

The Emperor, Part 2, Volume 8.

Georg Ebers

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THE EMPEROR, Part 2.

By Georg Ebers

Volume 8.

CHAPTER X.

The story told by Mastor which had so greatly agitated Pollux and had prompted him to his mad flight was the history of events which had taken place in the steward's rooms during the hours when the young artist was helping his parents to transfer their household belongings into his sister's tiny dwelling. Keraunus was certainly not one of the most cheerful of men, but on the morning when Sabina came to the palace and the gate-keeper was driven from his home, he had worn the aspect of a thoroughly-contented man.

Since visiting Selene the day before he had given himself no farther concern about her. She was not dangerously ill and was exceptionally well taken care of, and the children did not seem to miss her. Indeed, he himself did not want her back to-day. He avoided confessing this to himself it is true, still he felt lighter and freer in the absence of his grave monitor than he had been for a long time. It would be delightful, he thought, to go on living in this careless manner, alone with Arsinoe and the children, and now and again he rubbed his hands and grinned complacently. When the old slave-woman brought a large dish full of cakes which he had desired her to buy, and set it down by the side of the children's porridge, he chuckled so heartily that his fat person shook and swayed; and he had very good reason to be happy in his way, for Plutarch quite early in the morning, had sent a heavy purse of gold pieces for his ivory cup, and a magnificent bunch of roses to Arsinoe; he might give his children a treat, buy himself a solid gold fillet, and dress Arsinoe as finely as though she were the prefect's favorite daughter.

His vanity was gratified in every particular.

And what a splendid fellow was the slave who now--with a superbly reverential bow--presented him with a roast chicken and who was to walk behind him in the afternoon to the council-chamber. The tall Thessalian who marched after the Archidikastes to the Hall of justice, carrying his papers, was hardly grander than his "body-servant." He had bought him yesterday at quite a low price. The well-grown Samian was scarcely thirty years old; he could read and write and was in a position therefore to instruct the children in these arts; nay, he could even play the lute. His past, to be sure, was not a spotless record, and it was for that reason that he had been sold so cheaply. He had stolen things on several occasions; but the brands and scars which he bore upon his person were

hidden by his new chiton and Keraunus felt in himself the power to cure him of his evil propensities.

After desiring Arsinoe to let nothing he about of any value, for their new house-mate seemed not to be perfectly honest, he answered his daughter's scruples by saying:

"It would be better, no doubt, that he should be as honest as the old skeleton I gave in exchange for him, but I reflect that even if my body-servant should make away with some of the few drachmae we carry about with us, I need not repent of having bought him, since I got him for many thousand drachmae less than he is worth, on account of his thefts, while a teacher for the children would have cost more than he can steal from us at the worst. I will lock up the gold in the chest with my documents. It is strong and could only be opened with a crow-bar. Besides the fellow will have left off stealing at any rate at first, for his late master was none of the mildest and had cured him of his pilfering I should think, once for all. It is lucky that in selling such rascals we should be compelled to state what their faults are; if the seller fails to do so compensation maybe claimed from him by the next owner for what he may lose. Lykophon certainly concealed nothing, and setting aside his thieving propensities the Samian is said to be in every respect a capital fellow."

But father," replied Arsinoe, her anxiety once more urging her to speak, "it is a bad thing to have a dishonest man in the house."

"You know nothing about it child!" answered Keraunus. "To us to live and to be honest are the same thing, but a slave!--King Antiochus is said to have declared that the man who wishes to be well served must employ none but rascals."

When Arsinoe had been tempted out on to the balcony by her lover's snatch of song and had been driven in again by her father, the steward had not reproved her in any way unkindly, but had stroked her cheeks and said with a smile: "I rather fancy that lad of the gatekeeper's--whom I once turned out of doors has had his eye on you since you were chosen for Roxana. Poor wretch! But we have very different suitors in view for you my little girl. How would it be, think you, if rich Plutarch had sent you those roses, not on his own behalf but as a greeting on the part of his son? I know that he is very desirous of marrying him but the fastidious man has never yet thought any Alexandrian girl good enough for him."

"I do not know him, and he does not think of a poor thing like me," said Arsinoe.

"Do you think not?" asked Keraunus smiling. "We are of as good family, nay of a better than Plutarch, and the fairest is a match for the wealthiest. What would you say child to a long flowing purple robe and a chariot with white horses, and runners in front?"

At breakfast Keraunus drank two cups of strong wine, in which he allowed Arsinoe to mix only a few drops of water. While his daughter was curling his hair a swallow flew into the room; this was a good omen and raised the steward's spirits. Dressed in his best and with a well-filled purse, he was on the point of starting for the council-chamber with his new slave when Sophilus the tailor and his girl-assistant were shown into the living-room. The man begged to be allowed to try the dress, ordered for

Roxana by the prefect's wife, on the steward's daughter. Keraunus received him with much condescension and allowed him to bring in the slave who followed him with a large parcel of dresses,--and Arsinoe, who was with the children, was called.

Arsinoe was embarrassed and anxious and would far rather have yielded her part to another; still, she was curious about the new dresses. The tailor begged her to allow her maid to dress her; his assistant would help her because the dresses which were only slightly stitched together for trying on, were cut, not in the Greek but in the Oriental fashion.

"Your waiting woman," he added turning to Arsinoe, "will be able to learn to-day the way to dress you on the great occasion."

"My daughter's maid," said Keraunus, winking slyly at Arsinoe, "is not in the house."

"Oh, I require no help," cried the tailor's girl. "I am handy too at dressing hair, and I am most glad to help such a fair Roxana."

"And it is a real pleasure to work for her," added Sophilus. "Other young ladies are beautified by what they wear, but your daughter adds beauty to all she wears."

"You are most polite," said Keraunus, as Arsinoe and her handmaid left the room.

"We learn a great deal by our intercourse with people of rank," replied the tailor. "The illustrious ladies who honor me with their custom like not only to see but to hear what is pleasing. Unfortunately there are among them some whom the gods have graced with but few charms, and they, strangely enough, crave the most flattering speeches. But the poor always value it more than the rich when benevolence is shown them."

"Well said," cried Keraunus. "I myself am but indifferently well off for a man of family, and am glad to live within my moderate means--so that my daughter--"

"The lady Julia has chosen the costliest stuffs for her; as is fitting--as the occasion demands," said the tailor. "Quite right, at the same time--"

"Well, my lord?"

"The grand occasion will be over and my daughter, now that she is grown up, ought to be seen at home and in the street in suitable and handsome, though not costly, clothes.

"I said just now, true beauty needs no gaudy raiment."

"Would you be disposed now, to work for me at a moderate price?"

"With pleasure; nay, I shall be indebted to her, for all the world will admire Roxana and inquire who may be her tailor."

"You are a very reasonable and right-minded man. What now would you charge for a dress for her?"

"That we can discuss later."

"No, no, I beg you sincerely--"

"First let me consider what you want. Simple dresses are more difficult, far more difficult to make, and yet become a handsome woman better than rich and gaudy robes. But can any man make a woman understand it? I could tell you a tale of their folly! Why many a woman who rides by in her chariot wears dresses and gems to conceal not merely her own limbs, but the poverty-stricken condition of her house."

Thus, and in this wise did Keraunus and the tailor converse, while the assistant plaited up Arsinoe's hair with strings of false pearls that she had brought with her, and fitted and pinned on her the costly white and blue silk robes of an Asiatic princess. At first Arsinoe was very still and timid. She no longer cared to dress for any one but Pollux; but the garments prepared for her were wonderfully pretty--and how well the fitter knew how to give effect to her natural advantages. While the neat-handed woman worked busily and carefully many merry jests passed between them--many sincere and hearty words of admiration--and before long Arsinoe had become quite excited and took pleased interest in the needle-woman's labors.

Every bough that is freshly decked by spring seems to feel gladness, and the simple child who was to-day so splendidly dressed was captivated by pleasure in her own beauty, and its costly adornment which delighted her beyond measure. Arsinoe now clapped her hands with delight, now had the mirror handed to her, and now, with all the frankness of a child, expressed her satisfaction not only with the costly clothes she wore, but with her own surprisingly grand appearance in them.

The dress-maker was enchanted with her, proud and delighted, and could not resist the impulse to give a kiss to the charming girl's white, beautifully round throat.

"If only Pollux could see me so!" thought Arsinoe. "After the performance perhaps I might show myself in my dress to Selene, and then she would forgive my taking part in the show. It is really a pleasure to look so nice!"

The children all stood round her while she was being dressed, and shouted with admiration each time some new detail of the princess's attire was added. Helios begged to be allowed to feel her dress, and after satisfying herself that his little hands were clean she stroked them over the glistening white silk.

She had now advanced so far that her father and the tailor could be called in. She felt remarkably content and happy. Drawn up to her tallest, like a real king's daughter, and yet with a heart beating as anxiously as that of any girl would who is on the point of displaying her beauty--hitherto protected and hidden in her parents' home--to the thousand eyes of the gaping multitude, she went towards the sitting-room; but she drew back her hand she had put forth to raise the latch, for she heard the voices of several men who must just now have joined her father.

"Wait a little while, there are visitors," she cried to the seamstress who had followed her, and she put her ear to the door to listen. At first she could not make out anything that was going on, but the end of the strange conversation that was being carried on within was so hideously intelligible that she could never forget it so long as she

lived.

Her father had ordered two new dresses for her, beating down the price with the promise of prompt payment, when Mastor came into the steward's room and informed Keraunus that his master and Gabinius, the curiosity-dealer from Nicaea, wished to speak with him.

"Your master," said Keraunus haughtily, "may come in; I think that he regrets the injury he has done me; but Gabinius shall never cross this threshold again, for he is a scoundrel."

"It would be as well that you should desire that man to leave you for the present," said the slave, pointing to the tailor.

"Whoever comes to visit me," said the steward loftily, "must be satisfied to meet any one whom I permit to enter my house."

"Nay, nay," said the slave urgently, "my master is a greater man than you think. Beg this man to leave the room."

"I know, I know very well," said Keraunus with a smile. "Your master is an acquaintance of Caesar's. But we shall see, after the performance that is about to take place, which of us two Caesar will decide for. This tailor has business here and will stay at my pleasure. Sit in the corner there, my friend."

"A tailor!" cried Mastor, horrified. "I tell you he must go."

"He must!" asked Keraunus wrathfully. "A slave dares to give orders in my house? We will see."

"I am going," interrupted the artisan who understood the case. "No unpleasantness shall arise here on my account, I will return in a quarter of an hour."

"You will stay," commanded Keraunus. "This insolent Roman seems to think that Lochias belongs to him; but I will show him who is master here."

But Mastor paid no heed to these words spoken in a high pitch; he took the tailor's hand and led him out, whispering to him:

"Come with me if you wish to escape an evil hour."

The two men went off and Keraunus did not detain the artisan, for it occurred to his mind that his presence did him small credit. He purposed to show himself in all his dignity to the overbearing architect, but he also remembered that it was not advisable to provoke unnecessarily the mysterious bearded stranger, with the big clog. Much excited, and not altogether free from anxiety, he paced up and down his room. To give himself courage he hastily filled a cup from the wine-jar that stood on the breakfast table, emptied it, refilled it and drank it off a second time without adding any water, and then stood with his arms folded and a strong color in his face awaiting his enemy's visit.

The Emperor walked in with Gabinius. Keraunus expected some greeting, but Hadrian spoke not a word, cast a glance at him of the utmost contempt and passed by him without taking any more notice of him than if he had been a pillar or a piece of furniture. The blood mounted to the steward's head and heated his eyes and for fully a minute he strove in

vain to find words to give utterance to his rage. Gabinius paid no more heed to Keraunus than the Roman had done. He walked on ahead and paused in front of the mosaic for which he had offered so high a price, and over which a few days since he had been so sharply dealt with by the steward.

"I would beg you," he said, "to look at this masterpiece."

The Emperor looked at the ground, but hardly had he begun to study the picture, of which he quite understood and appreciated the beauty, when just behind him he heard in a hoarse voice these words uttered with difficulty:

"In Alexandria--it is the custom, to greet--to say something--to the people you visit." Hadrian half turned his head towards the speaker and said indifferently but with strong and insulting contempt:

"In Rome too it is the custom to greet honest people." Then looking down again at the mosaic he said, "Exquisite, exquisite an inestimable and precious work." At Hadrian's words Keraunus' eyes almost started out of his head. His face was crimson and his lips pale; he went close up to him and as soon as he had found breath to speak he said:

"What have you--what are your words intended to convey?"

Hadrian turned suddenly and full upon the steward; in his eyes sparkled that annihilating fire which few could endure to gaze on and his deep voice rolled sullenly through the room as he said to the miserable man:

"My words are intended to convey that you have been an unfaithful steward, that I know what you would rather I should not know, that I have learned how you deal with the property entrusted to you, that you--"

"That I?"--cried the steward trembling with rage and stepping close up to the Emperor.

"That you," shouted Hadrian in his face, "tried to sell this picture to this man; in short that you are a simpleton and a scoundrel into the bargain."

"I--I," gasped Keraunus slapping his hand on his fat chest. "I--a--a-- but you shall repent of these words."

Hadrian laughed coldly and scornfully, but Keraunus sprang on Gabinius with a wonderful agility for his size, clutched him by the collar of his chiton and shook the feeble little man as if he were a sapling, shrieking meanwhile:

"I will choke you with your own lies--serpent, mean viper!"

"Madman!" cried Hadrian "leave hold of the Ligurian or by Sirius you shall repent it."

"Repent it?" gasped the steward. "It will be your turn to repent when Caesar comes. Then will come a day of reckoning with false witnesses, shameless calumniators who disturb peaceful households, while credulous idiots--"

"Man, man," interrupted Hadrian, not loudly but sternly and ominously, "you know not to whom you speak."

"Oh I know you--I know you only too well. But I--I--shall I tell you who I am?"

"You--you are a blockhead," replied the monarch shrugging his shoulders contemptuously. Then he added calmly, with dignity--almost with indifference:

"I am Caesar."

At these words the steward's hand dropped from the chiton of the half-throttled dealer. Speechless and with a glassy stare he gazed in Hadrian's face for a few seconds. Then he suddenly started, staggered backwards, uttered a loud choking, gurgling, nameless cry, and fell back on the floor like a mass of rock shaken from its foundations by an earthquake. The room shook again with his fall.

Hadrian was startled and when he saw him lying motionless at his feet he bent over him--less from pity than from a wish to see what was the matter with him; for he had also dabbled in medicine. Just as he was lifting the fallen man's hand to feel his pulse Arsinoe rushed into the room. She had heard the last words of the antagonists with breathless anxiety and her father's fall and now threw herself on her knees by the side of the unhappy man, just opposite to Hadrian, and as his distorted and grey-white face told her what had occurred she broke out in a passionate cry of anguish. Her brothers and sisters followed at her heels, and when they saw their favorite sister bewailing herself they followed her example without knowing at first what Arsinoe was crying for, but soon with terror and horror at their father lying there stiff and disfigured. The Emperor, who had never had either son or daughter of his own, found nothing so intolerable as the presence of crying children. However he endured the wailing and whimpering that surrounded him till he had ascertained the condition of the man lying on the ground before him.

"He is dead," he said in a few minutes. "Cover his face, Master."

Arsinoe and the children broke out afresh, and Hadrian glanced down at them with annoyance. When his eye fell on Arsinoe, whose costly robe, merely pinned and slightly stitched together had come undone with the vehemence of her movements and were hanging as flapping rags in tumbled disorder, he was disgusted with the gaudy fluttering trumpery which contrasted so painfully with the grief of the wearer, and turning his back on the fair girl he quitted the chamb

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