

GEORG EBERS

SERAPIS.

VOLUME 02

Georg Ebers
Serapis. Volume 02

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Georg Ebers

Serapis – Volume 02

CHAPTER V

Karnis and his two companions were a long time away. Dada had almost forgotten her wish to see the young soldier once more, and after playing with little Papias for some time, as she might have played with a dog, she began to feel dull and to think the quiet of the boat intolerable. The sun was sinking when the absentees returned, but she at once reminded Karnis that he had promised to take her for a walk and show her Alexandria. Herse, however, forbid her going on such an expedition till the following day. Dada, who was more irritable and fractious than usual, burst into tears, flung the distaff that her foster-mother put into her hand over the side of the ship, and declared between her sobs that she was not a slave, that she would run away and find happiness wherever it offered. In short she was so insubordinate that Herse lost patience and scolded her severely. The girl sprang up, flung on a handkerchief and in a moment would have crossed the plank to the shore; Karnis, however, held her back.

"Why, child," he said, "do you not see how tired I am?" The appeal had its effect; Dada recovered her reason and tried to look up brightly, but her eyes were still tearful and heavy and she could only creep away into a corner and cry in silence. The old man's heart was very soft towards the girl; he would have been glad only to speak a few kind words to her and smoothe down her hair; however, he made an effort, and whispering a few words to his wife said he was ready, if Dada wished it, to take her as far as the Canopic way and the Bruchium.

Dada laughed with delight, wiped away her tears, flung her arms round the musician's neck and kissed his brown cheeks, exclaiming:

"You are the best of them all! Make haste, and Agne shall come too; she must see something of the city."

But Agne preferred to remain on board, so Karnis and Dada set out together. Orpheus followed them closely for, though the troops had succeeded in quelling the uproar, the city was still in a state of ferment. Closely veiled, and without any kind of adornment—on this Herse had positively insisted—the girl, clinging to the old man's arm, made her way through the streets, asking questions about everything she saw; and her spirits rose, and she was so full of droll suggestions that Karnis soon forgot his fatigue and gave himself up to the enjoyment of showing her the old scenes that he knew and the new beauties and improvements.

In the Canopic way Dada was fairly beside herself with delight. Houses like palaces stood arrayed on each side. Close to the buildings ran a covered arcade, and down the centre of the roadway there was a broad footpath shaded by sycamores. This fine avenue swarmed with pedestrians, while on each side chariots, drawn by magnificent horses, hurried past, and riders galloped up and down; at every step there was something new and interesting to be seen.

Rome, even, could not boast of a handsomer street, and Dada expressed her delight with frank eagerness; but Karnis did not echo her praises; he was indignant at finding that the Christians had removed a fine statue of the venerable Nile-god surrounded by the playful forms of his infant children, which had formerly graced the fountain in the middle of the avenue, and had also overthrown or mutilated the statues of Hermes that had stood by the roadside. Orpheus sympathized in his wrath which reached its climax when, on looking for two statues, of Demeter and of Pallas Athene, of which Karnis had spoken to his son as decorating the gateway of one of the finest houses in the city, they beheld instead, mounted on the plinths, two coarsely-wrought images of the Lamb with its Cross.

"Like two rats that have been caught under a stone!" cried the old man. "And what is most shameful is that I would wager that they have destroyed the statues which were the pride of the town and thrown them on a rubbish heap. In my day this house belonged to a rich man named Philippus. But stop—was not he the father of our hospitable protector . . ."

"The steward spoke of Porphyrius as the son of Philippus," Orpheus said.

"And Philippus was a corn merchant, too," added Karnis. "Demeter was figurative of a blessing on the harvest, for it was from that the house derived its wealth, and Pallas Athene was patroness of the learning that was encouraged by its owners. When I was a student here every wealthy man belonged to some school of philosophy. The money-bag did not count for everything. Heathen or Jew, whether engaged in business or enjoying the revenues of an inherited fortune, a man was expected to be able to talk of something besides the price of merchandise and the coming and sailing of vessels."

During this conversation Dada had withdrawn her hand from the old man's arm to raise her veil, for two men had gone up to the gate between the images that had roused Karnis to wrath, and one of them, who at this instant knocked at the door, was Mary's son.

"Father, see, there he is!" cried Dada, as the door was opened, speaking louder than was at all necessary to enable her companion to hear her; the musician at once recognized Marcus, and turning to his son he said:

"Now we may be quite sure! Porphyrius and this young Christian's father were brothers. Philippus must have left his house to his eldest son who is the one that is dead, and it now belongs no doubt to Mary, his widow. I must admit, child, that you choose your adorers from respectable families!"

"I should think so," said the girl laughing. "And that is why he is so proud. My fine gentleman has not even a glance to cast at us. Bang! the door is shut. Come along, uncle!"

The young man in question entered the hall of his father's house with his companion and paused there to say in a tone of pressing entreaty: "Only come and speak with my mother; you really must not leave like this."

"How else?" said the other roughly. "You stick to your way, I will go mine. You can find a better steward for the estate—I go to-morrow. May the earth open and swallow me up if I stay one hour longer than is absolutely necessary in this demented place. And after all Mary is your mother and not mine."

"But she was your father's wife," retorted Marcus.

"Certainly, or you would not be my brother. But she—I have amply repaid any kindness she ever did me by ten years of service. We do not understand each other and we never shall."

"Yes, yes, you will indeed. I have been in church and prayed—nay, do not laugh—I prayed to the Lord that he would make it all work right and He—well, you have been baptized and made one of His flock."

"To my misfortune! You drive me frantic with your meek and mild ways," cried the other passionately. "My own feet are strong enough for me to stand on and my hand, though it is horny, can carry out what my brain thinks right."

"No, no, Demetrius, no. You see, you believe in the old gods. . ."

"Certainly," said the other with increasing irritation. "You are merely talking to the winds, and my time is precious. I must pack up my small possessions, and for your sake I will say a few words of farewell when I take the account-books to your mother. I have land enough belonging to myself alone, at Arsinoe; I know my own business and am tired of letting a woman meddle and mar it. Good-bye for the present, youngster. Tell your mother I am coming; I shall be with her in just an hour."

"Demetrius!" cried the lad trying once more to detain his brother; but Demetrius freed himself with a powerful wrench and hurried across the court-yard—gay with flowers and with a fountain in the middle—into which the apartments of the family opened, his own among the number.

Marcus looked after him sadly; they differed too widely in thought and feeling ever to understand each other completely, and when they stood side by side no one would have imagined that they were the sons of one father, for even in appearance they were strongly dissimilar. Marcus was slight and delicate, Demetrius, on the contrary, broad-shouldered and large-boned.

After this parting from his half-brother Marcus betook himself to the women's rooms where Mary, after superintending the spinning and other work of the slave-girls, in the rooms at the back, was wont to sit during the evening. He found his mother in eager conversation with a Christian priest of advanced age, an imposing personage of gentle and dignified aspect. The widow, though past forty, might still pass for a handsome woman: it was from her that her son had inherited his tall, thin figure with narrow shoulders and a slight stoop, his finely-cut features, white skin and soft, flowing, raven-black hair. Their resemblance was rendered all the more striking by the fact that each wore a simple, narrow circlet of gold-round the head; nay it would have seemed some unusual trick of Nature's but that their eyes were quite unlike. Hers were black, and their gaze was shrewd and sharp and sometimes sternly hard; while the dreamy lustre of her son's, which were blue, lent his face an almost feminine softness.

She must have been discussing some grave questions with the old man, for, as the young man entered the room, she colored slightly and her long, taper fingers impatiently tapped the back of the couch on which she was lounging.

Marcus kissed first the priest's hand and then his mother's, and, after enquiring with filial anxiety after her health, informed her that Demetrius would presently be coming to take leave of her.

"How condescending?" she said coldly. "You know reverend Father what it is that I require of him and that he refuses. His peasants—always his peasants! Now can you tell me why they, who must feel the influence and power of their masters so much more directly than the lower class in towns, they, whose weal or woe so obviously depends on the will of the Most High, are so obstinately set against the Gospel of Salvation?"

"They cling to what they are used to," replied the old man. "The seed they sow bore fruit under the old gods; and as they cannot see nor handle our Heavenly Father as they can their idols, and at the same time have nothing better to hope for than a tenth or a twentieth of the grain. . ."

"Yes, mine and thine—the miserable profit of this world!" sighed the widow. "Oh! Demetrius can defend the idolatry of his favorites warmly enough, never fear. If you can spare the time, good Father, stay and help me to convince him."

"I have already stayed too long," replied the priest, "for the Bishop has commanded my presence. I should like to speak to you, my dear Marcus; to-morrow morning, early, will you come to me? The Lord be with you, beloved!"

He rose, and as he gave Mary his hand she detained him a moment signing to her son to leave them, and said in a low tone:

"Marcus must not suspect that I know of the error into which he has been led; speak roundly to his conscience, and as to the girl, I will take her in hand. Will it not be possible for Theophilus to grant me an interview?"

"Hardly, at present," replied the priest. "As you know, Cynegius is here and the fate of the Bishop and of our cause hangs on the next few days.

Give up your ambitious desires I beseech you, daughter, for even if Theophilus were to admit you I firmly believe, nay—do not be angry—I can but hope that he would never give way on this point."

"No?" said the widow looking down in some embarrassment; but when her visitor was gone she lifted her head with a flash of wilful defiance.

She then made Marcus, who had on the previous day given her a full account of his voyage from Rome, tell her all that had passed between himself and Demetrius; she asked him how he liked his horse, whether he hoped to win the approaching races, and generally what he had been doing and

was going to do. But it did not escape her notice that Marcus was more reticent than usual and that he tried to bring the conversation round to his voyage and to the guests in the Xenodochium; however, she always stopped him, for she knew what he was aiming at and would not listen to anything on that subject.

It was not till long after the slaves had lighted the three-branched silver lamps that Demetrius appeared. His stepmother received him kindly and began to talk on indifferent subjects; but he replied with ill- disguised impatience, for he had not come to chatter and gossip. She fully understood this; but it pleased her to check and provoke him and she did it in a way which vividly reminded him of his early days, of the desolation and unhappiness that had blighted his young life when this woman had taken the place of his own tender gentle mother, and come between him and his father. Day after day, in that bygone time, she had received him just as she had this evening: with words that sounded kindly, but with a cold, unloving heart. He knew that she had always seen his boyish errors and petty faults in the worst light, attributing them to bad propensities and innate wickedness, that she had injured him in his father's eyes by painting a distorted image of his disposition and doings—and all these sins he could not forgive her. At the time of his father's assassination Demetrius was already grown to man's estate, and as the eldest son it would have been his right and duty to take part with his uncle Porphyrius in the management of the business; but he could not endure the idea of living in the same place with his stepmother, so, having a pronounced taste for a country life, he left the widow in possession of the house in the Canopic street, persuaded his uncle to pay over his father's share in the business in hard cash and then had quitted Alexandria to take entire charge of the family estates in Cyrenaica. In the course of a few years he had become an admirable farmer; the landowners throughout the province were glad to take his advice or follow his example, and the accounts which he now laid on the table by the side of Mary's couch—three goodly rolls—proved by the irrefragable evidence of figures that he had actually doubled their revenues from the estates of which he had been the manager. He had earned his right to claim his independence, to persist in his own determinations and to go his own way; he was animated by the pride of an independent nature that recklessly breaks away from a detested tie when it has means at command either to rest without anxiety or to devote its energies to new enterprise.

When Demetrius had allowed his stepmother time enough for subjects in which he took no interest, he laid his hand on the account-books and abruptly observed that it was now time to talk seriously. He had already explained to Marcus that he could no longer undertake to meet her requirements; and as, with him, to decide was to act, he wished at once to come to a decision as to whether he should continue to manage the family estates in the way he thought proper, or should retire and devote himself to the care of his own land. If Mary accepted the latter alternative he would at once cancel their deed of agreement, but even then he was very willing to stay on for a time in Cyrenaica, and put the new steward, when she had appointed one, in the way of performing his onerous duties. After that he would have nothing more to do with the family estates. This was his last word; and whichever way she decided, they might part without any final breach, which he was anxious to avoid if only for the sake of Marcus.

Demetrius spoke gravely and calmly; still, the bitterness that filled his soul imparted a flavor to his speech that did not escape the widow, and she replied with some emphasis that she should be very sorry to think that any motives personal to herself had led to his decision; she owed much, very much, to his exertions and had great pleasure in expressing her obligations. He was aware, of course, that the property he had been managing had been purchased originally partly with her fortune and partly out of her husband's pocket, and that half of it was therefore hers and half of it the property of Marcus and himself; but that by her husband's will the control and management were hers absolutely. She had endeavored to carry out the intentions of her deceased husband by entrusting the stewardship of the estate to Demetrius while he was still quite young; under his care the income had increased, and she had no doubt that in the future he might achieve even greater results; at the same time,

the misunderstandings that the whole business had given rise to were not to be endured, and must positively be put an end to, even if their income were to diminish by half.

"I," she exclaimed, "am a Christian, with my whole heart and soul. I have dedicated my body and life to the service of my Saviour. What shall all the treasures of the world profit me if I lose my soul; and that, which is my immortal part, must inevitably perish if I allow my pockets to be filled by the toil of heathen peasants and slaves. I therefore must insist—and on this point I will not yield a jot—that our slaves in Cyrenaica, a flock of more than three thousand erring sheep, shall either submit to be baptized or be removed to make way for Christians."

"That is to say . . ." began Demetrius hastily.

"I have not yet done," she interrupted. "So far as the peasants are concerned who rent and farm our land they all, without exception—as you said yesterday—are stiff-necked idolaters. We must give them time to think it over, but the annual agreement will not be renewed with any who will not pledge themselves to give up the old sacrifices and to worship the Redeemer. If they submit they will be safe—in this world and the next; if they refuse they must go, and the land must be let to Christians in their stead."

"Just as I change this seat for another!" said Demetrius with a laugh, and lifting up a heavy bronze chair he flung it down again on the hard mosaic pavement so that the floor shook.

Maria started violently.

"My body may tremble," she said in great excitement, "but my soul is firm when its everlasting bliss is at stake. I insist—and my representative, whether he be you or another, must carry my orders into effect without an hour's delay—I insist that every heathen shrine, every image of the field and garden-gods, every altar and sacred stone which the heathens use for their idolatrous practices shall be pulled down, overthrown, mutilated and destroyed. That is what I require and insist on."

"And that is what I will never consent to," cried Demetrius in a voice like low thunder. "I cannot and will not. These things have been held precious and sacred to men for thousands of years and I cannot, will not, blow them off the face of the earth, as you blow a feather off your cloak. You may go and do it yourself; you may be able to achieve it."

"What do you mean?" asked Mary drawing herself up with a glance of indignant protest.

"Yes—if any one can do it you can!" repeated Demetrius imperturbably. "I went to-day to seek the images of our forefathers—the venerable images that were clear to our infancy, the portraits of our fathers' fathers and mothers, the founders of the honor of our race. And where are they? They have gone with the protectors of our home, the pride and ornament of this house—of the street, of the city—the Hermes and Pallas Athene that you—you flung into the lime-kiln. Old Phabis told me with tears in his eyes. Alas poor house that is robbed of its past, of its glory, and of its patron deities!"

"I have placed it under a better safeguard," replied Maria in a tremulous voice, and she looked at Marcus with an appeal for sympathy. "Now, for the last time, I ask you: Will you accede to my demands or will you not?"

"I will not," said Demetrius resolutely.

"Then I must find a new agent to manage the estates."

"You will soon find one; but your land—which is our land too—will become a desert. Poor land! If you destroy its shrines and sanctuaries you will destroy its soul; for they are the soul of the land. The first inhabitants gathered round the sanctuary, and on that sanctuary and the gods that dwell there the peasant founds his hopes of increase on what he sows and plants, and of prosperity for his wife and children and cattle and all that he has. In destroying his shrines you ruin his hopes, and with them all the joy of life. I know the peasant; he believes that his labors must be vain if you deprive him of the gods that make it thrive. He sows in hope, in the swelling of the grain he sees the hand of the gods who claim his joyful thanksgiving after the harvest is gathered in. You are depriving him of all that encourages and uplifts and rejoices his soul when you ruin his shrines and altars!"

"But I give him other and better ones," replied Mary.

"Take care then that they are such as he can appreciate," said Demetrius gravely. "Persuade him to love, to believe, to hope in the creed you force upon him; but do not rob him of what he trusts in before he is prepared to accept the substitute you offer him.—Now, let me go; we are neither of us in the temper to make the best arrangements for the future. One thing, at any rate, is certain: I have nothing more to do with the estate."

CHAPTER VI

After leaving his stepmother Demetrius made good use of his time and dictated a number of letters to his secretary, a slave he had brought with him to Alexandria, for the use of the pen was to him unendurable labor. The letters were on business, relating to his departure from Cyrenaica and his purpose of managing his own estates for the future, and when they lay before him, finished, rolled up and sealed, he felt that he had come to a mile-stone on his road, a landmark in his life. He paced the room in silence, trying to picture to himself the fate of the slaves and peasants who, for so many years, had been his faithful servants and fellow-laborers, whose confidence he had entirely won, and many of whom he truly loved. But he could not conceive of their life, their toil or their festivals, bereft of images, offerings, garlands, and hymns of rejoicing. To him they were as children, forbidden to laugh and play, and he could not help once more recurring to his boyhood and the day of his going to school, when, instead of running and shouting in his father's sunny garden, he had been made to sit still and silent in a dull class-room. And now had the whole world reached such a boundary line in existence beyond which there was to be no more freedom and careless joy— where a ceaseless struggle for higher things must begin and never end?

If the Gospel were indeed true, and if all it promised could ever find fulfilment, it might perhaps be prudent to admit the sinfulness of man and to give up the joys and glories of this world to win the eternal treasure that it described. Many a good and wise man whom he had known —nay the Emperor, the great and learned Theodosius himself—was devoted heart and soul to the Christian faith, and Demetrius knew from his own experience that his mother's creed, in which he had been initiated as a boy and from which his father, after holding him at the font had perverted him at an early age, offered great consolations and enduring help to those whose existence was one of care, poverty, and suffering. But his laborers and servants? They were healthy and contented. What power on earth could induce them—a race that clung devotedly to custom —to desert the faith of their fathers, and the time-honored traditions to which they owed all the comforts and pleasures of life, or to seek in a strange creed the aid which they already believed that they possessed.

He did not repent of his determination; but he nevertheless said to himself that, when once he was gone, Mary would proceed only too soon on the work of extermination and destruction; and every temple on the estate, every statue, every whispering grotto, every shrine and stone anointed by pious hands, doomed now to perish, rose before his fancy.

Demetrius was accustomed to rise at cock-crow and go to bed at an early hour, and he was on the point of retiring even before the usual time, when Marcus came to his room and begged him to give him yet an hour.

"You are angry with my mother," said the younger man with a look of melancholy entreaty, "but you know there is nothing that she would not sacrifice for the faith. And you can smile so bitterly! But only put yourself in my place. Loving my mother as I do, it is acutely painful to me to see another person—to see you whom I love, too, for you are my friend and brother—to see you, I say, turn your back on her so completely. My heart is heavy enough to-day I can tell you."

"Poor boy!" said the countryman. "Yes, I am truly your friend, and am anxious to remain so; you are not to blame in this business—and for that matter, I am anything but cheerful. You have chosen to say: Down with the shrines! Perish all those who do not think as we do! Still, look at the thing as you will, in some cases certainly violence must ensue—nay, if no blood is shed it will be a wonder! You sum up the matter in one common term: The heathen peasants on the estate. My view of it is totally different; I know these farmers and their wives and children, each one by name and by sight. There is not one but is ready to bid me good day and shake my hand or kiss my dress. Many a one has come to me in tears and left me happy.—By the great Zeus! no one ever accused me of

being soft-hearted, but I could wish this day that I were harder; and my blood turns to gall as I ask—What is all this for—to what possible end?"

"For the sake and honor of the faith, Demetrius; for the eternal salvation of our people."

"Indeed!" retorted Demetrius with a drawl, "I know better. If that and that alone were intended you would build churches and chapels and send us worthy priests—Eusebius and the like—and would try to win men's hearts to your Lord by the love you are always talking so much about. That was my advice to your mother, only this morning. I believe the end might be attained by those means, among us as elsewhere; ultimately it will, no doubt, be gained—but not to-day nor to-morrow. A peasant, when he had become accustomed to the church and grasped a trust in the new God, would of his own accord give up the old gods and their sanctuaries; I could count you off a dozen such instances. That I could have looked on at calmly, for I want only men's arms and legs and do not ask for their souls; but to burn down the old house before you have collected wood and stone to build a new one I call wicked.—It is cruelty and madness, and when so shrewd a woman as your mother is bent on carrying through such a measure, come what may, there is something more behind it."

"You think she wants to get rid of you—you, Demetrius!" interrupted Marcus eagerly. "But you are mistaken, you are altogether wrong. What you have done for the estate . . ."

"Oh! as for that!" cried the other, "what has my work to do with all this? Ere the year is out everything that can remind us of the heathen gods is to be swept away from the hamlets and fields of the pious Mary. That is what is intended! Then they will hurry off to the Bishop with the great news and to crown one marvel with another, the reversion will be secured of a martyr's nimbus. And this is what all this zeal is for—this and nothing else!"

"You are speaking of my mother, remember!" cried Marcus, looking at his brother with a touching appeal in his eyes. Demetrius shook his shaggy head and spoke more temperately as he went on:

"Yes, child, I had forgotten that—and I may be mistaken of course, for I am no more than human. Here one thing follows so close on another, and in this house I feel so battered and storm-tossed, that I hardly know myself. But old Phabis tells me that steps are being seriously taken to procure the title of Martyr for our father Apelles."

"My mother is quite convinced that he died for the faith, and she loved him devotedly . . ."

"Then it is so!" cried Demetrius, grinding his teeth and thumping his fist down on the table. "The lies sown by one single man have produced a deadly weed that is smothering this miserable house! You—to be sure, what can you know of our father? I knew him; I have been present when he and his friends, the philosophers, have laughed to scorn things which not only you Christians but even pious heathen regard as sacred. Lucretius was his evangelist, and the Cosmogony of that utter atheist lay by his pillow and was his companion wherever he went."

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