertheless I am commanded, at once, before the seed-time, to levy the temple-serfs. I regret the order, but the king is the will, and I am only the hand."

"The hand, which he makes use of to sequester ancient rights, and to open a way to the desert over the fruitful land."

["With good management," said the first Napoleon, "the Nile encroaches upon the desert, with bad management the desert encroaches upon the Nile."]

"Your acres will not long remain unprovided for. Rameses will win new victories with the increased army, and the help of the Gods."

"The Gods! whom he insults!"

"After the conclusion of peace he will reconcile the Gods by doubly rich gifts. He hopes confidently for an early end to the war, and writes to me that after the next battle he wins he intends to offer terms to the Cheta. A plan of the king's is also spoken of—to marry again, and, indeed, the daughter of the Cheta King Chetasar."

Up to this moment the Regent had kept his eyes cast down. Now he raised them, smiling, as if he would fain enjoy Ameni's satisfaction, and asked:

"What dost thou say to this project?"

"I say," returned Ameni, and his voice, usually so stern, took a tone of amusement, "I say that Rameses seems to think that the

blood of thy cousin and of his mother, which gives him his right to the throne, is incapable of pollution."

"It is the blood of the Sun-god!"

"Which runs but half pure in his veins, but wholly pure in thine."

The Regent made a deprecatory gesture, and said softly, with a smile which resembled that of a dead man:

"We are not alone."

No one is here," said Ameni, "who can hear us; and what I say is known to every child."

"But if it came to the king's ears—" whispered Ani, "he—"

"He would perceive how unwise it is to derogate from the ancient rights of those on whom it is incumbent to prove the purity of blood of the sovereign of this land. However, Rameses sits on the throne; may life bloom for him, with health and strength!"—[A formula which even in private letters constantly follows the name of the Pharaoh.]

The Regent bowed, and then asked:

"Do you propose to obey the demand of the Pharaoh without delay?"

"He is the king. Our council, which will meet in a few days, can only determine how, and not whether we shall fulfil his command."

"You will retard the departure of the serfs, and Rameses requires them at once. The bloody labor of the war demands new tools."

"And the peace will perhaps demand a new master, who understands how to employ the sons of the land to its greatest advantage—a genuine son of Ra."

The Regent stood opposite the high-priest, motionless as an image cast in bronze, and remained silent; but Ameni lowered his staff before him as before a god, and then went into the fore part of the hall.

When Ani followed him, a soft smile played as usual upon his countenance, and full of dignity he took his seat on the throne.

"Art thou at an end of thy communications?" he asked the high-priest.

"It remains for me to inform you all," replied Ameni with a louder voice, to be heard by all the assembled dignitaries, "that the princess Bent- Anat yesterday morning committed a heavy sin, and that in all the temples in the land the Gods shall be entreated with offerings to take her uncleanness from her."

Again a shadow passed over the smile on the Regent's countenance. He looked meditatively on the ground, and then said:

"To-morrow I will visit the House of Seti; till then I beg that this affair may be left to rest."

Ameni bowed, and the Regent left the hall to withdraw to a wing of the king's palace, in which he dwelt.

On his writing-table lay sealed papers. He knew that they contained important news for him; but he loved to do violence to his curiosity, to test his resolution, and like an epicure to reserve

the best dish till the last.

He now glanced first at some unimportant letters. A dumb negro, who squatted at his feet, burned the papyrus rolls which his master gave him in a brazier. A secretary made notes of the short facts which Ani called out to him, and the ground work was laid of the answers to the different letters.

At a sign from his master this functionary quitted the room, and Ani then slowly opened a letter from the king, whose address: "To my brother Ani," showed that it contained, not public, but private information.

On these lines, as he well knew, hung his future life, and the road it should follow.

With a smile, that was meant to conceal even from himself his deep inward agitation, he broke the wax which sealed the short manuscript in the royal hand.

"What relates to Egypt, and my concern for my country, and the happy issue of the war," wrote the Pharaoh, "I have written to you by the hand of my secretary; but these words are for the brother, who desires to be my son, and I write to him myself. The lordly essence of the Divinity which dwells in me, readily brings a quick 'Yes' or 'No' to my lips, and it decides for the best. Now you demand my daughter Bent-Anat to wife, and I should not be Rameses if I did not freely confess that before I had read the last words of your letter, a vehement 'No' rushed to my lips. I caused the stars to be consulted, and the entrails of the victims to be examined, and they were adverse to your request; and yet

I could not refuse you, for you are dear to me, and your blood is royal as my own. Even more royal, an old friend said, and warned me against your ambition and your exaltation. Then my heart changed, for I were not Seti's son if I allow myself to injure a friend through idle apprehensions; and he who stands so high that men fear that he may try to rise above Rameses, seems to me to be worthy of Bent-Anat. Woo her, and, should she consent freely, the marriage may be celebrated on the day when I return home. You are young enough to make a wife happy, and your mature wisdom will guard my child from misfortune. Bent-Anat shall know that her father, and king, encourages your suit; but pray too to the Hathors, that they may influence Bent-Anat's heart in your favor, for to her decision we must both submit."

The Regent had changed color several times while reading this letter. Now he laid it on the table with a shrug of his shoulders, stood up, clasped his hand behind him, and, with his eyes cast meditatively on the floor, leaned against one of the pillars which supported the beams of the roof.

The longer he thought, the less amiable his expression became. "A pill sweetened with honey,

[Two recipes for pills are found in the papyri, one with honey for women, and one without for men.]

such as they give to women," he muttered to himself. Then he went back to the table, read the king's letter through once more, and said: "One may learn from it how to deny by granting, and at the same time not to forget to give it a brilliant show of

magnanimity. Rameses knows his daughter. She is a girl like any other, and will take good care not to choose a man twice as old as herself, and who might be her father. Rameses will 'submit'—I am to I submit!' And to what? to the judgment and the choice of a wilful child!"

With these words he threw the letter so vehemently on to the table, that it slipped off on to the floor.

The mute slave picked it up, and laid it carefully on the table again, while his master threw a ball into a silver bason.

Several attendants rushed into the room, and Ani ordered them to bring to him the captive dwarf of the Lady Katuti. His soul rose in indignation against the king, who in his remote camp-tent could fancy he had made him happy by a proof of his highest favor. When we are plotting against a man we are inclined to regard him as an enemy, and if he offers us a rose we believe it to be for the sake, not of the perfume, but of the thorns.

The dwarf Nemu was brought before the Regent and threw himself on the ground at his feet.

Ani ordered the attendants to leave him, and said to the little man

"You compelled me to put you in prison. Stand up!" The dwarf rose and said, "Be thanked—for my arrest too."

The Regent looked at him in astonishment; but Nemu went on half humbly, half in fun, "I feared for my life, but thou hast not only not shortened it, but hast prolonged it; for in the solitude of the dungeon time seemed long, and the minutes grown to hours."

"Keep your wit for the ladies," replied the Regent. "Did I not know that you meant well, and acted in accordance with the Lady Katuti's fancy, I would send you to the quarries."

"My hands," mumbled the dwarf, "could only break stones for a game of draughts; but my tongue is like the water, which makes one peasant rich, and carries away the fields of another."

"We shall know how to dam it up."

"For my lady and for thee it will always flow the right way," said the dwarf. "I showed the complaining citizens who it is that slaughters their flesh and blood, and from whom to look for peace and content. I poured caustic into their wounds, and praised the physician."

"But unasked and recklessly," interrupted Ani; "otherwise you have shown yourself capable, and I am willing to spare you for a future time. But overbusy friends are more damaging than intelligent enemies. When I need your services I will call for you. Till then avoid speech. Now go to your mistress, and carry to Katuti this letter which has arrived for her."

"Hail to Ani, the son of the Sun!" cried the dwarf kissing the Regent's foot. "Have I no letter to carry to my mistress Nefert?"

"Greet her from me," replied the Regent. "Tell Katuti I will visit her after the next meal. The king's charioteer has not written, yet I hear that he is well. Go now, and be silent and discreet."

The dwarf quitted the room, and Ani went into an airy hall, in which his luxurious meal was laid out, consisting of many dishes

prepared with special care. His appetite was gone, but he tasted of every dish, and gave the steward, who attended on him, his opinion of each.

Meanwhile he thought of the king's letter, of Bent-Anat, and whether it would be advisable to expose himself to a rejection on her part.

After the meal he gave himself up to his body-servant, who carefully shaved, painted, dressed, and decorated him, and then held the mirror before him.

He considered the reflection with anxious observation, and when he seated himself in his litter to be borne to the house of his friend Katuti, he said to himself that he still might claim to be called a handsome man.

If he paid his court to Bent-Anat—if she listened to his suit—what then?

He would refer it to Katuti, who always knew how to say a decisive word when he, entangled in a hundred pros and cons, feared to venture on a final step.

By her advice he had sought to wed the princess, as a fresh mark of honor—as an addition to his revenues—as a pledge for his personal safety. His heart had never been more or less attached to her than to any other beautiful woman in Egypt. Now her proud and noble personality stood before his inward eye, and he felt as if he must look up to it as to a vision high out of his reach. It vexed him that he had followed Katuti's advice, and he began to wish his suit had been repulsed. Marriage with Bent-

Anat seemed to him beset with difficulties. His mood was that of a man who craves some brilliant position, though he knows that its requirements are beyond his powers—that of an ambitious soul to whom kingly honors are offered on condition that he will never remove a heavy crown from his head. If indeed another plan should succeed, if— and his eyes flashed eagerly—if fate set him on the seat of Rameses, then the alliance with Bent-Anat would lose its terrors; there would he be her absolute King and Lord and Master, and no one could require him to account for what he might be to her, or vouchsafe to her.

CHAPTER V

During the events we have described the house of the charioteer Mena had not remained free from visitors.

It resembled the neighboring estate of Paaker, though the buildings were less new, the gay paint on the pillars and walls was faded, and the large garden lacked careful attention. In the vicinity of the house only, a few well-kept beds blazed with splendid flowers, and the open colonnade, which was occupied by Katuti and her daughter, was furnished with royal magnificence.

The elegantly carved seats were made of ivory, the tables of ebony, and they, as well as the couches, had gilt feet. The artistically worked Syrian drinking vessels on the sideboard, tables, and consoles were of many forms; beautiful vases full of flowers stood everywhere; rare perfumes rose from alabaster cups, and the foot sank in the thick pile of the carpets which covered the floor.

And over the apparently careless arrangement of these various objects there reigned a peculiar charm, an indescribably fascinating something.

Stretched at full-length on a couch, and playing with a silky-haired white cat, lay the fair Nefert—fanned to coolness by a negro-girl—while her mother Katuti nodded a last farewell to her sister Setchem and to Paaker.

Both had crossed this threshold for the first time for four years, that is since the marriage of Mena with Nefert, and the old enmity seemed now to have given way to heartfelt reconciliation and mutual understanding.

After the pioneer and his mother had disappeared behind the pomegranate shrubs at the entrance of the garden, Katuti turned to her daughter and said:

"Who would have thought it yesterday? I believe Paaker loves you still."

Nefert colored, and exclaimed softly, while she hit the kitten gently with her fan—

"Mother!"

Katuti smiled.

She was a tall woman of noble demeanor, whose sharp but delicately-cut features and sparkling eyes could still assert some pretensions to feminine beauty. She wore a long robe, which reached below her ankles; it was of costly material, but dark in color, and of a studied simplicity. Instead of the ornaments in bracelets, anklets, ear and finger-rings, in necklaces and clasps, which most of the Egyptian ladies—and indeed her own sister and daughter—were accustomed to wear, she had only fresh flowers, which were never wanting in the garden of her son-in-law. Only a plain gold diadem, the badge of her royal descent, always rested, from early morning till late at night, on her high brow—for a woman too high, though nobly formed—and confined the long blue- black hair, which fell

unbraided down her back, as if its owner contemned the vain labor of arranging it artistically. But nothing in her exterior was unpremeditated, and the unbejewelled wearer of the diadem, in her plain dress, and with her royal figure, was everywhere sure of being observed, and of finding imitators of her dress, and indeed of her demeanor.

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