

GEORG EBERS

SERAPIS.

VOLUME 03

Georg Ebers
Serapis. Volume 03

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Georg Ebers

Serapis – Volume 03

CHAPTER XI

Agne's flight remained unperceived for some little time, for every member of the merchant's household was at the moment intent on some personal interest. When Karnis and Orpheus had set out Gorgo was left with her grandmother and it was not till some little time after that she went out into the colonade on the garden side of the house, whence she had a view over the park and the shore as far as the ship-yard. There, leaning against the shaft of a pillar, under the shade of the blossoming shrubs, she stood gazing thoughtfully to the southward.

She was dreaming of the past, of her childhood's joys and privations. Fate had bereft her of a mother's love, that sun of life's spring. Below her, in a splendid mausoleum of purple porphyry, lay the mortal remains of the beautiful woman who had given her birth, and who had been snatched away before she could give her infant a first caress. But all round the solemn monument gardens bloomed in the sunshine, and on the further side of the wall covered with creepers, was the ship-yard, the scene of numberless delightful games. She sighed as she looked at the tall hulks, and watched for the man who, from her earliest girlhood, had owned her heart, whose image was inseparable from every thing of joy and beauty that she had ever known, and every grief her young soul had suffered under.

Constantine, the younger son of Clemens the shipbuilder, had been her brothers' companion and closest friend. He had proved himself their superior in talents and gifts, and in all their games had been the recognized leader. While still a tiny thing she would always be at their heels, and Constantine had never failed to be patient with her, or to help and protect her, and then came a time when the lads were all eager to win her sympathy for their games and undertakings. When her grandmother read in the stars that some evil influences were to cross the path of Gorgo's planet, the girl was carefully kept in the house; at other times she was free to go with the boys in the garden, on the lake or to the ship-yard. There the happy playmates built houses or boats; there, in a separate room, old Melampus modelled figure-heads for the finished vessels, and he would supply them with clay and let them model too. Constantine was an apt pupil, and Gorgo would sit quiet while he took her likeness, till, out of twenty images that he had made of her, several were really very like. Melampus declared that his young master might be a very distinguished sculptor if only he were the son of poor parents, and Gorgo's father appreciated his talent and was pleased when the boy attempted to copy the beautiful busts and statues of which the house was full; but to his parents, and especially his mother, his artistic proclivities were an offence. He himself, indeed, never seriously thought of devoting himself to such a heathenish occupation, for he was deeply penetrated by the Christian sentiments of his family, and he had even succeeded in inflaming the sons of Porphyrius, who had been baptized at an early age, with zeal for their faith. The merchant perceived this and submitted in silence, for the boys must be and remain Christians in consequence of the edict referring to wills; but the necessity for confessing a creed which was hateful to him was so painful and repulsive to a nature which, though naturally magnanimous was not very steadfast, that he was anxious to spare his sons the same experience, and allowed them to accompany Constantine to church and to wear blue—the badge of the Christians—at races and public games, with a shrug of silent consent.

With Gorgo it was different. She was a woman and need wear no colors; and her enthusiasm for the old gods and Greek taste and prejudices were the delight of her father. She was the pride of his life, and as he heard his own convictions echoed in her childish prattle, and later in her conversation and exquisite singing, he was grateful to his mother and to his friend Olympius who had implanted and cherished these feelings in his daughter. Constantine's endeavors to show her the beauty of his

creed and to win her to Christianity were entirely futile; and the older they grew, and the less they agreed, the worse could each endure the dissent of the other.

An early and passionate affection attracted the young man to his charming playfellow; the more ardently he cherished his faith the more fervently did he desire to win her for his wife. But Olympius' fair pupil was not easy of conquest; nay, he was not unfrequently hard beset by her questions and arguments, and while, to her, the fight for a creed was no more than an amusing wrestling match, in which to display her strength, to him it was a matter in which his heart was engaged.

Damia and Porphyrius took a vain pleasure in their eager discussions, and clapped with delight, as though it were a game of skill, when Gorgo laughingly checkmated her excited opponent with some unanswerable argument.

But there came a day when Constantine discovered that his eager defence of that which to him was high and holy, was, to his hearers, no more than a subject of mockery, and henceforth the lad, now fast growing to manhood, kept away from the merchant's house. Still, Gorgo could always win him back again, and sometimes, when they were alone together, the old strife would be renewed, and more seriously and bitterly than of old. But while he loved her, she also loved him, and when he had so far mastered himself as to remain away for any length of time she wore herself out with longing to see him. They felt that they belonged to each other, but they also felt that an insuperable gulf yawned between them, and that whenever they attempted to clasp hands across the abyss a mysterious and irresistible impulse drove them to open it wider, and to dig it deeper by fresh discussions, till at last Constantine could not endure that she, of all people, should mock at his Holy of Holies and drag it in the dust.

He must go—he must leave Gorgo, quit Alexandria, cost what it might. The travellers' tales that he had heard from the captains of trading- vessels and ships of war who frequented his father's house had filled him with a love of danger and enterprise, and a desire to see distant lands and foreign peoples. His father's business, for which he was intended, did not attract him. Away—away—he would go away; and a happy coincidence opened a path for him.

Porphyrius had taken him one day on some errand to Canopus; the elder man had gone in his chariot, his two sons and Constantine escorting him on horseback. At the city-gates they met Romanus, the general in command of the Imperial army, with his staff of officers, and he, drawing rein by the great merchant's carriage, had asked him, pointing to Constantine, whether that were his son.

"No," replied Porphyrius, "but I wish he were." At these words the ship- master's son colored deeply, while Romanus turned his horse round, laid his hand on the young man's arm and called out to the commander of the cavalry of Arsinoe: "A soldier after Ares' own heart, Columella! Do not let him slip."

Before the clouds of dust raised by the officers' horses as they rode off, had fairly settled, Constantine had made up his mind to be a soldier. In his parents' house, however, this decision was seen under various aspects. His father found little to say against it, for he had three sons and only two shipyards, and the question seemed settled by the fact that Constantine, with his resolute and powerful nature, was cut out to be a soldier. His pious mother, on the other hand, appealed to the learned works of Clemens and Tertullian, who forbid the faithful Christian to draw the sword; and she related the legend of the holy Maximilianus, who, being compelled, under Diocletian, to join the army, had suffered death at the hands of the executioner rather than shed his fellow-creatures' blood in battle. The use of weapons, she added, was incompatible with a godly and Christian life.

His father, however, would not listen to this reasoning; new times, he said, were come; the greater part of the army had been baptized; the Church prayed for, victory, and at the head of the troops stood the great Theodosius, an exemplar of an orthodox and zealous Christian.

Clemens was master in his own house, and Constantine joined the heavy cavalry at Arsinoe. In the war against the Blemmyes he was so fortunate as to merit the highest distinction; after that he

was in garrison at Arsinoe, and, as Alexandria was within easy reach of that town, he was in frequent intercourse with his own family and that of Porphyrius. Not quite three years previously, when a revolt had broken out in favor of the usurper Maximus in his native town, Constantine had assisted in suppressing it, and almost immediately afterwards he was sent to Europe to take part in the war which Theodosius had begun, again against Maximus.

An unpleasant misunderstanding had embittered his parting from Gorgo; old Damia, as she held his hand had volunteered a promise that she and her granddaughter would from time to time slay a beast in sacrifice on his behalf. Perhaps she had had no spiteful meaning in this, but he had regarded it as an insult, and had turned away angry and hurt. Gorgo, however, could not bear to let him go thus; disregarding her grandmother's look of surprise, she had called him back, and giving him both hands had warmly bidden him farewell. Damia had looked after him in silence and had ever afterwards avoided mentioning his name in Gorgo's presence.

After the victory over Maximus, Constantine, though still very young, was promoted to the command of the troop in the place of Columella, and he had arrived in Alexandria the day before at the head of his 'ala miliaria'.

[The ala miliaria consisted of 24 'turmae' or 960 mounted troopers under the conduct of a Prefect.]

Gorgo had never at any time ceased to think of him, but her passion had constantly appeared to her in the light of treason and a breach of faith towards the gods, so, to condone the sins she committed on one side by zeal on another, she had come forth from the privacy of her father's house to give active support to Olympius in his struggle for the faith of their ancestors. She had become a daily worshipper at the temple of Isis, and the hope of hearing her sing had already more than once filled it to overflowing at high festivals. Then, while Olympius was defending the sanctuary of Serapis against the attacks of the Christians, she and her grandmother had become the leaders of a party of women who made it their task to provide the champions of the faith with the means of subsistence.

All this had given purpose to her life; still, every little victory in this contest had filled her soul with regrets and anxieties. For months and years she had been conspicuous as the opponent of her lover's creed, and the bright eager child had developed into a grave girl a clear-headed and resolute woman. She was the only person in the house who dared to contradict her grandmother, and to insist on a thing when she thought it right. The longing of her heart she could not still, but her high spirit found food for its needs in all that surrounded her, and, by degrees, would no doubt have gained the mastery and have been supreme in all her being and doing, but that music and song still fostered the softer emotions of her strong, womanly nature.

The news of Constantine's return had shaken her soul to the foundations. Would it bring her the greatest happiness or only fresh anguish and unrest?

She saw him coming!—The plume of his helmet first came in sight above the bushes, and then his whole figure emerged from among the shrubbery. She leaned against the pillar for support now, for her knees trembled under her. Tall and stately, his armor blazing in the sunshine, he came straight towards her—a man, a hero—exactly as her fancy had painted him in many a dark and sleepless hour. As he passed her mother's tomb, she felt as though a cold hand laid a grip on her beating heart. In a swift flash of thought she saw her own home with its wealth and splendor, and then the ship-builder's house—simple, chillingly bare, with its comfortless rooms; she felt as though she must perish, nipped and withered, in such a home. Again she thought of him standing on his father's threshold, she fancied she could hear his bright boyish laugh and her heart glowed once more. She forgot for the moment—clear-headed woman though she was, and trained by her philosopher to "know herself"—she forgot what she had fully acknowledged only the night before: That he would no more give up his Christ than she would her Isis, and that if they should ever reach the dreamed-of pinnacle of joy it must be for an instant only, followed by a weary length of misery. Yes—she forgot everything; doubts and

fears were cast aside; as his approaching footsteps fell on her ear, she could hardly keep herself from flying, open armed, to meet him.

He was standing before her; she offered him her hand with frank gladness, and, as he clasped it in his, their hearts were too full for words. Only their eyes gave utterance to their feelings, and when he perceived that hers were sparkling through tears, he spoke her name once, twice— joyfully and yet doubtfully, as if he dared not interpret her emotion as he would. She laid her left hand lightly on his which still grasped her right, and said with a brilliant smile: "Welcome, Constantine, welcome home! How glad I am to see you back again!"

"And I—and I..." he began, greatly moved.

"O Gorgo! Can it really be years since we parted?"

"Yes, indeed," she said. "Anxious, busy, struggling years!"

"But to-day we celebrate the festival of Peace," he exclaimed fervently. "I have learnt to leave every man to go his own way so long as I am allowed to go mine. The old strife is buried; take me as I am and I, for my part, will think only of the noble and beautiful traits in which your nature is so rich. The fruit of all wholesome strife must be peace; let us pluck that fruit, Gorgo, and enjoy it together. Ah! as I stand here and gaze out over the gardens and the lake, hearing the hammers of the shipwrights, and rejoicing in your presence, I feel as though our childhood might begin all over again—only better, fuller and more beautiful!"

"If only my brothers were here!"

"I saw them,"

"Oh! where?"

"At Thessalonica, well and happy—I have letters for you from them."

"Letters!" cried Gorgo, drawing away her hand. "Well, you are a tardy messenger! Our houses are within a stone's throw, and yet in a whole day, from noon till noon, so old a friend could not find a few minutes to deliver the letters entrusted to him, or to call upon such near neighbors . . ."

"First there were my parents," interrupted the young soldier. "And then the tyrant military duty, which kept me on the stretch from yesterday afternoon till an hour or two since. Romanus robbed me even of my sleep, and kept me in attendance till the morn had set. However, I lost but little by that, for I could not have closed my eyes till they had beheld you! This morning again I was on duty, and rarely have I ridden to the front with such reluctance. After that I was delayed by various details; even on my way here—but for that I cannot be sorry for it gave me this chance of finding you alone. All I ask now is that we may remain so, for such a moment is not likely to be repeated.—There, I heard a door . . ."

"Come into the garden," cried Gorgo, signing to him to follow her. "My heart is as full as yours. Down by the tank under the old sycamores—we shall be quietest there."

Under the dense shade of the centenarian trees was a rough-hewn bench that they themselves had made years before; there Gorgo seated herself, but her companion remained standing.

"Yes!" he exclaimed. "Here—here you must hear me! Here where we have been so happy together!"

"So happy!" she echoed softly,

"And now," he went on, "we are together once more. My heart beats wildly, Gorgo; it is well that this breastplate holds it fast, for I feel as though it would burst with hope and thankfulness."

"Thankfulness?" said Gorgo, looking down.

"Yes, thankfulness—sheer, fervent passionate gratitude! What you have given me, what an inestimable boon, you yourself hardly know; but no emperor could reward love and fidelity more lavishly than you have done—you, the care and the consolation, the pain and the joy of my life! My mother told me—it was the first thing she thought of—how you shed tears of grief on her bosom when the false report of my death reached home. Those tears fell as morning dew on the drooping hopes in my heart, they were a welcome such as few travellers find on their return home. I am no

orator, and if I were, how could speech in any way express my feelings? But you know them—you understand what it is, after so many years . . ."

"I know," she said looking up into his eyes, and allowing him to seize her hand as he dropped on the bench by her side. "If I did not I could not bear this—and I freely confess that I shed many more tears over you than you could imagine. You love me, Constantine . . ."

He threw his arm round her; but she disengaged herself, exclaiming:

"Nay—I implore you, not so—not yet, till I have told you what troubles me, what keeps me from throwing myself wholly, freely into the arms of happiness. I know what you will ask—what you have a right to ask; but before you speak, Constantine, remember once more all that has so often saddened our life, even as children, that has torn us asunder like a whirlwind although, ever since we can remember, our hearts have flowed towards each other. But I need not remind you of what binds us—that we both know well, only too well. . ."

"Nay," he replied boldly: "That we are only beginning to know in all its fullness and rapture. The other thing the whirlwind of which you speak, has indeed tossed and tormented me, more than it has you perhaps; but since I have known that you could shed tears for me and love me I have had no more anxieties; I know for certain that all must come right! You love me as I am, Gorgo. I am no dreamer nor poet; but I can look forward to finding life lovely and noble if shared with you, so long as one—only one thing is sure. I ask you plainly and truly: Is your heart as full of love for me as mine is for you? When I was away did you think of me every day, every night, as I thought of you, day and night without fail?"

Gorgo's head sank and blushes dyed her cheeks as she replied: "I love you, and I have never even thought of any one else. My thoughts and yearnings followed you all the while you were away. . . and yet. . . oh, Constantine! That one thing . . ."

"It cannot part us," said the young man passionately, "since we have love—the mighty and gracious power which conquers all things! When love beckon: the whirlwind dies away like the breath from a child's lips; it can bridge over any abyss; it created the world and preserves the existence of humanity, it can remove mountains—and these are the most beautiful words of the greatest of the apostles: 'It is long suffering and kind, it believes all things, hopes all things' and it knows no end. It remains with us till death and will teach us to find that peace whose bulwark and adornment, whose child and parent it is!"

Gorgo had looked lovingly at him while he spoke, and he, pressing her hand to his lips went on with ardent feeling:

"Yes, you shall be mine—I dare, and I will go to ask you of your father. There are some words spoken in one's life which can never be forgotten. Once your father said that he wished that I was his son. On the march, in camp, in battle, wherever I have wandered, those words have been in my mind; for me they could have but one meaning: I would be his son—I shall be his son when Gorgo is my wife!—And now the time has come . . ."

"Not yet, not to-day," she interrupted eagerly. "My hopes are the same as yours. I believe with you that our love can bring all that is sweetest into our lives. What you believe I must believe, and I will never urge upon you the things that I regard as holiest. I can give up much, bear much, and it will all seem easy for your sake. We can agree, and settle what shall be conceded to your Christ and what to our gods— but not to-day; not even to-morrow. For the present let me first carry out the task I have undertaken—when that is done and past, then. . . You have my heart, my love; but if I were to prove a deserter from the cause to-day or to-morrow it would give others—Olympius—a right to point at me with scorn."

"What is it then that you have undertaken?" asked Constantine with grave anxiety.

"To crown and close my past life. Before I can say: I am yours, wholly yours . . ."

"Are you not mine now, to-day, at once?" he urged.

"To day-no," she replied firmly. "The great cause still has a claim upon me; the cause which I must renounce for your sake. But the woman who gives only one person reason to despise her signs the death-warrant of her own dignity. I will carry out what I have undertaken... Do not ask me what it is; it would grieve you to know.—The day after tomorrow, when the feast of Isis is over . . ."

"Gorgo, Gorgo!" shouted Damia's shrill voice, interrupting the young girl in her speech, and half a dozen slave-women came rushing out in search of her.

They rose, and as they went towards the house Constantine said very earnestly:

"I will not insist; but trust my experience: When we have to give something up sooner or later, if the wrench is a painful one, the sooner and the more definitely it is done the better. Nothing is gained by postponement and the pain is only prolonged. Hesitation and delay, Gorgo, are a barrier built up by your own hand between us and our happiness. You always had abundance of determination; be brave then, now, and cut short at once a state of things that cannot last."

"Well, well," she said hurriedly. "But you must not, you will not require me to do anything that is beyond my strength, or that would involve breaking my word. To-morrow is not, and cannot be yours; it must be a day of leave-taking and parting. After that I am yours, I cannot live without you. I want you and nothing else. Your happiness shall be mine; only, do not make it too hard to me to part from all that has been dear to me from my infancy. Shut your eyes to tomorrow's proceedings, and then—oh! if only we were sure of the right path, if only we could tread it together! We know each other so perfectly, and I know, I feel, that it will perhaps be a comfort to our hearts to be patient with each other over matters which our judgment fails to comprehend or even to approve. I might be so unutterably happy; but my heart trembles within me, and I am not, I dare not be quite glad yet."

CHAPTER XII

The young soldier was heartily welcomed by his friends of the merchant's family; but old Damia was a little uneasy at the attitude which he and Gorgo had taken up after their first greeting. He was agitated and grave, she was eager and excited, with an air of determined enterprise.

Was Eros at the bottom of it all? Were the young people going to carry out the jest of their childhood in sober earnest? The young officer was handsome and attractive enough, and her granddaughter after all was but a woman.

So far as Constantine was concerned the old lady had no personal objection to him; nay, she appreciated his steady, grave manliness and, for his own sake, was very glad to see him once more; but to contemplate the ship-builder's son—the grandson of a freedman—a Christian and devoted to the Emperor, even though he were a prefect or of even higher grade—as a possible suitor for her Gorgo, the beautiful heiress of the greater part of her wealth—the centre of attraction to all the gilded youth of Alexandria—this was too much for her philosophy; and, as she had never in her life restrained the expression of her sentiments, though she gave him a friendly hand and the usual greeting, she very soon showed him, by her irony and impertinence, that she was as hostile to his creed as ever.

She put her word in on every subject, and when, presently, Demetrius—who, after Dada's rebuff, had come on to see his uncle—began speaking of the horses he had been breeding for Marcus, and Constantine enquired whether any Arabs from his stables were to be purchased in the town, Damia broke out:

"You out-do your crucified God in most things I observe! He could ride on an ass, and a stout Egyptian nag is not good enough for you."

However, the young officer was not to be provoked; and though he was very well able to hold his own in a strife of words, he kept himself under control and pretended to see nothing in the old woman's taunts but harmless jesting.

Gorgo triumphed in his temperate demeanor, and thanked him with grateful glances and a silent grasp of the hand when opportunity offered.

Demetrius, who had also known Constantine as a boy, and who, through Porphyrius, had sold him his first charger, met him very warmly and told him with a laugh that he had seen him before that day, that he had evidently learnt something on his travels, that he had tracked the prettiest head of game in all the city; and he slapped him on the shoulder and gave him what he meant to be a very knowing glance. Constantine could not think where Demetrius had seen him or what he meant; while Gorgo supposed that he alluded to her, and thought him perfectly odious.

Porphyrius pelted the prefect with questions which Constantine was very ready to answer, till they were interrupted by some commotion in the garden. On looking out they saw a strange and unpleasing procession, headed by Herse who was scolding, thumping and dragging Dada's Egyptian slave, while her husband followed, imploring her to moderate her fury. Behind them came Orpheus, now and then throwing out a persuasive word to soothe the indignant matron. This party soon came up with the others, and Herse, unmasked, poured out an explanation of her wrath.

She had had but a brief interview with Mary, Marcus' mother, for she had positively opposed the Christian lady's suggestion that Karnis and his family would do well to quit Alexandria as soon as possible, accepting an indemnification from Mary herself. To the widow's threats of seeking the intervention of the law, she had retorted that they were not public singers but free citizens who performed for their own enjoyment; to the anxious mother's complaints that Dada was doing all she could to attract Marcus, she had answered promptly and to the point that her niece's good name would certainly out-weigh anything that could be said against a young man to whom so much license was allowed in Alexandria. She would find some means of protecting her own sister's child. Mary had replied that Herse would do well to remember that she—Mary—had means at her command

of bringing justice down on those who should attempt to entrap a Christian youth, and tempt him into the path of sin.

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