

GEORG EBERS

SERAPIS.

VOLUME 06

Georg Ebers
Serapis. Volume 06

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Serapis – Volume 06

CHAPTER XXV

The spacious Hippodrome was filled with some thousands of spectators. At first many rows of seats had been left vacant, though usually on the eve of the great races, the people would set out soon after midnight and every place would be filled long before the games began; indeed the upper tiers of the tribune, which were built of wood and were free to all comers, with standing-room behind, were commonly so crowded early in the morning that the crush ended in a free fight.

On this occasion, the storm of the previous night, the anxiety caused by the conflict round the Serapeum, and the prevalent panic as to the approaching end of the world, kept great numbers away from their favorite diversion; but when the sky recovered its radiant blue, and when it became known that the statue of Serapis had escaped uninjured in the siege of his sanctuary—when Cynegius, the Imperial legate, and Evagrius, the city-prefect, had entered the theatre with much pomp, followed by several senators and ladies and gentlemen of rank—Christians, Heathen, and Jews—the most timid took courage; the games had been postponed for an hour, and before the first team was led into the arched shed whence the chariots started, the seats, though less densely packed than usual, were amply filled.

The number of chariots entered for competition was by no means smaller than on former occasions, for the heathen had strained every nerve to show their fellow-citizens of different creeds, and especially Caesar's representative, that, in spite of persecution and in defiance of Imperial edicts, they were still a power worthy of consideration. The Christians, on their part, did their utmost to outdo the idolaters on the same ground where, not long since, they had held quite the second place.

The Bishop's epigram: That Christianity had ceased to be the religion of the poor, was amply confirmed; the greater proportion of the places for senators, officials and rich citizens were occupied by its adherents, and the men and women who professed the Faith were by no means behind their heathen peers in magnificence of dress and jewels.

The horses, too, entered by the Christians could not fail to please the connoisseur, as they punctually made their appearance behind the starting-place, though he might have felt more confidence—and not without reason—in the heathen steeds, and more particularly in their drivers, each of whom had won on an average nine races out of ten.

The horses in the quadriga with which Marcus, the son of Mary, made his appearance in the arena had never before been driven in the Hippodrome. Demetrius, the owner's brother, had bred and trained them—four magnificent black Arabs—and they excited much interest among the knowing judges who were wont to collect and lounge about the 'oppidum', as it was called, behind the 'carceres'—[The covered sheds or stalls in which the horses were brought to wait for the start.]—to inspect the racers, predict the winner, offer counsel to the drivers, and make bets. These perfect creatures were perhaps as fine as the famous team of golden bays belonging to Iphicrates, which so often had proved victorious; but the agitadores, or drivers, attracted even more interest than the horses. Marcus, though he knew how to handle the reins—he had already been seen in experimental races—could hardly hold his own against Hippias, the handsome young heathen, who, like most of the drivers in the arena, was an agitator by profession. A story was told of his having driven over a bridge which was not quite as wide as the outside edges of his chariot-wheels; and there were many witnesses to the feat he had performed of writing his mistress' name with his chariot-tracks in the sand of the Hippodrome.

The betting was freest and the wagers highest on Hippias and the team belonging to Iphicrates. Some few backed Marcus and his Arabs, but for smaller sums; and when they compared the tall but narrow-shouldered figure of the young Christian with the heroic breadth of Hippias' frame, and his delicate features, dreamy blue eyes and downy black moustache with the powerful Hermes-head of his rival, they were anxious about their money. If his brother now, the farmer Demetrius—who was standing by the horses' heads—or some well-known agitator had held the reins, it would have been a pleasure and a profit to back such horses. Marcus had been abroad, too, and men shrugged their shoulders over that, for it was not till the last few days that he had been seen exercising his horses in the Hippodrome.

Time was going on, and the Imperial envoy, who had been elected to preside as judge, at length took his place; Demetrius whispered a few last words of advice to his brother and went back into the arena. He had secured a good place on the stone podium and on the shady side, though there were several seats vacant among those belonging to his family; but he did not care to occupy one of these, preferring to keep out of the way of his step-mother, who had made her appearance with a senator and his wife to whom she was related. He had not seen her for two days; his promise to Karnis that he would try to find Dada, had kept him fully occupied, and he had done his best in all earnest to discover the girl.

The honest indignation with which this young creature had refused his splendid offers, in spite of the modest circumstances of her life, had roused his respect, and he had felt it an insult to himself and to his brother when Gorgo had spoken of her with contempt. For his part, he had never met with any one more fascinating; he could not cease dreaming of her, and the thought that she might be swallowed up in the foul mire of a great city made him miserable. His brother had the first claim on her and he would not dispute it; while he had sought her unweariedly in every resort of the young and gay—nay even in Canopus—he had only meant to place her in safety, as a treasure which runs a risk of being lost to the family, though, when at last its possession is secured, it becomes the property of the member who can prove the best right of ownership. But all his efforts had been in vain; and it was in an unhappy mood that he went at last to the Hippodrome. There the bitter hostility and party-feeling which he had everywhere observed during his present visit to his native city, were not less conspicuous than they had been in the streets. The competing chariots usually arrived at the amphitheatre in grand procession, but this had not been thought advisable in the prevailing excitement; they had driven into the oppidum singly and without any display; and the images of the gods, which in former days had always been placed on the spina before the games began, had long since fallen into disuse.

[The spina was the division down the middle of the arena. At each end of it were placed the metae or goals, at a distance from it of about 13 feet. The spina was originally constructed of wood, subsequently it was of stone, and its height was generally about 29 feet. The spina in the Circus of Caracalla was more than 900 feet long.]

All this was vexatious to Demetrius, and when he had taken his seat it was in no pleasant temper that he looked round at the ranks of spectators.

His step-mother was sitting on the stuffed bench covered with lion-skins which was reserved for the family. Her tunic and skirt displayed the color blue of the Christian charioteer, being made of bright blue and silver brocade of a beautiful pattern in which the cross, the fish, and the olive-branch were elegantly combined. Her black hair was closely and simply smoothed over her temples and she wore no garland, but a string of large grey pearls, from which hung a chaplet of sapphires and opals, lying on her forehead. A veil fell over the back of her head and she sat gazing into her lap as if she were absorbed in prayer; her hands were folded and held a cross. This placid and demure attitude she deemed becoming to a Christian matron and widow. Everyone might see that she had not come for worldly pleasure, but merely to be present at a triumph of her fellow-Christians—and especially her

son—over the idolaters. Everything about her bore witness to the Faith, even the pattern on her dress and the shape of her ornaments; down to the embroidery on her silk gloves, in which a cross and an anchor were so designed as to form a Greek X, the initial letter of the name of Christ. Her ambition was to appear simple and superior to all worldly vanities; still, all she wore must be rich and costly, for she was here to do honor to her creed. She would have regarded it as a heathen abomination to wear wreaths of fresh and fragrant flowers, though for the money which that string of pearls had cost she might have decked the circus with garlands from end to end, or have fed a hundred poor for a twelvemonth. It seems so much easier to cheat the omniscient Creator of the Universe than our fellow-fools!

So Dame Maria sat there in sour and virtuous dignity, looking like the Virgin Mary as painters and sculptors were at that time wont to represent her; and her farmer-son shuddered whenever his eye fell on his step-mother. It did him good, by contrast, to hear a hearty peal of laughter that came up from the lowest ranks of the podium. When he had discovered the spot from whence it proceeded he could hardly believe his eyes, for there sat the long-sought Dada, between an old man and a young woman, laughing as though something had just occurred to amuse her extremely. Demetrius stretched his limbs with a feeling of relief and satisfaction; then he rose, and seeing his city agent seated just behind the girl, he begged him to change places with him, as he thought it advisable not to lose sight of the game now it was caught; the old man was very ready to oblige him and went up to the other seat with a meaning smile.

For the first time since she could recollect anything Dada had spent a sleepless night. Whether the wind and thunder would have sufficed to keep her awake who can tell; but the thoughts that had whirled through her brain had been varied and exciting enough to rob her of sleep. Her own people who were fighting for Serapis—how were they faring; and Agne—what had become of her? Then her mind turned to the church, and the worthy old priest's sermon; to the races that she was to see—and the face and figure of the handsome young Christian rose vividly and irresistibly before her fancy. Of course—of course, she wished his horses to win; but it was strange enough that she, Karnis' niece, should be on the side of the Christians. Stranger still that she had entirely ceased to believe in all the abuse which, from her earliest childhood, she had heard heaped on the followers of the crucified Jew. It could only be that Karnis had never been able to forgive them for having ruined his theatre at Tauromenium, and so, perhaps, had never known them thoroughly.

She had enjoyed many a happy hour at the festivals of the old gods; and they were no doubt beautiful and festive divinities, or terrible when they were wroth; still, in the depths of her soul there had for some time lurked a vague, sweet longing which found no fulfilment in any heathen temple. She knew no name for it and would have found it hard to describe, but in the church, listening to the prayers and hymns and the old deacon's discourse, it had for the first time been stilled; she had felt then and there that, helpless and simple as she was, and even if she were to remain parted from her foster parents, she need never feel abandoned, but could rest and hope in a supreme, loving, and helpful power. And indeed she needed such a protector; she was so easily beguiled. Stephanion, a flute-player she had known in Rome, had wheedled everything she had a fancy for out of poor Dada, and when she had got into any mischief laid it all on Dada's shoulders. There must be something particularly helpless about her, for everyone, as a matter of course, took her in hand and treated her like a child, or said things that made her angry.

In the Hippodrome, however, she forgot everything in the present pleasure, and was happy enough in finding herself in the lowest row of places, in the comfortable seats on the shady side, belonging to Posidonius, the wealthy Magian. This was quite different from her experience in Rome, where once, in the Circus Maximus, she had stood in the second tier of the wooden gallery and had been squeezed and pushed, while no one had taken any notice of her and she had only seen the races from a distance, looking down on the heads of the men and horses. Herse never would take her a second time, for, as they came out, they had been followed and spoken to by men, young and old;

and after that her aunt had fancied she never could be safe, scenting danger at every turn, and would not allow her ever again to go out alone in the city.

This was altogether a much finer place, for here she was parted from the race-course only by a narrow watercourse which, as it happened, was bridged over just in front of her; the horses would pass close to her; and besides, it was pleasant to be seen and to feel conscious of a thousand flattering glances centered on herself.

Even the great Cynegius, Caesar's envoy and deputy, who had often noticed her on board ship, turned again and again to look at her. He was carried in on a golden litter by ten huge negroes, preceded by twelve lictors bearing fasces wreathed with laurel; and he took his seat, robed in purple and embroidery, on a magnificent throne in the middle of the tribune above the starting sheds; however, Dada troubled herself no more about the overdressed old man.

Her eyes were everywhere, and she made Medius or his daughter name everybody and explain everything. Demetrius was delighted with her eager enjoyment; presently, nudging the singer, she whispered to him with much satisfaction:

"Look how the people down below are craning their necks to look at us! My dress is so very pretty—I wonder where your friend Posidonius gets these lovely roses. There are above a hundred buds in this garland across my shoulders and down to my girdle, I counted them in the litter as I came along. It is a pity they should die so soon; I shall dry the leaves and make scent of them."

Demetrius could not resist the temptation; he leaned forward and said over her shoulder: "There are hardly enough for that."

At this unexpected address Dada looked round, and she blushed as she recognized Marcus' brother; he, however, hastened to assure her that he deeply regretted his audacious proposals of two days since, and the girl laughed, and said that he had come off worst, and that she might have sent him away a little more civilly perhaps; but the truth was she had been out of temper to begin with—any one would be cross that was treated as Dame Herse had treated her: hiding her shoes and leaving her a prisoner on the deck of a barge in the middle of a lake! Then she introduced him to Medius, and finally enquired about Marcus and his horses, and whether he had any chance of winning the race.

The countryman answered all her questions; and when, presently, a flower-girl came along the ranks of seats, selling wreaths of blue and red flowers and ribbands, Demetrius bought two lovely olive-wreaths to fling to the winner—his brother he hoped. Medius and his daughter wore red knots—the color of the Heathen, and Dada, following their example, had a similar bow on her shoulder; now, however, she accepted a blue ribband that Demetrius bought for her and pinned it in the place of the red one as being the color of Marcus, to the old singer's great annoyance. Demetrius laughed loudly in his deep bass tones, declaring that his brother was already most anxious to win, and that, when he saw her with these ribbands he would strain every nerve, in gratitude for her partisanship. He could assure her that Marcus thought of her constantly.

"I am glad of that," she said simply; and she added that it was the same with her, for she had been thinking all night of Marcus and his horses. Medius could not help remarking that Karnis and Herse would take it very ill that she should display the Christian color to-day of all days; to which she only replied that she was sorry for that, but that she liked blue better than red. The answer was so abrupt and short that it startled Demetrius, who had hitherto seen Dada gentle and pliant; and it struck him at once how deep an aversion the girl felt for her present protectors.

There was music, as usual, in the towers at either end of the row of carceres; but it was less stirring and cheerful than of yore, for flutes, and several of the heathen airs had been prohibited. Formerly, too, the Hippodrome had been a place where lovers could meet and where many a love-affair had been brought to a happy climax; but to-day none of the daughters of the more respectable families were allowed to quit the women's apartments in their own homes, for danger was in the air; the course of events in the Serapeum had kept many of the younger men from witnessing the races,

and some mysterious influence seemed to weigh upon the gaiety and mirth of which the Hippodrome on a gala day was usually the headquarters.

Wild excitement, expectation strung to the highest pitch, and party-feeling, both for and against, had always, of course, been rife here; but to-day they were manifest in an acuter form—hatred had added its taint and lent virulence to every emotion. The heathen were oppressed and angered, their rights abridged and defied; they saw the Christians triumphant at every point, and hatred is a protean monster which rages most fiercely and most venomously when it has lurked in the foul career of envy.

The Christians could hate, too, and they hated the idolaters who gloried with haughty self-sufficiency in their intellectual inheritance; the traditions of a brilliant past. They, who had been persecuted and contemned, now had the upper hand; they were in power, and the more insolently they treated their opponents, the more injustice they did them, and the less the victimized heathen were able to revenge themselves, the more bitterly did the Christians detest the party they contemned as superstitious idolaters. In their care for the soul—the spiritual and divine part—the Christians had hitherto neglected the graces of the body; thus the heathen had remained the undisputed masters of the palaestra and the hippodrome. In the gymnasium the Christian refused even to compete, for the exhibition of his naked body he regarded as an abomination; but on the race-course he had lately been willing to display his horses, and many times had disputed the crown with the hereditary victors, so that, even here, the heathen felt his time-honored and undisputed supremacy endangered. This was intolerable—this must be averted—the mere thought of being beaten on this ground roused the idolaters to wrath and malice. They displayed their color in wreaths of scarlet poppies, pomegranate flowers and red roses, with crimson ribbands and dresses; white and green, the colors formerly adopted by the competitors, were abandoned; for all the heathen were unanimous in combining their forces against the common foe. The ladies used red sun-shades and the very baskets, in which the refreshments were brought for the day, were painted red.

The widow Mary, on the other hand, and all the Christians were robed in blue from head to foot, their sandals being tied with blue ribbands; and Dada's blue shoulder-knot was in conspicuous contrast to her bright rose-colored dress.

The vendors of food who wandered round the circus had eggs dyed blue and red, cakes with sugared icing and refreshing drinks in jars of both colors. When a Christian and a Heathen found themselves seated side by side, each turned a shoulder to the other, or, if they were forced to sit face to face, eyed each other with a scowl.

Cynegius did all he could to postpone the races as long as possible; he was anxious to wait till the Comes had finished his task in the Serapeum, so that the troops might be free to act in any emergency that might arise before the contests in the Hippodrome were fairly ended. Time did not hang heavy on his hands for the vast multitude here assembled interested him greatly, though he had frequently been a spectator of similar festivities in Rome and Constantinople; but this crowd differed in many particulars from the populace of those cities. In the topmost tiers of free seats black and brown faces predominated greatly over white ones; in the cushioned and carpeted ranks of the stone podium—the lower portion of the amphitheatre—mingled with Greeks and Egyptians, sat thousands of splendidly dressed men and women with strongly-marked Semitic features: members of the wealthy Jewish community, whose venerable head, the Alabarch, a dignified patriarch in Greek dress, sat with the chief members of the senate, near the envoy's tribune.

The Alexandrians were not a patient race and they were beginning to rebel against the delay, making no small noise and disturbance, when Cynegius rose and with his white handkerchief waved the signal for the races to begin. The number of spectators had gradually swelled from fifty to sixty and to eighty thousand; and no less than thirty-six chariots were waiting behind the carceres ready to start.

Four 'missus' or races were to be run. In each of the three first twelve chariots were to start, and in the fourth only the leaders in the three former ones were to compete. The winner of the

olive-wreath and palmbranch in this final heat would bear the honors of the day; his party would be victorious and he would quit the Hippodrome in triumph.

Lots were now drawn in the oppidum to decide which shed each chariot was to start from, and in which naissus each was to run. It was Marcus' fate to start among the first lot, and, to the horror of those who had backed his chances, Hippias, the hero of the Hippodrome, was his rival, with the four famous bays.

Heathen priests poured libations to Poseidon, and Phoebus Apollo, the patron divinities of horses and of the Hippodrome—for sacrifices of blood were prohibited; while Christian presbyters and exorcists blessed the rival steeds in the name of the Bishop. A few monks had crept in, but they were turned out by the heathen with bitter jeers, as unbidden intruders.

Cynegius repeated his signal. The sound of the tuba rang through the air, and the first twelve chariots were led into the starting-sheds. A few minutes later a machine was set in motion by which a bronze eagle was made to rise with outspread wings high into the air, from an altar in front of the carceres; this was the signal for the chariots to come forth from their boxes. They took up their positions close behind a broad chalk line, traced on the ground with diagonal slope, so as to reduce the disadvantage of standing outermost and having a larger curve to cover.

Until this moment only the privileged possessors of the seats over the carceres had been able, by craning backwards, to see the horses and drivers; now the competitors were visible to the multitude which, at their first appearance, broke out into vociferous applause. The agitadores had to exert all their strength to hold in the startled and eager teams, and make them stand even for a few short minutes; then Cynegius signalled for the third time. A golden dolphin, which had been suspended from a beam, and on which the eye of every charioteer was fixed, dropped to the ground, a blast on the 'salpinx', or war-trumpet, was sounded, and forty-eight horses flew forth as though thrown forward by one impulsion.

The strength of four fine horses whirled each light, two-wheeled chariot over the hard causeway as though it were a toy. The down-pour of the previous night had laid the dust; the bright sunshine sparkled and danced in rapidly-changing flashes, mirrored in the polished gilding of the bronze or the silver fittings of the elegantly-decorated, semicircular cars in which the drivers stood.

Five blue and seven red competitors had drawn the first lots. The eye rested with pleasure on the sinewy figures whose bare feet seemed rooted to the boards they stood on, while their eyes were riveted on the goal they were striving to reach, though—as the eye of the archer sees arrow, bow and mark all at once—they never lost sight of the horses they were guiding. A close cap with floating ribbands confined their hair, and they wore a short sleeveless tunic, swathed round the body with wide bands, as if to brace their muscles and add to their strength. The reins were fastened around the hips so as to leave the hands free, not only to hold them but also to ply the whip and use the goad. Each charioteer had a knife in his girdle, to enable him to release himself, in case of accident, from a bond that might prove fatal.

Before long the bay team was leading alone. Behind were two Christian drivers, followed by three red chariots; Marcus was last of all, but it was easy to see that it was by choice and not by necessity that he was hanging back. He was holding in his fiery team with all his strength and weight—his body thrown back, his feet firmly set with his knees against the silver bar of the chariot, and his hands gripping the reins. In a few minutes he came flying past Dada and his brother, but he did not see them. He had not even caught sight of his own mother, while the professional charioteers had not failed to bow to Cynegius and nod to their friends. He could only keep his eyes and mind fixed on his horses and on the goal.

The multitude clapped, roared, shouted encouragement to their party, hissed and whistled when they were disappointed—venting their utmost indignation on Marcus as he came past behind the others; but he either heard them not or would not hear. Dada's heart beat so wildly that she thought it would burst. She could not sit still; she started to her feet and then flung herself back on her cushions,

shouting some spurring words to Marcus in the flash of time when he might perhaps hear them. When he had passed, her head fell and she said sadly enough: "Poor fellow!—We have bought our wreaths for nothing after all, Demetrius!"

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