

GEORG EBERS

SERAPIS.

VOLUME 05

Georg Ebers
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Serapis – Volume 05:*

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CHAPTER XX

Gorgo, when she had left her grandmother, could not rest. Her lofty calmness of demeanor had given way to a restless mood such as she had always contemned severely in others, since she had ceased to be a vehement child and grown to be a woman. She tried to beguile the alarm that made her pulses beat so quickly, and the heart-sickness that ached like a wound, by music and singing; but this only added to her torment. The means by which she could usually recover her equanimity of mind had lost their efficacy, and Sappho's longing hymn, which she began to sing, had only served to bring the fervid longing of her own heart to light—to set it, as it were, in the full glare of the sun. She had become aware that every fibre, every nerve of her being yearned for the man she loved; she would have thrown away her life like a hollow nut for one single hour of perfect joy with him and in him. The faith in the old gods, the heathen world which contained the ideal of her young soul, her detestation of Christianity, her beautiful art—everything, in short, that had filled the spiritual side of her life, was cast into the shade by the one absorbing passion that possessed her soul. Every feeling, every instinct,

urged her to abandon herself entirely to her lover, and yet she never for one instant doubted which side she would take in the approaching conflict of the great powers that ruled the world. The last few hours had only confirmed her conviction that the end of all things was at hand. The world was on the eve of destruction, she foresaw that she must perish—perish with Constantine, and that, in her eyes, was a grace from the gods.

While Damia was vainly struggling to liberate her soul from the bondage of the flesh, Gorgo had been wandering uneasily about the house; now going to the slaves, encouraging them with brave words, and giving them employment to keep them from utter desperation, and then stealing up to see whether her grandmother might not by this time be in need of her. As it grew dark she observed that several of the women, and even some of the men, had made their escape. These were such as had already shown a leaning towards the new faith, and who now made off to join their fellow-Christians, or to seek refuge in the churches under the protection of the crucified God whose supreme power might, perhaps, even yet, avert the impending catastrophe.

Twice had Porphyrius sent a messenger to assure his mother and daughter that all was well with him, that a powerful party was prepared to defend the Serapeum, and that he should pass the night in the temple. The Romans were evidently hesitating to attack it, and if, next morning, the heathen should succeed in repelling the first onset, reinforcements might yet be brought up in time. Gorgo could not share these hopes; a client of her father's

had brought in a rumor that the Biamites, after advancing as far as Naucratis, had been dispersed by a few of the Imperial maniples. Fate was stalking on its way, and no one could give it pause.

The evening brought no coolness, and when it was already quite dark, as her grandmother had not yet called her, Gorgo could no longer control her increasing anxiety, so, after knocking in vain at the door of the observatory, she went in. Her old nurse preceded her with a lamp, and the two women stood dumb with consternation, for the old lady lay senseless on the ground. Her head was thrown back against the seat of the chair off which she had slipped, and her pale face was lifeless and horrible to look at, with its half-closed eyes and dropped jaw. Wine, water, and strong essences were all at hand, and they laid the unconscious woman on a couch intended for the occasional use of the wearied observer. In a few minutes they had succeeded in reviving the old lady; but her eyes rested without recognition on the girl who knelt by her side, and she murmured to herself: "The ravens—where are they gone? Ravens!"

Her glance wandered round the room, to the tablets and rolls which had been tossed off the couch and the table to make room for her, and for the lamps and medicaments. They lay in disorder on the floor, and the sight of this confusion produced a favorable excitement and reaction; she succeeded in expressing herself in husky accents and broken, hardly intelligible sentences, so far as to scold them sharply for their irreverence for the precious documents, and for the disorder they had created. The waiting-

woman proceeded to pick them up: but Damia again became unconscious. Gorgo bathed her brow and tried to pour some wine between her teeth, but she clenched them too firmly, till the slave-woman came to her assistance and they succeeded in making Damia swallow a few drops. The old woman opened her eyes, smacking her tongue feebly; but she took the cup into her own hand to hold it to her lips; and though she trembled so that half the contents were spilt, she drank eagerly till it was quite empty. "More," she gasped with the eagerness of intense thirst, "more—I want drink !"

Gorgo gave her a second and a third draught which Damia drank with equal eagerness; then, with a deep breath, she looked up fully conscious, at her granddaughter.

"Thank you, child," she said. "Now I shall do very well for a little while. The material world and all that belongs to it weighs us down and clings to us like iron fetters. We may long and strive to be free, but it pursues us and holds us fast. Only those who are content with their miserable humanity can enjoy it. They laugh, as you know, at Praxilla, the poetess, because she makes the dying Adonis lament, when face to face with death, that he is forced to leave the apples and pears behind him. But is not that subtly true? Yes, yes; Praxilla is right! We fast, we mortify ourselves—I have felt it all myself—to partake of divinity. We almost perish of hunger and thirst, when we might be so happy if only we would be satisfied with apples and pears! No man has ever yet succeeded in the great effort; those who would be truly

happy must be content with small things. That is what makes children so happy. Apples and pears! Well, everything will be at an end for me ere long—even those. But if the great First Cause spares himself in the universal crash, there is still the grand idea of Apples and Pears; and who knows but that it may please Him, when this world is destroyed, to frame another to come after it. Will He then once more embody the ideas of Man—and Apples and Pears? It would be plagiarism from himself. Nay, if He is merciful, He will never again give substance to that hybrid idea called Man; or, if He does, He will let the poor wretch be happy with apples and pears—I mean trivial joys; for all higher joys, be they what they may, are vanity and vexation.... Give me another draught. Ah, that is good! And to-morrow is the end. I could find it in my heart to regret the good gifts of Dionysus myself; it is better than apples and pears; next to that comes the joy that Eros bestows on mortals, and there must be an end to all that, too. That, however, is above the level of apples and pears. It is great, very great happiness, and mingled therefor with bitter sorrow. Rapture and anguish—who can lay down the border line that divides them? Smiles and tears alike belong to both. And you are weeping? Aye, aye— poor child! Come here and kiss me." Damia drew the head of the kneeling girl close to her bosom and pressed her lips to Gorge's brow. Presently, however, she relaxed her embrace and, looking about the room, she exclaimed:

"How you have mixed and upset the book-rolls! If only I could show you how clearly everything agrees and coincides. We know

now exactly how it will all happen. By the day after to-morrow there will be no more earth, no more sky; and I will tell you this, child: If, when Serapis falls, the universe does not crumble to pieces like a ruinous hovel, then the wisdom of the Magians is a lie, the course of the stars has nothing to do with the destinies of the earth and its inhabitants, the planets are mere lamps, the sun is no more than a luminous furnace, the old gods are marsh-fires, emanations from the dark bog of men's minds—and the great Serapis... But why be angry with him? There is no doubt—no if nor butGive me the diptychon and I will show you our doom. There—just here—my sight is so dazzled, I cannot make it out.—And if I could, what matter? Who can alter here below what has been decided above? Leave me to sleep now, and I will explain it all to you to-morrow if there is still time. Poor child, when I think how we have tormented you to learn what you know, and how industrious you have been! And now—to what end? I ask you, to what end? The great gulf will swallow up one and all."

"So be it, so be it !" cried Gorgo interrupting her. "Then, at any rate, nothing that I love on earth will be lost to me before I die!"

"And the enemy will perish in the same ruin!" continued Damia, her eyes sparkling with revived fire. "But where shall we go to—where? The soul is divine by nature and cannot be destroyed. It must return—say, am I right or wrong?—It will return to its first fount and cause; for like attracts and absorbs

like, and thus our deification, our union with the god will be accomplished."

"I believe it—I am sure of it!" replied Gorgo with conviction.

"You are sure of it?" retorted the old woman. "But I am not. For our clearest knowledge is but guesswork when it is not based on numbers. Nothing is proved or provable but by numbers, but they are surer than the rocks in the sea; that is why I believe in our coming doom, for, on those tablets, we have calculated it to a certainty. But who can calculate evidence of the future fate of the soul? If, indeed, the old order should not pass away—if the depths should remain below and the empyrean still keep its place above—then, to be sure, your studies would not be in vain; for then your soul, which is fixed on spiritual, supernatural and sublime conceptions, would be drawn upwards to the great Intelligence of which it is the offspring, to the very god, and become one with him—absorbed into him, as the rain-drop fallen from a cloud rises again and is reunited to its parent vapor. Then—for there may be a metempsychosis—your songful spirit might revive to inform a nightingale, then . . ."

Damia paused; and gazed upwards as if in ecstasy, and it was not till a few minutes later that she went on, with a changed expression in her face: "Then my son's widow, Mary, would be hatched out of a serpent's egg and would creep a writhing asp... Great gods! the ravens! What can they mean? They come again. Air, air! Wine! I cannot—I am choking—take it away!—To-morrow—to-day... Everything is going; do you see—do you

feel? It is all black—no, red; and now black again. Everything is sinking; hold me, save me; the floor is going from under me.—Where is Porphyrius? Where is my son?—My feet are so cold; rub them. It is the water! rising—it is up to my knees. I am sinking—help! save me! help!" The dying woman fought with her arms as if she were drowning; her cries for help grew fainter, her head drooped on her laboring chest, and in a few minutes she had breathed her last in her grandchild's arms, and her restless, suffering soul was free.

Never before had Gorgo seen death. She could not persuade herself that the heart which had been so cold for others, but had throbbed so warmly and tenderly for her, was now stilled for ever; that the spirit which, even in sleep, had never been at rest, had now found eternal peace. The slave-woman had hastily taken her place, had closed the dead woman's eyes and mouth, and done all she could to diminish the horror of the scene, and the terrible aspect of the dead in the sight of the girl who had been her one darling. But Gorgo had remained by her side, and, while she did everything in her power to revive the stiffening body, the overwhelming might of Death had come home to her with appalling clearness. She felt the limbs of one she had loved growing cold and rigid under her hands, and her spirit rose in obstinate rebellion against the idea that annihilation stood between her and the woman who had so amply filled a mother's place. She insisted on having every method of resuscitation tried that had ever been heard of, and made her nurse send for

physicians, though the woman solemnly assured her that human help was of no avail: then she sent for the priest of Saturn who—as the dead woman herself had told her—knew mighty spells which had called back many a departed spirit to the body it had quitted.

When, at last, she was alone and gazed on the hard, set features of the dead, though she shuddered with horror, she so far controlled herself as to press her lips in sorrow and gratitude to the thin hand whose caresses she had been wont to accept as a mere matter of course. How cold and heavy it was! She shivered and dropped it, and the large rings on the fingers rattled on the wooden frame of the couch. There was no hope; she understood that her friend and mother was indeed dead and silent forever.

Deep and bitter grief overwhelmed her completely, with the sense of abandoned loneliness, the humiliating feeling of helplessness against a brutal power that marches on, scorning humanity, as a warrior treads down the grass and flowers in his path. She fell on her knees by the corpse, sobbing passionately, and crying like an indignant child when a stronger companion has robbed it of some precious possession. She wept with rage at her own impotence; and her tears flowed faster and faster as she more fully realized how lonely she was, and what a blow this must be to her father. In this hour no pleasant reminiscences of past family happiness came to infuse a drop of sweetness into the bitterness of her grief. Only one reflection brought her any comfort, and that was the thought that the grave which had yawned already

for her grandmother would soon, very soon, open for herself and all living souls. On the table, close at hand, lay the evidence of their impending doom, and a longing for that end gradually took complete possession of her, excluding every other feeling. Thinking of this she rose from her knees and ceased to weep.

When, presently, her waiting-woman should return, she was resolved to leave the house at once; she could not bear to stay; her feelings and duty alike indicated the place where she might find the last hour's happiness that she expected or desired of life. Her father must learn from herself, and not from a stranger, of the loss that had befallen them, and she knew that he was in the Serapeum—on the very spot where she might hope next morning to meet Constantine. It would be her lover's duty to open the gate to destruction, and she would be there to pass through it at his side.

She waited a long, long time, but at last there was a noise on the stairs. That was her nurse's step, but she was not alone. Had she brought the leech and the exorciser? The door opened and the old steward came in, carrying a three-branched lamp; then followed the slave-woman, and then—her heart stood still then came Constantine and his mother.

Gorgo, pale and speechless, received her unexpected visitors. The nurse had failed to find the physician, whose aid would, at any rate, have come too late; and as the housekeeper had taken herself off with others of the Christian slaves, the faithful soul had said to herself that "her child" would want some womanly

help and comfort in her trouble, and had gone to the house of their neighbor Clemens, to entreat his wife to come with her to see the dead, and visit her forlorn young mistress. Constantine, who had come home a short time previously, had said nothing, but had accompanied the two women.

While Constantine gazed with no unkindly feelings at the still face of Damia—to whom, after all, he owed many a little debt of kindness—and then turned to look at Gorgo who stood downcast, pale, and struggling to breathe calmly, Dame Marianne tried to proffer a few words of consolation. She warmly praised everything in the dead woman which was not in her estimation absolutely reprobate and godless, and brought forward all the comforting arguments which a pious Christian can command for the edification and encouragement of those who mourn a beloved friend; but to Gorgo all this well-meant discourse was as the babble of an unknown tongue; and it was only when, at length, Marianne went up to her and drew her to her motherly bosom, to kiss her, and bid her be welcome under Clelnens' roof till Porphyrius should be at home again, that she understood that the good woman meant kindly, and honestly desired to help and comfort her.

But the allusion to her father reminded her of the first duty in her path; she roused her energies, thanked Marianne warmly, and begged her only to assist her in carrying the corpse into the thalamos, and then to take charge of the keys. She herself, she explained, meant at once to seek her father, since he ought to

learn from no one but herself of his mother's death. Nor would she listen for a moment to her friend's pressing entreaties that she would put off this task, and pass the night, at any rate, under her roof.

Constantine had kept in the background; it was not till Gorgo approached the dead and gave the order to carry the body down into the house that he came forward, and with simple feeling offered her his hand. The girl looked frankly in his face, and, as she put her hand in his, she said in a low voice: "I was unjust to you, Constantine. I insulted and hurt you; but I repented sincerely, even before you had left the house. And you owe me no grudge, I know, for you understood how forlorn I must be and came to see me. There is no ill-feeling, is there, nothing to come between us?"

"Nothing, nothing!" he eagerly exclaimed, seizing her other hand with passionate fervor.

She felt as if all the blood in her body had rushed in a full tide to her heart—as if he were some part of her very being, that had been torn out, snatched from her, and that she must have back again, even if it cost them both their life and happiness. The impulse was irresistible; she drew away her hands from his grasp and flung them round his neck, clinging to him as a weary child clings to its mother. She did not know how it had come about—how such a thing was possible, but it was done; and without paying any heed to Marianne, who looked on in dismay while her son's lips were pressed to the brow and lips of the lovely

idolatress, she wept upon her lover's shoulders, feeling a thousand roses blossoming in her soul and a thousand thorns piercing and tearing her heart.

It had to be, that she felt; it was at once their union and their parting. Their common destiny was but for a moment, and that moment had come and gone. All that now remained for them was death—destruction, with all things living; and she looked forward to this, as a man watches for the dawn after a sleepless night. Marianne stood aside; she dimly perceived that something vital was going on, that something inevitable had happened which would admit of no interference. Gorgo, as she freed herself from Constantine's embrace, stood strangely solemn and unapproachable. To the simple matron she was an inscrutable riddle to which she could find no clue; but she was pleased, nevertheless, when Gorgo came up to her and kissed her hand. She could not utter a word, for she felt that whatever she might say, it would not be the right thing; and it was a real relief to her to busy herself over the removal of the body, in which she could be helpful.

Gorgo had covered the dead face; and when old Damia had been carried down to the thalamos and laid in state on the bridal bed, she strewed the couch with flowers.

Meanwhile, the priest of Saturn had been found, and he declared in all confidence that no power on earth could have recalled this departed soul. Damia's sudden end and the girl's great grief went to his faithful heart, and he gladly acceded

to Gorgo's request that he would wait for her by the garden-gate and escort her to the Serapeum. When he had left them she gave the keys of her grandmother's chests and cupboards into Marianne's keeping; then she went into the adjoining room, where Constantine had been waiting while she decked the bed of death, and bid him a solemn, but apparently calm, farewell. He put out his arm to clasp her to his heart, but this she would not permit; and when he besought her to go home with them she answered sadly, "No, my dearest... I must not; I have other duties to fulfil."

"Yes," he replied emphatically, "and I, too—I have mine. But you have given yourself to me. You are my very own; you belong to me only, and not to yourself; and I desire, I command you to yield to my first request. Go with my mother, or stay here, if you will, with the dead. Wherever your father may be, it is not, cannot be, the right place for you—my betrothed bride. I can guess where he is. Oh! Gorgo, be warned.

"The fate of the old gods is sealed. We are the stronger and to-morrow, yes to-morrow—by your own head, by all I hold dear and sacred!—Serapis will fall!"

"I know it," she said firmly. "And you are charged to lay hands on the god?"

"I am, and I shall do it."

She nodded approbation and then said submissively and sweetly: "It is your duty, and you cannot do otherwise. And come what may we are one, Constantine, forever one. Nothing can

part us. Whatever the future may bring, we belong to each other, to stand or fall together. I with you, you with me, till the end of time." She gave him her hand and looked lovingly into his eyes; then she threw herself into his mother's arms and kissed her fondly.

"Come, come with me, my child," said Marianne; but Gorgo freed herself, exclaiming: "Go, go; if you love me leave me; go and let me be alone."

She went back into the thalamos where the dead lay at peace, and before the others could follow her she had opened a door hidden behind some tapestry near the bed, and fled into the garden.

CHAPTER XXI

The night was hot and gloomy. Heavy clouds gathered in the north, and wreaths of mist, like a hot vapor-bath, swayed over the crisply-foaming wavelets that curled the lustreless waters of the Mareotis Lake. The moon peeped, pale and shrouded, out of a russet halo, and ghostly twilight reigned in the streets, still heated by the baked walls of the houses.

To the west, over the desert, a dull sulphurous yellow streaked the black clouds, and from time to time the sultry air was rent by a blinding flash sent across the firmament from the north. There was a hot, sluggish wind blowing from the southwest, which drove the sand across the lake into the streets; the fine grit stung: and burnt the face of the wanderer who hurried on with half-closed eyes and tightly-shut lips. A deep oppression seemed to have fallen on nature and on man; the sudden gusts of the heated breeze, the arrow-like shafts of lightning, the weird shapes and colors of the clouds, all combined to give a sinister, baleful and portentous aspect to this night, as though skies and waters, earth and air were brooding over some tremendous catastrophe.

Gorgo had thrown a veil and handkerchief round her head and followed the priest with an aching brow and throbbing heart. When she heard a step behind her she started-for it might be Constantine following her up; when a gust of wind flung the stinging sand in her face, or the storm-flash threw a lurid light

on the sky, her heart stood still, for was not this the prelude to the final crash.

She was familiar with the way they were going, but its length seemed to have stretched tenfold. At last, however, they reached their destination. She gave the pass-word at the gate of her father's timber-yard and exchanged the signs agreed upon; in a few minutes she had made her way through the piles of beams and planks that screened the entrance to the aqueduct—a slave who knew her leading the way with a light—and she and her companion entered the underground passage.

It was hot and close; bats, scared by the flare of the torch, fluttered round her with a ghostly rustle, startling and disgusting her; still, she felt less alarm here than outside; and when, as she went forward she thought of the great temple she was coming to, of its wonderful beauty and solemn majesty, she only cared to press onward to that refuge of ineffable splendor where all would be peace. To die there, to perish there with her lover, did not seem hard; nay, she felt proud to think that she might await death in the noblest edifice ever raised to a god by mortal hands. Here Fate might have its way; she had known the highest joy she had ever dreamed of, and where on earth was there a sublimer tomb than this sanctuary of the sovereign of the universe, whose supremacy even the other gods acknowledged with trembling!

She had known the sacred halls of the temple from her childhood, and she pictured them as filled with thousands of lofty souls, united in this supreme hour by one feeling and

one purpose. She even fancied she could hear the inspired and heartfelt strains of the enthusiasts who were prepared to give their lives for the god of their fathers, that she breathed the odor of incense and burnt sacrifices, that she saw the chorus of youths and maidens, led by priests and dancing with solemn grace in mazy circles round the flower-decked altars. There among the elders who had gathered round Olympius to meditate devoutly on the coming doom and on the inmost meaning of the mysteries—among the adepts who were anxiously noting, in the observatories of the Serapeum, the fateful courses of the stars, the swirling of the clouds and the flight of birds, she would doubtless find her father; and the fresh wound bled anew as she remembered that she was the bearer of news which must deeply shock and grieve him. Still, no doubt, she would find him wrapped in dignified readiness for the worst, sorrowing serenely for the doomed world, and so her melancholy message would come to a prepared and resigned heart.

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