

SERAPIS.

CHAPTER I.

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