

**GEORG EBERS**

THE SISTERS.

VOLUME 5

Georg Ebers

**The Sisters. Volume 5**

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# Georg Ebers

## The Sisters – Volume 5

### CHAPTER XXII

On the roof of the tower of the pylon by the gate of the Serapeum stood an astrologer who had mounted to this, the highest part of the temple, to observe the stars; but it seemed that he was not destined on this occasion to fulfil his task, for swiftly driving black clouds swept again and again across that portion of the heavens to which his observations were principally directed. At last he impatiently laid aside his instruments, his waxed tablet and style, and desired the gate-keeper—the father of poor little Philo—whose duty it was to attend at night on the astrologers on the tower, to carry down all his paraphernalia, as the heavens were not this evening favorable to his labors.

"Favorable!" exclaimed the gate-keeper, catching up the astrologer's words, and shrugging his shoulders so high that his head disappeared between them.

"It is a night of horror, and some great disaster threatens us for certain. Fifteen years have I been in my place, and I never saw such a night but once before, and the very next day the soldiers of Antiochus, the Syrian king, came and plundered our treasury. Aye—and to-night is worse even than that was; when the dog-star first rose a horrible shape with a lion's mane flew across the desert, but it was not till midnight that the fearful uproar began, and even you shuddered when it broke out in the Apis-cave. Frightful things must be coming on us when the sacred bulls rise from the dead and butt and storm at the door with their horns to break it open. Many a time have I seen the souls of the dead fluttering and wheeling and screaming above the old mausoleums, and rock-tombs of ancient times. Sometimes they would soar up in the air in the form of hawks with men's heads, or like ibises with a slow lagging flight, and sometimes sweep over the desert like gray shapeless shadows, or glide across the sand like snakes; or they would creep out of the tombs, howling like hungry dogs. I have often heard them barking like jackals or laughing like hyenas when they scent carrion, but to-night is the first time I ever heard them shrieking like furious men, and then groaning and wailing as if they were plunged in the lake of fire and suffering horrible torments.

"Look there—out there—something is moving again! Oh! holy father, exorcise them with some mighty bann. Do you not see how they are growing larger? They are twice the size of ordinary mortals." The astronomer took an amulet in his hand, muttered a few sentences to himself, seeking at the same time to discover the figures which had so scared the gate-keeper.

"They are indeed tall," he said when he perceived them. "And now they are melting into one, and growing smaller and smaller—however, perhaps they are only men come to rob the tombs, and who happen to be particularly tall, for these figures are not of supernatural height."

"They are twice as tall as you, and you are not short," cried the gate-keeper, pressing his lips devoutly to the amulet the astrologer held in his hand, "and if they are robbers why has no watchman called out to stop them? How is it their screams and groans have not waked the sentinels that are posted there every night? There—that was another fearful cry! Did you ever hear such tones from any human breast? Great Serapis, I shall die of fright! Come down with me, holy father, that I may look after my little sick boy, for those who have seen such sights do not escape unstricken."

The peaceful silence of the Necropolis had indeed been disturbed, but the spirits of the departed had no share in the horrors which had been transacted this night in the desert, among the monuments and rocktombs. They were living men that had disturbed the calm of the sacred place, that had conspired with darkness in cold-blooded cruelty, greater than that of evil spirits, to achieve the destruction of a fellow-man; but they were living men too who, in the midst of the horrors of a most fearful night, had experienced the blossoming in their own souls of the divinest germ which heaven

implants in the bosom of its mortal children. Thus in a day of battle amid blood and slaughter may a child be born that shall grow up blessed and blessing, the comfort and joy of his family.

The lion-maned monster whose appearance and rapid disappearance in the desert had first alarmed the gate-keeper, had been met by several travellers on its way to Memphis, and each and all, horrified by its uncanny aspect, had taken to flight or tried to hide themselves—and yet it was no more than a man with warm pulses, an honest purpose, and a true and loving heart. But those who met him could not see into his soul, and his external aspect certainly bore little resemblance to that of other men.

His feet, unused to walking, moved but clumsily, and had a heavy body to carry, and his enormous beard and the mass of gray hair on his head—which he turned now this way and now that—gave him an aspect that might well scare even a bold man who should meet him unexpectedly. Two stall-keepers who, by day, were accustomed to offer their wares for sale near the Serapeum to the pilgrims, met him close to the city.

"Did you see that panting object?" said one to the other as they looked after him. "If he were not shut up fast in his cell I could declare it was Serapion, the recluse."

"Nonsense," replied the other. "He is tied faster by his oath than by chains and fetters. It must be one of the Syrian beggars that besiege the temple of Astarte."

"Perhaps," answered his companion with indifference. "Let us get on now, my wife has a roast goose for supper this evening."

Serapion, it is true, was fast tied to his cell, and yet the pedler had judged rightly, for he it was who hurried along the high-road frightening all he met. After his long captivity walking was very painful to him; besides, he was barefoot, and every stone in the path hurt the soles of his feet which had grown soft; nevertheless he contrived to make a by no means contemptible pace when in the distance he caught sight of a woman's figure which he could fancy to be Klea. Many a man, who in his own particular sphere of life can cut a very respectable figure, becomes a laughing-stock for children when he is taken out of his own narrow circle, and thrown into the turmoil of the world with all his peculiarities clinging to him. So it was with Serapion; in the suburbs the street-boys ran after him mocking at him, but it was not till three smart hussys, who were resting from their dance in front of a tavern, laughed loudly as they caught sight of him, and an insolent soldier drove the point of his lance through his flowing mane, as if by accident, that he became fully conscious of his wild appearance, and it struck him forcibly that he could never in this guise find admission to the king's palace.

With prompt determination he turned into the first barber's stall that he saw lighted up; at his appearance the barber hastily retreated behind his counter, but he got his hair and beard cut, and then, for the first time for many years, he saw his own face in the mirror that the barber held before him. He nodded, with a melancholy smile, at the face—so much aged—that looked at him from the bright surface, paid what was asked, and did not heed the compassionate glance which the barber and his assistant sent after him. They both thought they had been exercising their skill on a lunatic, for he had made no answer to all their questions, and had said nothing but once in a deep and fearfully loud voice:

"Chatter to other people—I am in a hurry."

In truth his spirit was in no mood for idle gossip; no, it was full of gnawing anxiety and tender fears, and his heart bled when he reflected that he had broken his vows, and forsworn the oath he had made to his dying mother.

When he reached the palace-gate he begged one of the civic guard to conduct him to his brother, and as he backed his request with a gift of money he was led at once to the man whom he sought. Glaucus was excessively startled to recognize Serapion, but he was so much engaged that he could only give up a few minutes to his brother, whose proceedings he considered as both inexplicable and criminal.

Irene, as the anchorite now learned, had been carried off from the temple, not by Euergetes but by the Roman, and Klea had quitted the palace only a few minutes since in a chariot and would

return about midnight and on foot from the second tavern to the temple. And the poor child was so utterly alone, and her way lay through the desert where she might be attacked by dissolute soldiery or tomb-robbers or jackals and hyenas. Her walk was to begin from the second tavern, and that was the very spot where low rioters were wont to assemble—and his darling was so young, so fair, and so defenceless!

He was once more a prey to the same unendurable dread that had come over him, in his cell, after Klea had left the temple and darkness had closed in. At that moment he had felt all that a father could feel who from his prison-window sees his beloved and defenceless child snatched away by some beast of prey. All the perils that could threaten her in the palace or in the city, swarming with drunken soldiers, had risen before his mind with fearful vividness, and his powerful imagination had painted in glaring colors all the dangers to which his favorite—the daughter of a noble and respected man—might be exposed.

He rushed up and down his cell like a wounded tiger, he flung himself against the walls, and then, with his body hanging far out of the window, had looked out to see if the girl—who could not possibly have returned yet—were not come back again. The darker it grew, the more his anguish rose, and the more hideous were the pictures that stood before his fancy; and when, presently, a pilgrim in the Pastophorium who had fallen into convulsions screamed out loud, he was no longer master of himself—he kicked open the door which, locked on the outside and rotten from age, had been closed for years, hastily concealed about him some silver coins he kept in his chest, and let himself down to the ground.

There he stood, between his cell and the outer wall of the temple, and now it was that he remembered his vows, and the oath he had sworn, and his former flight from his retreat. Then he had fled because the pleasures and joys of life had tempted him forth—then he had sinned indeed; but now the love, the anxious care that urged him to quit his prison were the same as had brought him back to it. It was to keep faith that he now broke faith, and mighty Serapis could read his heart, and his mother was dead, and while she lived she had always been ready and willing to forgive.

He fancied so vividly that he could see her kind old face looking at him that he nodded at her as if indeed she stood before him.

Then, he rolled an empty barrel to the foot of the wall, and with some difficulty mounted on it. The sweat poured down him as he climbed up the wall built of loose unbaked bricks to the parapet, which was much more than a man's height; then, sliding and tumbling, he found himself in the ditch which ran round it on the outside, scrambled up its outer slope, and set out at last on his walk to Memphis.

What he had afterwards learned in the palace concerning Klea had but little relieved his anxiety on her account; she must have reached the border of the desert so much sooner than he, and quick walking was so difficult to him, and hurt the soles of his feet so cruelly! Perhaps he might be able to procure a staff, but there was just as much bustle outside the gate of the citadel as by day. He looked round him, feeling the while in his wallet, which was well filled with silver, and his eye fell on a row of asses whose drivers were crowding round the soldiers and servants that streamed out of the great gate.

He sought out the strongest of the beasts with an experienced eye, flung a piece of silver to the owner, mounted the ass, which panted under its load, and promised the driver two drachmm in addition if he would take him as quickly as possible to the second tavern on the road to the Serapeum. Thus—he belaboring the sides of the unhappy donkey with his sturdy bare legs, while the driver, running after him snorting and shouting, from time to time poked him up from behind with a stick—Serapion, now going at a short trot, and now at a brisk gallop, reached his destination only half an hour later than Klea.

In the tavern all was dark and empty, but the recluse desired no refreshment. Only his wish that he had a staff revived in his mind, and he soon contrived to possess himself of one, by pulling a stake out of the fence that surrounded the innkeeper's little garden. This was a somewhat heavy walking-

stick, but it eased the recluse's steps, for though his hot and aching feet carried him but painfully the strength of his arms was considerable.

The quick ride had diverted his mind, had even amused him, for he was easily pleased, and had recalled to him his youthful travels; but now, as he walked on alone in the desert, his thoughts reverted to Klea, and to her only.

He looked round for her keenly and eagerly as soon as the moon came out from behind the clouds, called her name from time to time, and thus got as far as the avenue of sphinxes which connected the Greek and Egyptian temples; a thumping noise fell upon his ear from the cave of the Apis- tombs. Perhaps they were at work in there, preparing for the approaching festival. But why were the soldiers, which were always on guard here, absent from their posts to-night? Could it be that they had observed Klea, and carried her off?

On the farther side of the rows of sphinxes too, which he had now reached, there was not a man to be seen—not a watchman even though the white limestone of the tombstones and the yellow desert-sand shone as clear in the moonlight as if they had some internal light of their own.

At every instant he grew more and more uneasy, he climbed to the top of a sand-hill to obtain a wider view, and loudly called Klea's name.

There—was he deceived? No—there was a figure visible near one of the ancient tomb-shrines—a form that seemed wrapped in a long robe, and when once more he raised his voice in a loud call it came nearer to him and to the row of sphinxes. In great haste and as fast as he could he got down again to the roadway, hurried across the smooth pavement, on both sides of which the long perspective of man-headed lions kept guard, and painfully clambered up a sand-heap on the opposite side. This was in truth a painful effort, for the sand crumbled away again and again under his feet, slipping down hill and carrying him with it, thus compelling him to find a new hold with hand and foot. At last he was standing on the outer border of the sphinx-avenue and opposite the very shrine where he fancied he had seen her whom he sought; but during his clamber it had become perfectly dark again, for a heavy cloud had once more veiled the moon. He put both hands to his mouth, and shouted as loud as he could, "Klea!"—and then again, "Klea!"

Then, close at his feet he heard a rustle in the sand, and saw a figure moving before him as though it had risen out of the ground. This could not be Klea, it was a man—still, perhaps, he might have seen his darling—but before he had time to address him he felt the shock of a heavy blow that fell with tremendous force on his back between his shoulders. The assassin's sand-bag had missed the exact spot on the nape of the neck, and Serapion's strongly-knit backbone would have been able to resist even a stronger blow.

The conviction that he was attacked by robbers flashed on his consciousness as immediately as the sense of pain, and with it the certainty that he was a lost man if he did not defend himself stoutly.

Behind him he heard another rustle in the sand. As quickly as he could he turned round with an exclamation of "Accursed brood of vipers!" and with his heavy staff he fell upon the figure before him like a smith beating cold iron, for his eye, now more accustomed to the darkness, plainly saw it to be a man. Serapion must have hit straight, for his foe fell at his feet with a hideous roar, rolled over and over in the sand, groaning and panting, and then with one shrill shriek lay silent and motionless.

The recluse, in spite of the dim light, could see all the movements of the robber he had punished so severely, and he was bending over the fallen man anxiously and compassionately when he shuddered to feel two clammy hands touching his feet, and immediately after two sharp pricks in his right heel, which were so acutely painful that he screamed aloud, and was obliged to lift up the wounded foot. At the same time, however, he did not overlook the need to defend himself. Roaring like a wounded bull, cursing and raging, he laid about him on all sides with his staff, but hit nothing but the ground. Then as his blows followed each other more slowly, and at last his wearied arms could no longer wield the heavy stake, and he found himself compelled to sink on his knees, a hoarse voice addressed him thus:



"You have taken my comrade's life, Roman, and a two-legged serpent has stung you for it. In a quarter of an hour it will be all over with you, as it is with that fellow there. Why does a fine gentleman like you go to keep an appointment in the desert without boots or sandals, and so make our work so easy? King Euergetes and your friend Eulaeus send you their greetings. You owe it to them that I leave you even your ready money; I wish I could only carry away that dead lump there!"

During this rough speech Serapion was lying on the ground in great agony; he could only clench his fists, and groan out heavy curses with his lips which were now getting parched. His sight was as yet undimmed, and he could distinctly see by the light of the moon, which now shone forth from a broad cloudless opening in the sky, that the murderer attempted to carry away his fallen comrade, and then, after raising his head to listen for a moment sprang off with flying steps away into the desert. But the recluse now lost consciousness, and when some minutes later he once more opened his eyes his head was resting softly in the lap of a young girl, and it was the voice of his beloved Klea that asked him tenderly.

"You poor dear father! How came you here in the desert, and into the hands of these murderers? Do you know me—your Klea? And he who is looking for your wounds—which are not visible at all—he is the Roman Publius Scipio. Now first tell us where the dagger hit you that I may bind it up quickly—I am half a physician, and understand these things as you know."

The recluse tried to turn his head towards Klea's, but the effort was in vain, and he said in a low voice: "Prop me up against the slanting wall of the tomb shrine yonder; and you, child, sit down opposite to me, for I would fain look at you while I die. Gently, gently, my friend Publius, for I feel as if all my limbs were made of Phoenician glass, and might break at the least touch. Thank you, my young friend—you have strong arms, and you may lift me a little higher yet. So—now I can bear it; nay, I am well content, I am to be envied—for the moon shows me your dear face, my child, and I see tears on your cheeks, tears for me, a surly old man. Aye, it is good, it is very good to die thus."

"Oh, father, father!" cried Klea. "You must not speak so. You must live, you must not die; for see, Publius here asks me to be his wife, and the Immortals only can know how glad I am to go with him, and Irene is to stay with us, and be my sister and his. That must make you happy, father.—But tell us, pray tell us where the wound hurts that the murderer gave you?"

"Children, children," murmured the anchorite, and a happy smile parted his lips. "The gracious gods are merciful in permitting me to see that—aye, merciful to me, and to effect that end I would have died twenty deaths."

Klea pressed his now cold hand to her lips as he spoke and again asked, though hardly able to control her voice for tears:

"But the wound, father—where is the wound?" "Let be, let be," replied Serapion. "It is acrid poison, not a dagger or dart that has undone my strength. And I can depart in peace, for I am no longer needed for anything. You, Publius, must now take my place with this child, and will do it better than I. Klea, the wife of Publius Scipio! I indeed have dreamt that such a thing might come to pass, and I always knew, and have said to myself a thousand times that I now say to you my son: This girl here, this Klea is of a good sort, and worthy only of the noblest. I give her to you, my son Publius, and now join your hands before me here—for I have always been like a father to her."

That you have indeed," sobbed Klea. "And it was no doubt for my sake, and to protect me, that you quitted your retreat, and have met your death."

"It was fate, it was fate," stammered the old man.

"The assassins were in ambush for me," cried Publius, seizing Serapion's hand, "the murderers who fell on you instead of me. Once more, where is your wound?"

"My destiny fulfils itself," replied the recluse. "No locked-up cell, no physician, no healing herb can avail against the degrees of Fate. I am dying of a serpent's sting as it was foretold at my birth; and if I had not gone out to seek Klea a serpent would have slipped into my cage, and have ended

my life there. Give me your hands, my children, for a deadly chill is creeping over me, and its cold hand already touches my heart."

For a few minutes his voice failed him, and then he said softly:

"One thing I would fain ask of you. My little possessions, which were intended for you and Irene, you will now use to bury me. I do not wish to be burnt, as they did with my father—no, I should wish to be finely embalmed, and my mummy to be placed with my mother's. If indeed we may meet again after death—and I believe we shall—I would rather see her once more than any one, for she loved me so much—and I feel now as if I were a child again, and could throw my arms round her neck. In another life, perhaps, I may not be the child of misfortune that I have been in this—in another life—now it grips my heart—in another—Children whatever joys have smiled on me in this, children, it was to you I have owed it—Klea, to you—and there is my little Irene too—"

These were the last words of Serapion the recluse; he fell back with a deep sigh and was dead. Klea and Publius tenderly closed his faithful eyes.

## CHAPTER XXIII

The unwonted tumult that had broken the stillness of the night had not been unobserved in the Greek Serapeum any more than in the Egyptian temple adjoining the Apis-tombs; but perfect silence once more reigned in the Necropolis, when at last the great gate of the sanctuary of Osiris- Apis was thrown open, and a little troop of priests arranged in a procession came out from it with a vanguard of temple servants, who had been armed with sacrificial knives and axes.

Publius and Klea, who were keeping faithful watch by the body of their dead friend, saw them approaching, and the Roman said:

"It would have been even less right in such a night as this to let you proceed to one of the temples with out my escort than to have let our poor friend remain unwatched."

"Once more I assure you," said Klea eagerly "that we should have thrown away every chance of fulfilling Serapion's last wish as he intended, if during our absence a jackal or a hyena had mutilated his body, and I am happy to be able at least to prove to my friend, now he is dead, how grateful I am for all the kindness he showed us while he lived. We ought to be grateful even to the departed, for how still and blissful has this hour been while guarding his body. Storm and strife brought us together—"

"And here," interrupted Publius, "we have concluded a happy and permanent treaty of peace for the rest of our lives."

"I accept it willingly," replied Klea, looking down, "for I am the vanquished party."

"But you have already confessed," said Publius, "that you were never so unhappy as when you thought you had asserted your strength against mine, and I can tell you that you never seemed to me so great and yet so lovable as when in the midst of your triumph, you gave up the battle for lost. Such an hour as that, a man experiences but once in his lifetime. I have a good memory, but if ever I should forget it, and be angry and passionate—as is sometimes my way—remind me of this spot, or of this our dead friend, and my hard mood will melt, and I shall remember that you once were ready to give your life for mine. I will make it easy for you, for in honor of this man, who sacrificed his life for yours and who was actually murdered in my stead, I promise to add his name of Serapion to my own, and I will confirm this vow in Rome. He has behaved to us as a father, and it behoves me to reverence his memory as though I had been his son. An obligation was always unendurable to me, and how I shall ever make full restitution to you for what you have done for me this night I do not yet know—and yet I should be ready and willing every day and every hour to accept from you some new gift of love. 'A debtor,' says the proverb, 'is half a prisoner,' and so I must entreat you to deal mercifully with your conquerer."

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