

# GEORG EBERS

SERAPIS.

VOLUME 01

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**Serapis. Volume 01**

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## Serapis – Volume 01

### CHAPTER I

The busy turmoil of the town had been hushed for some hours; the moon and stars were keeping silent watch over Alexandria, and many of the inhabitants were already in the land of dreams. It was deliciously fresh —a truly gracious night; but, though peace reigned in the streets and alleys, even now there was in this pause for rest a lack of the soothing calm which refreshes and renews the spirit of man. For some few weeks there had been an oppressive and fevered tension in the repose of night. Every house and shop was closed as securely as though it were done, not only to secure slumber against intrusion, but to protect life and property from the spoiler; and instead of tones of jollity and mirth the sleeping city echoed the heavy steps and ringing arms of soldiers. Now and again, when the Roman word of command or the excited cry of some sleepless monk broke the silence, shops and doors were cautiously opened and an anxious face peered out, while belated wanderers shrunk into gateways or under the black shadow of a wall as the watch came past. A mysterious burden weighed on the Heart of the busy city and clicked its pulses, as a nightmare oppresses the dreamer.

On this night of the year of our Lord 391, in a narrow street leading from the commercial harbor known as Kibotus, an old man was slinking along close to the houses. His clothes were plain but decent, and he walked with his head bent forward looking anxiously on all sides; when the patrol came by he shrank into the shadow; though he was no thief he had his reasons for keeping out of the way of the soldiery, for the inhabitants, whether natives or strangers, were forbidden to appear in the streets after the harbor was closed for the night.

He stopped in front of a large house, whose long, windowless wall extended from one side street to the next, and pausing before the great gate, he read an inscription on which the light fell from a lamp above: The House of the Holy Martyr. His widow here offers shelter to all who need it. He that giveth to the poor lendeth to the Lord."

"At how much per cent I wonder?" muttered the old man and a satirical smile curled his bearless lips. A heavy thud with the knocker rang through the silent street, and after a few short questions from within and equally curt replies from without, a small door was opened in the great gate. The stranger was on the point of crossing the vestibule when a human creature crept up to him on all fours, and clutched his ankle with a strong hand, exclaiming in a hoarse voice: "As soon as the door is shut—an entrance fee; for the poor, you know."

The old man flung a copper piece to the gatekeeper who tried it, and then, holding on to the rope by which he was tied to a post

like a watch-dog, he whined out "Not a drop to wet a Christian's lips?"

"It has not rained for some time," retorted the stranger, who proceeded to open a second door which led into a vast courtyard open to the blue vault of heaven. A few torches stuck against the pillars and a small fire on the pavement added thin smoky, flickering light to the clear glory of the stars, and the whole quadrangle was full of a heavy, reeking atmosphere, compounded of smoke and the steam of hot food.

Even in the street the wanderer had heard the dull buzz and roar which now met his ear as a loud medley of noises and voices, rising from hundreds of men who were encamped in the wide space before him—in groups or singly, sleeping and snoring, or quarrelling, eating, talking and singing as they squatted on the ground which was strewn with straw.

The inn was full, and more than half of the humble guests were monks who, during the last two days, had flowed into the city from every Cenoby, Laura and hermitage in the desert, and from most of the monasteries in the surrounding district—the 'Nitriote Nome'. Some of them had laid their heads close together for confidential whispering, others squabbled loudly, and a large group in the northern angle of the court had raised a psalm which mingled strangely with the "three," "four," "seven," of the men who were playing 'mora', and the cry of the cook inviting purchasers to his stall spread with meat, bread, and onions.

At the end of the court furthest from the gateway there was

a covered way, on to which a row of doors opened leading to the rooms devoted to families of women and children, each apartment being divided into two by a curtain across the middle. The stranger made his way into one of these rooms, where he was warmly welcomed by a young man, who was occupied in cutting a Kopais reed into a mouth-piece for a double flute, and by a tall matronly woman.

The new-comer's name was Karnis and he was the head of a family of wandering singers who had arrived in Alexandria only the day before from Rome. His surroundings were poor and mean, for their ship had been attacked off the African coast by a band of pirates, and though they had saved their lives they had lost everything they possessed. The young owner of the vessel, to whom he owed his safety, had procured him admission to this Xenodochium,—[a refuge or inn]—kept by his mother the Widow Mary; Karnis had, however, found it far from comfortable, and had gone forth at noon to seek other quarters.

"All in vain!" said he, as he wiped the heat drops from his forehead. "I have hunted Medius half the city through and found him at last at the house of Posidonius the Magian, whose assistant he is. There was singing behind a curtain—wretched rubbish; but there were some old airs too with an accompaniment on the flutes, in the style of Olympus, and really not so bad.

"Then spirits appeared. By Sirius a queer business altogether! Medius is in the midst of it all. I arranged the chorus and sang with them a little. All I got for it was a little dirty silver—there!

But as for a lodging—free quarters!—there are none to be found here for anything above an owl; and then there is the edict—that cursed edict!"

During this speech the younger man had exchanged meaning glances with his mother. He now interrupted Karnis, saying in a tone of encouragement:

"Never mind, father; we have something good in view."

"You have?" said the old man with an incredulous shrug, while his wife served him with a small roast chicken, on a stool which did duty for a table.

"Yes father, we!" the lad went on, laying aside his knife. "You know we vowed an offering to Dionysus for our escape, since he himself once fell into the hands of pirates, so we went at once to his temple. Mother knew the way; and as we—she, I mean, and Dada and myself. . ."

"Heh! what is this?" interrupted Karnis, now for the first time noticing the dish before him. "A fowl—when we are so miserably poor? A whole fowl, and cooked with oil?" He spoke angrily, but his wife, laying her hand on his shoulder, said soothingly:

"We shall soon earn it again. Never a sesterce was won by fretting.

Enjoy to-day's gifts and the gods will provide for to-morrow."

"Indeed?" asked Karnis in an altered key. "To be sure when a roast fowl flies into one's mouth instead of a pigeon . . . But you are right as usual, Herse, as usual, only—here am I battenning like a senator while you—I lay a wager you have drunk nothing but

milk all day and eaten nothing but bread and radishes. I thought so? Then the chicken must pretend to be a pheasant and you, wife, will eat this leg. The girls are gone to bed? Why here is some wine too! Fill up your cup, boy. A libation to the God! Glory to Dionysus !" The two men poured the libation on the floor and drank; then the father thrust his knife into the breast of the bird and began his meal with a will, while Orpheus, the son, went on with his story:

"Well, the temple of Dionysus was not to be found, for Bishop Theophilus has had it destroyed; so to what divinity could we offer our wreath and cake? Here in Egypt there is none but the great Mother Isis. Her sanctuary is on the shore of Lake Mareotis and mother found it at once. There she fell into conversation with a priestess who, as soon as she learnt that my mother belonged to a family of musicians—though Dame Herse was cautious in announcing this fact—and hoped to find employment in Alexandria, led her away to a young lady who was closely veiled. This lady," Orpheus went on—he not only played the flute but took the higher parts for a man's voice and could also strike the lyre—"desired us to go to her later at her own house, where she would speak with us. She drove off in a fine carriage and we, of course followed her orders; Agne was with us too. A splendid house! I never saw anything handsomer in Rome or Antioch. We were kindly received, and with the lady there were another very old lady and a tall grave man, a priest I should fancy or a philosopher, or something of that kind."

"Not some Christian trap?" asked Karnis suspiciously. "You do not know this place, and since the edict. . ."

"Never fear, father! There were images of the gods in the halls and corridors, and in the room where we were received by Gorgo, the beautiful daughter of Porphyrius, there was an altar before an image of Isis, quite freshly anointed.—This Porphyrius is a very rich merchant; we learnt that afterwards, and many other things. The philosopher asked us at once whether we were aware that Theodosius had lately promulgated a new edict forbidding young maidens to appear in public as singers or flute-players."

"And did Agne hear that?" said the old man in a low voice as he pointed to the curtain.

"No, she and Dada were in the garden on to which the room opened, and mother explained at once that though Agne was a Christian she was a very good girl, and that so long as she remained in our service she was bound to sing with us whenever she was required. The philosopher exclaimed at once: 'The very thing!' and they whispered together, and called the girls and desired them to show what they could do."

"And how did they perform?" asked the old man, who was growing excited.

"Dada warbled like a lark, and Agne—well you know how it always is. Her voice sounded lovely but it was just as usual. You can guess how much there is in her and how deep her feeling is but she never quite brings it out. What has she to complain of with us? And yet whatever she sings has that mournful, painful

ring which even you can do nothing to alter. However, she pleased them better than Dada did, for I noticed that Gorgo and the gentleman glanced at each other and at her, and whispered a word now and then which certainly referred to Ague. When they had sung two songs the young lady came towards us and praised both the girls, and asked whether we would undertake to learn something quite new. I told her that my father was a great musician who could master the most difficult things at the first hearing."

"The most difficult! Hm... that depends," said the old man. "Did she show it you?"

"No; it is something in the style of Linus and she sang it to us."

"The daughter of the rich Porphyrius sang for your entertainment? Yours?" said Karnis laughing. "By Sirius! The world is turning upside down. Now that girls are forbidden to perform to the gentlefolks, art is being cultivated by the upper classes; it cannot be killed outright. For the future the listeners will be paid to keep quiet and the singers pay for the right of torturing their ears—our ears, our luckless ears will be victimized."

Orpheus smiled and shook his head; then, again dropping his knife, he went on eagerly:

"But if you could only hear her! You would give your last copper piece to hear her again."

"Indeed!" muttered his father. "Well, there are very good teachers here. Something by Linus did you say she sang?"

"Something of that kind; a lament for the dead of very great power: 'Return, oh! return my beloved, come back—come home!' that was the burthen of it. And there was a passage which said: 'Oh that each tear had a voice and could join with me in calling thee!' And how she sang it, father! I do not think I ever in my life heard anything like it. Ask mother. Even Dada's eyes were full of tears."

"Yes, it was beautiful," the mother agreed. "I could not help wishing that you were there."

Karnis rose and paced the little room, waving his arms and muttering:

"Ah! so that is how it is! A friend of the Muses. We saved the large lute—that is well. My chlamys has an ugly hole in it—if the girls were not asleep... but the first thing to-morrow Ague... Tell me, is she handsome, tall?"

Herse had been watching her excitable husband with much satisfaction and now answered his question: "Not a Hera—not a Muse—decidedly not. Hardly above the middle height, slightly made, but not small, black eyes, long lashes, dark straight eyebrows. I could hardly, like Orpheus, call her beautiful. . ."

"Oh yes, mother.—Beautiful is a great word, and one my father has taught me to use but rarely; but she—if she is not beautiful who is?—when she raised her large dark eyes and threw back her head to bring out her lament; tone after tone seemed to come from the bottom of her heart and rise to the furthest height of heaven. Ah, if Agne could learn to sing like that! 'Throw your

whole soul into your singing.'—You have told her that again and again. Now, Gorgo can and does. And she stood there as steady and as highly strung as a bow, every note came out with the ring of an arrow and went straight to the heart, as clear and pure as possible."

"Be silent!" cried the old man covering his ears with his hands. "I shall not close an eye till daylight, and then... Orpheus, take that silver—take it all, I have no more—go early to market and buy flowers— laurel branches, ivy, violets and roses. But no lotuses though the market here is full of them; they are showy, boastful things with no scent, I cannot bear them. We will go crowned to the Temple of the Muses."

"Buy away, buy all you want!" said Herse laughing, as she showed her husband some bright gold pieces. "We got that today, and if all is well. . ." Here she paused, pointed to the curtain, and went on again in a lower tone: "It all depends of course, on Agne's playing us no trick."

"How so? Why? She is a good girl and I will. . ."

"No, no," said Herse holding him back. "She does not know yet what the business is. The lady wants her. . ."

"Well?"

"To sing in the Temple of Isis."

Karnis colored. He was suddenly called from a lovely dream back to the squalid reality. "In the Temple of Isis," he said gloomily. "Agne? In the face of all the people? And she knows nothing about it?"

"Nothing, father."

"No? Well then, if that is the case . . . Agne, the Christian, in the Temple of Isis—here, here, where Bishop Theophilus is destroying all our sanctuaries and the monks outdo their master. Ah, children, children, how pretty and round and bright a soap-bubble is, and how soon it bursts. Do you know at all what it is that you are planning? If the black flies smell it out and it becomes known, by the great Apollo! we should have fared better at the hands of the pirates. And yet, and yet.—Do you know at all how the girl...?"

"She wept at the lady's singing," interrupted Herse eagerly, "and, silent as she generally is, on her way home she said: 'To sing like that! She is a happy girl!'"

Karnis looked up with renewed confidence.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, "that is my Agne. Yes, yes, she truly loves her divine art. She can sing, she will sing! We will venture it, if you, I, all of us die for it!

"Herse, Orpheus, what have we to lose? Our gods, too, shall have their martyrs. It is a poor life that has no excitement. Our art—why, all I have ever had has been devoted to it. I make no boast of having sacrificed everything, and if gold and lands were again to be mine I would become a beggar once more for the sake of art: We have always held the divine Muse sacred, but who can keep up a brave heart when he sees her persecuted! She may only be worshipped in darkness in these days, and the Queen of Gods and men shuns the light like a moth, a bat, an owl. If we must die

let it be with and for Her! Once more let pure and perfect song rejoice this old heart, and if afterwards . . . My children, we have no place in this dim, colorless world. While the Arts lived there was Spring on the earth. Now they are condemned to death and it is Winter. The leaves fall from all the trees, and we piping birds need groves to sing in. How often already has Death laid his hand on our shoulder, every breath we draw is a boon of mercy—the extra length given in by the weaver, the hour of grace granted by the hangman to his victim! Our lives are no longer our own, a borrowed purse with damaged copper coins. The hard-hearted creditor has already bent his knuckles, and when he knocks the time is up. Once more let us have one hour of pure and perfect enjoyment, and then we will pay up capital and interest when we must."

"It cannot and will not be yet," said Herse resolutely, but she wiped her eyes with her band. "If Agne sings even, so long as she does it without coercion and of her own free-will no Bishop can punish us."

"He cannot, he dare not!" cried the old man. "There are still laws and judges."

"And Gorgo's family is influential as well as rich. Porphyrius has power to protect us, and you do not yet know what a fancy he has taken to us. Ask mother."

"It is like a story," Herse put in. "Before we left, the old lady—she must be eighty or more—took me aside and asked me where we were lodging. I told her at the Widow Mary's and when she

heard it she struck her crutch on the floor. 'Do you like the place?' she asked. I told her not at all, and said we could not possibly stop here."

"Quite right!" cried Karnis. "The monks in the court-yard will kill us as dead as rats if they hear us learning heathen hymns."

"That is what I told her; but the old lady did not allow me to finish; she drew me close to her and whispered, 'only do as my granddaughter wishes and you shall be safely housed and take this for the present'— and she put her hand into the purse at her girdle, gave the gold into my hand, and added loud enough for the others to hear: 'Fifty gold pieces out of my own pocket if Gorgo tells me that she is satisfied with your performance.'"

"Fifty gold pieces!" cried Karnis clasping his hands. "That brightens up the dull grey of existence. Fifty, then, are certain. If we sing six times that makes a talent—[estimated in 1880 at \$1100]—and that will buy back our old vineyard at Leontium. I will repair the old Odeum—they have made a cowhouse of it—and when we sing there the monks may come and listen! You laugh? But you are simpletons—I should like to see who will forbid my singing on my own land and in my own country. A talent of gold!

"It is quite enough to pay on account, and I will not agree to any bargain that will not give me the field-slaves and cattle. Castles in the air, do you say? But just listen to me: We are sure you see of a hundred gold pieces at least. . ." He had raised his voice in his eagerness and while he spoke the curtains had been

softly opened, and the dull glimmer of the lamp which stood in front of Orpheus fell on a head which was charming in spite of its disorder. A quantity of loose fair hair curled in papers stuck up all over the round head and fell over the forehead, the eyes were tired and still half shut, but the little mouth was wide awake and laughing with the frank amusement of light-hearted youth.

Karnis, without noticing the listener, had gone on with his visionary hopes of regaining his estates by his next earnings, but at this point the young girl, holding the curtain in her right hand, stretched out her plump left arm and begged in a humble whine:

"Good father Karnis, give me a little of your wealth; five poor little drachmae!"

The old man started; but he instantly recovered himself and answered good-naturedly enough:

"Go back to bed, you little hussy. You ought to be asleep instead of listening there!"

"Asleep?" said the girl. "While you are shouting like an orator against the wind! Five drachmae, father. I stick to that. A new ribband for me will cost one, and the same for Agne, two. Two I will spend on wine for us all, and that makes the five."

"That makes four—you are a great arithmetician to be sure!"

"Four?" said Dada, as much amazed as though the moon had fallen. "If only I had a counting-frame. No, father, five I tell you—it is five."

"No, child, four; and you shall have four," replied her father. "Plutus is at the door and to-morrow morning you shall both have

garlands."

"Yes, of violets, ivy and roses," added Dame Herse. "Is Agne asleep?"

"As sound as the dead. She always sleeps soundly unless she lies wide awake all the night through. But we were both so tired—and I am still. It is a comfort to yawn. Do you see how I am sitting?"

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