

GEORG EBERS

SERAPIS.

VOLUME 04

Georg Ebers
Serapis. Volume 04

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Serapis – Volume 04

CHAPTER XVI

The day had flown swiftly for Dada under the roof of Medius; there were costumes and scenery in wonderful variety for her to look over; the children were bright and friendly, and she had enjoyed playing with them, for all her little tricks and rhymes, which Papias was familiar with by this time, were to them new and delightful. It amused her, too, to see what the domestic difficulties were of which the singer had described himself as being a victim.

Medius was one of those men who buy everything that strikes them as cheap—for instance, that very morning, at Kibotus he had stood to watch a fish auction and had bought a whole tub-full of pickled fish for "a mere trifle;" but when, presently, the cargo was delivered, his wife flew into a great rage, which she vented first on the innocent lad who brought the fish, and then on the less innocent purchaser. They would not get to the bottom of the barrel and eat the last herring, she asserted, till they were a century old. Medius, while he disputed so monstrous a statement, vehemently declared that such wholesome and nutritious food as those fish was undoubtedly calculated to prolong the lives of the whole family to an exceptionally great age.

This discussion, which was not at all by way of a jest, amused Dada far more than the tablets, cylinders and cones covered with numbers and cabalistic signs, to which Medius tried to direct her attention. She darted off in the midst of his eager explanations to show his grandchildren how a rabbit sniffs and moves his ears when he is offered a cabbage-leaf.

The report, which reached them in the afternoon, of the proceedings in the square by the Prefect's house, disturbed Medius greatly, and he set off at once for the scene of action.

He did not return till evening, and then he looked like an altered man. He must have witnessed something very terrible, for his face was as pale as death, and his usually confident and swaggering manner had given place to a stricken and care-worn air. He walked up and down the room, groaning as he went; he flung himself on the divan and stared fixedly at the ground; he wandered into the atrium and gazed cautiously out on the street. Dada's presence seemed suddenly to be the source of much anxiety to him, and the girl, painfully conscious of this, hastened to tell him that she would prefer to return home at once to her uncle and aunt.

"You can please yourself," was all he said, with a shrug and a sigh.

"You may stay for aught I care. It is all the same now!"

So far his wife had left him to himself, for she was used to his violent and eccentric behavior whenever anything had crossed him; but now she peremptorily desired to be informed what had happened to him and he at once acceded. He had been unwilling to frighten them sooner than was needful, but they must learn it sooner or later: Cynegius had arrived to overthrow the image of Serapis, and what must ensue they knew only too well. "To-day," he cried, "we will live; but by to-morrow—a thousand to one-by to-morrow there will be an end of all our joys and the earth will swallow up the old home and us with it!"

His words fell on prepared ground; his wife and daughter were appalled, and as Medius went on to paint the imminent catastrophe in more vivid colors, his energy growing in proportion to its effect on them, they began at first to sob and whimper and then to wail loudly. When the children, who by this time were in bed, heard the lamentations of their elders, they, too, set up a howl, and even Dada caught the infection. As for Medius himself, he had talked himself into such a state of terror by his own descriptions of the approaching destruction of the world that he abandoned all claim to his proud reputation as a strong-minded man, and quite forgot his favorite theory that everything that went by

the name of God was a mere invention of priests and rulers to delude and oppress the ignorant; at last he even went so far as to mutter a prayer, and when his wife begged to be allowed to join a family of neighbors in sacrificing a black lamb at daybreak, he recklessly gave her a handful of money.

None of the party closed an eye that night. Dada could not bear to remain in the house. Perhaps all these horrors existed only in Medius' fancy; but if destruction were indeed impending, she would a thousand times rattier perish with her own relations than with these people, in whom there was something—she did not know what—for which she felt a deep aversion. This she explained to her host early in the day and he was ready to set out at once and restore her to the care of Karnis.

In fact, the purpose for which he had needed her must certainly come to nothing. He himself was attached to the service of Posidonius, a great magician and wizard, to whom half Alexandria flocked—Christians, Jews, and heathens—in order to communicate with the dead, with gods and with demons, to obtain spells and charms by which to attract lovers or injure foes, to learn the art of becoming invisible, or to gain a glimpse into the future. In the performance which was being planned Dada was to have appeared to a bereaved mother as the glorified presence of her lost daughter; but the disturbance in the city had driven the matron, who was rich, to take refuge in the country the previous afternoon. Nor was it likely that the sorcerer's other clients—even if all turned out better than could be hoped—would venture into the streets by night. Rich people were timid and suspicious; and as the Emperor had lately promulgated fresh and more stringent edicts against the magic arts, Posidonius had thought it prudent to postpone the meeting. Hence Medius had at present no use for the girl; but he affected to agree so readily to her wishes merely out of anxiety to relieve Isarnis as soon as possible of his uneasiness as to her fate.

The morning was bright and hot, and the town was swarming with an excited mob soon after sunrise. Terror, curiosity and defiance were painted on every face; however, Medius and his young companion made their way unhindered as far as the temple of Isis by the lake. The doors of the sanctuary were closed, and guarded by soldiers; but the southern and western walls were surrounded by thousands and thousands of heathen. Some hundreds, indeed, had passed the night there in prayer, or in sheer terror of the catastrophe which could not fail to ensue, and they were kneeling in groups, groaning, weeping, and cursing, or squatting in stolid resignation, weary, crushed and hopeless. It was a heart-rending sight, and neither Dada—who till this moment had been dreading Dame Herse's scolding tongue far more than the destruction of the world—nor her companion could forbear joining in the wail that rose from this vast multitude. Medius fell on his knees groaning aloud and pulled the girl down beside him; for, upon the wall that enclosed the temple precincts, they now saw a priest who, after holding the sacred Sistrum up to view and muttering some unintelligible prayers and invocations, proceeded to address the people.

He was a short stout man, and the sweat streamed down his face as he stood under the blazing sun to sketch a fearful picture of the monstrous doom which was hanging over the city and its inhabitants. He spoke with pompous exaggeration, in a shrill, harsh voice, wiping his face meanwhile with his white linen robe or gasping for air, when breath failed him, like a fish stranded on the beach. All this, however, did not trouble his audience, for the hatred that inspired his language, and the terror of the immediate future which betrayed itself in every word exactly reflected their feelings. Dada alone was moved to mirth; the longer she looked at him the more she felt inclined to laugh; besides, the day was so bright—a pigeon on the wall pattered round his mate, nodding and wriggling after the funny manner of pigeons in love—and, above all, her heart beat so high and she had such a happy instinctive feeling that all was ordered for the best, that the world seemed to her a beautiful and fairly secure dwelling-place, in spite of the dark forebodings of the zealous preacher. On the eve of destruction the earth must surely look differently from this; and it struck her as highly improbable that the gods should have revealed their purpose to such a queer old driveller as this priest, and have hidden it from other men. The very fact that this burly personage should prophesy evil with such conviction made her doubt it; and presently, when the plumes of three or four helmets became visible behind

the speaker, and a pair of strong hands grasped his thick ankles and suddenly dragged him down from his eminence and back into the temple, she could hardly keep herself from laughing outright.

Now, however, there was more real cause for alarm a trumpet-blast was heard, and a maniple of the twenty-second legion marched down in close order on the crowd who fled before them. Medius was one of the first to make off; Dada kept close to his side, and when, in his alarm, he fairly took to his heels, she did the same; for, in spite of the reception she apprehended, she felt that the sooner she could rejoin her own people the better. Never till now had she known how dear they were to her. Herse might scold; but her sharpest words were truer and better than the smooth flattery of Medius. It was a joy to think of seeing them again—Agne, too, and little Papias—and she felt as though she were about to meet them after years of separation.

By this time they were at the ship-yard, which was divided only by a lane from the Temple-grove; there lay the barge. Dada pulled off her veil and waved it in the air, but the signal met with no response. They were at the house, no doubt, for some men were in the very act of drawing up the wooden gangway which connected the vessel with the land. Medius hurried forward and was so fortunate as to overtake the steward, who had been superintending the operation, before he reached the garden-gate.

The old man was rejoiced to see them, and told them at once that his old mistress had promised Herse to give Dada shelter if she should return to them. But Dada was proud. She had no liking for Gorgo or her grandmother; and when she had caught up to Medius, quite out of breath, she positively refused the old lady's hospitality.

The barge was deserted. Karnis—so the steward informed her—had withdrawn to the temple of Serapis with his son, intending to assist in its defence; and Herse had accompanied them, for Olympius had said that women would be found useful in the beleaguered sanctuary, in preparing food for the combatants and in nursing the wounded.

Dada stood looking at their floating home, utterly disappointed and discouraged. She longed to follow her aunt and to gain admission to the Serapeum; but how could she do this now, and of what use could she hope to be? There was nothing heroic in her composition, and from her infancy she had always sickened at the sight of blood. She had no alternative but to return with Medius, and take refuge under his roof.

The singer gave her ample time for reflection; he had seated himself, with the steward, under the shade of a sycamore, and the two men were absorbed in convincing each other, by a hundred arguments which they had picked up during the last day or two, how inevitably the earth must be annihilated if the statue of Serapis should be overthrown. In the warmth of their discussion they paid no heed to the young girl, who was sitting on a fallen Hermes by the road-side. Her vigorous and lively temperament rendered her little apt to dream, or even meditate, in broad daylight; but the heat and the recent excitement had overwrought her and she fell into a drowsy reverie. Now and again, as her heavy head drooped on her breast, she fancied the Serapeum had actually fallen; then, as she raised it again, she recovered her consciousness that it was hot, that she had lost her home, and that she must, however unwillingly, return with Medius. But at length her eyelids closed, and as she sat in the full blaze of the sun, a rosy light filled her eyes and a bright vision floated before her: Marcus took the modius—the corn measure—from the head of the statue of Serapis and offered it to her; it was quite full of lilies and roses and violets, and she was delighted with the flowers and thanked him warmly when he set the modius down before her. He held out his hands to her calmly and kindly, and she gave him hers, feeling very happy under the steady, compassionate gaze of his large eyes which had often watched her, on board ship, for some minutes at a time. She longed to say something to him, but she could not speak; and she looked on quite unmoved as the statue of the god and the hall in which it stood were wrapt in flames. No smoke mingled with this clear and genial blaze, but it compelled her to shade her dazzled eyes; and as she lifted her hand she woke to see Medius standing in front of her.

He desired her to come home with him at once, and she rose to obey, listening in silence to his assurances that the lives of Karnis and Orpheus would not be worth a sesterce if they fell into the hands of the Roman soldiers.

She walked on, more hopeless and depressed than she had ever felt in her life before, past the unfinished hulks in the ship-yard where no one was at work to-day when, coming down the lane that divided the wharf from the temple precincts, she saw an old man and a little boy. She had not time to ask herself whether she saw rightly or was mistaken before the child caught sight of her, snatched his hand away from that of his companion, and flew towards her, shouting her name. In the next moment little Papias had rushed rapturously into her arms and, as she lifted him up, had thrown his hands round her neck, clinging to her as if he would never leave go again, while she hugged him closely for joy, and kissed him with her eyes full of tears. She was herself again at once; the sad and anxious girl was the lively Dada once more.

The man who had been leading the little boy was immediately besieged with questions, and from his answers they learnt that he had found the child the evening before at the corner of a street, crying bitterly; that he had taken him home, and with some little difficulty had ascertained from him that he belonged to some people who were living on board a barge, close to a ship-yard. In spite of the excitement that prevailed he had brought the child home as soon as possible, for he could fancy how anxious his parents must be. Dada thanked the kind-hearted artisan with sincere warmth, and the man, seeing how happy the girl and the child were at having met, went his way quite satisfied.

Medius had stood by and had said nothing, but he looked on the pretty little boy with much favor. If the earth were not to crumble into nothingness after all, this child would be a real treasure trove; and when Dada begged him to find a corner for Papias in his house, though he hinted at the smallness of his earnings and the limited space at his command, he yielded, if reluctantly, to her entreaties, on her offering him her gold brooch to cover his expenses.

As they made their way back she cast many loving glances at the child; she was extremely fond of him, and he seemed a link to bind her to her own people.

CHAPTER XVII

The singer's wife and daughter had joined some neighbors in sacrificing a black lamb to Zeus, a ceremony that was usual on the occasion of earthquakes or very severe storms; but it was done very secretly, for the edicts prohibiting the sacrifice of victims to the gods were promptly and rigidly enforced. The more the different members of the family came into contact with other citizens, the more deeply rooted was their terror that the end of all things was at hand. As soon as it was dark the old man buried all his savings, for even if everyone else were to perish, he felt that he—though how or why he knew not—might be exempt from the common doom.

The night was warm, and great and small alike slept—or lay awake—under the stars so as not to be overwhelmed by the crash of roofs and walls; the next day was oppressively hot, and the family cowered in a row in the scanty shade of a palm and of a fig-tree, the only growth of any size in the singer's garden. Medius himself, in spite of the scorching sun, could not be still.

He rushed off to the town again and again, but only to return each time to enhance the anguish of the household by relating all sorts of horrors which he had picked up in his wanderings. They were obliged to satisfy their hunger with bread, cheese, and fruit, for the two slave-women positively refused to risk their lives by cooking in the house.

Medius' temper varied as he came and went; now he was gentle and affectionate, and then again he raged like a madman; and his wife outdid him. At one moment she would abandon him and the children, while she anointed the household altar and put up prayers; at the next she railed at the baseness and cruelty of the gods. When her husband brought the news that the Serapeum was surrounded by the Imperial troops, she scoffed and spit at the sacred images, and five minutes later she was vowing a sacrifice to the deities of Olympus. The general confusion was distracting; as the sun rose, the anguish, physical and mental, of the whole family greatly increased, and by noon had reached an appalling pitch.

Dada looked on intensely disgusted, and only shook her head when one or another of her companions was sure she felt a shock of earthquake or heard the roll of distant thunder. She could not explain to herself why she, who was usually timid enough, was exempt from the universal panic though she felt deeply pitiful towards the terrified women and children. None of them troubled themselves about her; the day dragged on with intolerable slowness, quenching all her gay vivacity, while she was utterly exhausted by the scorching African sun, of which, till now, she had never known the power. At last, in the afternoon, she found the little garden, which was by this time heated like an oven, quite unbearable, and she looked round for Papias. The child was sitting on the wall looking at the congregation streaming into the basilica of St. Mark. Dada followed his example, and when the many-voiced psalms rang out of the open door of the church, she listened to the music, for it seemed long since she had heard any, and after wiping the perspiration from the little boy's face with her peplos, she pointed to the building and said: "It must be nice and cool in there."

"Of course it is," said Papias.

"It is never too hot in church. I will tell you what—we will go there." This was a bright idea; for, thought Dada, any place must be pleasanter than this; and she felt strongly tempted, too, to see the inside of one of Agne's temples and to sing once more, or, at any rate, hear others sing.

"Come along," she said, and they stole through the deserted house to get into the street by the atrium. Medius saw them, but he made no attempt to detain them; he had sunk into lethargic indifference. It was not an hour since he had taken stock of his life and means, setting the small figure of his average income against his hospitality to Dada and her little companion; but then, again, he had calculated that, if all went well, he might make considerable profits out of the girl and the child. Now, he felt it was all the same to him whether he and his family and Dada met their doom in the house or out of it.

Dada and Papias soon reached the church of St. Mark, the oldest Christian basilica in the city. It consisted of a vestibule—the narthex—and the body of the church, a very long hall, with a flat roof ceiled with stained wood and supported on a double row of quite simple columns. This space was divided into two parts by a screen of pierced work; the innermost portion had a raised floor or podium, on which stood a table with chairs placed round it in a semicircle. The centre seat was higher and more richly decorated than the others. These chairs were unoccupied; a few deacons in 'talares' of light-colored brocade were busied about the table.

In the middle of the vestibule there was a small tank; here a number of penitents had collected who, with their flayed ribs and abject lamentations, offered a more melancholy spectacle than even the terrified crowd whom Dada had seen the day before, gathered round the temple of Isis. Indeed, she would have withdrawn at once but that Papias dragged her forward, and when she had passed through the great door into the nave she breathed a sigh of relief. A soothing sense of respite came over her, such as she had rarely felt; for the lofty building, which was only half full, was deliciously cool and the subdued light was restful to her eyes. The slight perfume of incense and the sober singing of the assembled worshippers were soothing to her senses, and, as she took a seat on one of the benches, she felt sheltered and safe.

The old church struck her as a home of perfect peace; in all the city, she thought, there could hardly be another spot where she might rest so quietly and contentedly. So for some little time she gave herself up, body and soul, to the refreshing influences of the coolness, the solemnity, the fragrance and the music; but presently her attention was attracted to two women in the seats just in front of her.

One of them, who had a child on her arm, whispered to her neighbor:

"You here, Hannah, among the unbaptized? How are you going on at home?"

"I cannot stay long," was the answer. "It is all the same where one sits, and when I leave I shall disturb no one. But my heart is heavy; the child is very bad. The doctor says he cannot live through the day, and I felt as if I must come to church."

Very right, very right. Do you stay here and I will go to your house at once; my husband will not mind waiting."

"Thank you very much, but Katharine is staying with the boy and he is quite safe there."

"Then I will stay and pray with you for the dear little child."

Dada had not missed a word of this simple dialogue. The woman whose child was ill at home, and who had come here to pray for strength or mercy, had a remarkably sweet face; as the girl saw the two friends bow their heads and fold their hands with downcast eyes, she thought to herself: "Now they are praying for the sick child. . ." and involuntarily she, too, bent her curly head, and murmured softly: "O ye gods, or thou God of the Christians, or whatever thou art called that hast power over life and death, make this poor woman's little son well again. When I get home again I will offer up a cake or a fowl—a lamb is so costly."

And she fancied that some invisible spirit heard her, and it gave her a vague satisfaction to repeat her simple supplication over and over again.

Meanwhile a miserable blind dwarf had seated himself by her side; near him stood the old dog that guided him. He held him by a string and had been allowed to bring his indispensable comrade into the church. The old man joined loudly and devoutly in the psalm which the rest of the congregation were singing; his voice had lost its freshness, no doubt, but he sang in perfect tune. It was a pleasure to Dada to listen, and though she only half understood the words of the psalm she easily caught the air and began to sing too, at first timidly and hardly audibly; but she soon gained courage and, following the example of little Papias, joined in with all her might.

She felt as though she had reached land after a stormy and uncomfortable voyage, and had found refuge in a hospitable home; she looked about her to discover whether the news of the approaching destruction of the world had not penetrated even here, but she could not feel certain; for, though many faces expressed anguish of mind, contrition, and a passionate desire—perhaps for help or, perhaps,

for something quite different— not a cry of lamentation was to be heard, such as had rent the air by the temple of Isis, and most of the men and women assembled here were singing, or praying in silent absorption. There were none of the frenzied monks who had terrified her in the Xenodochium and in the streets; on this day of tumult and anxiety they are devoting all their small strength and great enthusiasm to the service of the Church militant.

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