BRITANNIA & EVE

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The Cover

Which is reproduced by kind permission of George Cross, Esq., is the famous Circus picture from this year's Royal Academy, "Laugh, Clown, Laugh," by Dame LAURA KNIGHT, R.A.

SPECIAL FEATURES of the DECEMBER NUMBER:

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General

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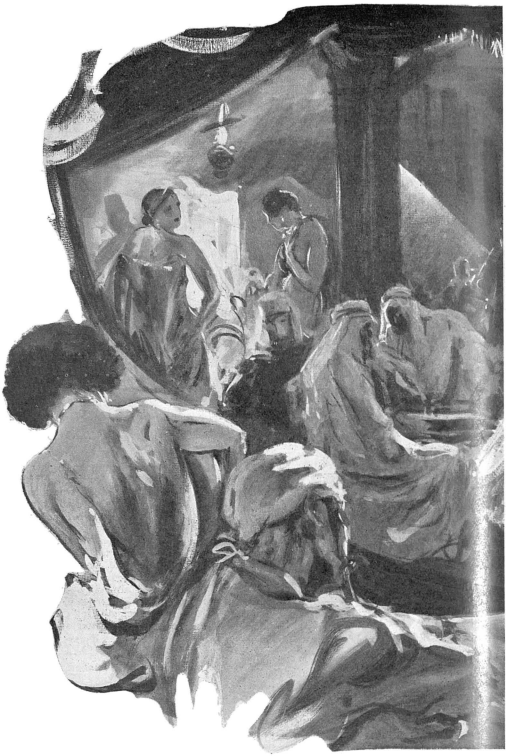
Fires of Baal

The secret of Sheba, dancing-girl, enchantress, fanatic, priestess of immemorial rites, and the more terrible secret of the God she served—Baal, greedy for fire and sacrifice

Illustrations by FORSTER



I.

"YES!" Duval nodded, smiling at Beckford across the little round-topped table. "I told you she was a beauty."

She was. Environment, and the keen spice of unexpectedness no doubt enhanced her spell. But, looking back over the years, impartially, I know that Sheba was beautiful, then.

That café in Aleppo frequently recurs in my memory. I had seen many such scenes, but this one was destined to stick. Tarbushes surrounded most of the tables. The Syrian has not yet succumbed to the dreadful Charlie Chaplin hats adopted by emancipated Turkey. Blobs of brown faces half-veiled by tobacco smoke. Bright, dark eyes gleaming through the haze. Groups of Bedouins, picturesquely robed. A salting of junior French officers. Fruit sellers, boot-blacks, Greek waiters . . Chatter, coffee, a smell of decayed bones. . . .

No women, of course, except those engaged as performers. Two or three were seated in the gallery, being entertained by country visitors, to whom Aleppo was a gay capital. The hawk eyes of the Arabs sometimes turned up to them, watching with curiosity but without desire.

A native orchestra, to whom tune and time were alike unknown. Already we had suffered several items. But that curious writhing of breast and abdomen which passes for dancing in the Near East becomes definitely repulsive when performed in European costume.

"The star turn," Duval had said, "doesn't come on before midnight. She's worth waiting for . . ."

So we had waited, drinking indifferent whisky and smoking Albanian cigarettes, which I detest. Duval was in mufti, but nobody could have mistaken him for anything but a French cavalryman.

SHEBA'S appearance had blotted out the whole scene—the Syrians, the Bedouins, the women in the gallery—the clatter . . . even the smell. She was preceded by two musicians, robed, turbaned and carrying instruments resembling Pandean pipes. With these they dominated the orchestra, playing a sort of prelude. Then Sheba came on. She wore a costume of which Ziegfeld would have disapproved and in which C. B. Cochran might have suggested certain modifications without greatly adding to the cost.

We saw a perfect woman—a study in pale amber. The quality of her skin created an uncanny impression of transparency. Jet black, snaky hair; smouldering eyes; slim and apparently boneless arms which seemed to speak a language of their own.

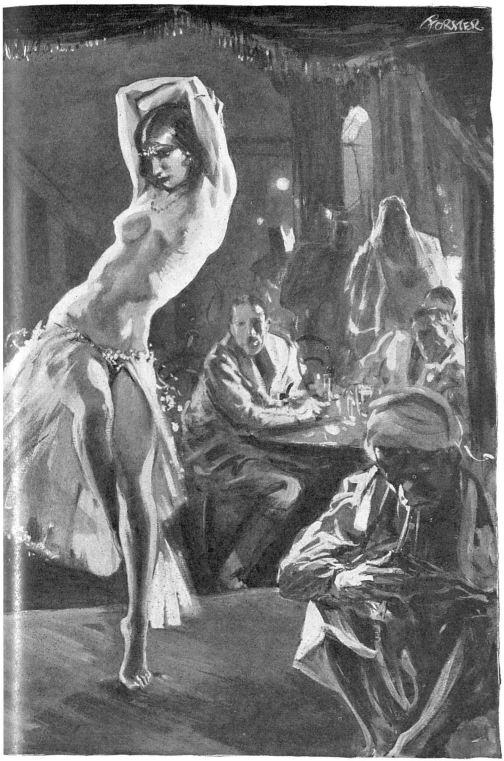
She was thin-lipped and aquiline, but beautiful as an opium dream. In contrast to the wobbly bulk of her predecessors, Sheba's slender flanks suggested the Persian simile of a gazelle.

I had never seen, and had ceased to expect to see, so complete a realisation of one's imaginary Eastern dancing girl.

Then she danced.

All alone, I watched her. I mean, I was unconscious of any other spectator's presence.

I was fascinated. And it was a sort of fascination which I had never experienced. It was not her art which held me. It was not the frank hedonism of her movements which stirred my blood. It



"We saw a perfect woman—a study in pale amber . . . jet black, snaky hair; smouldering eyes; slim and apparently boneless arms which seemed to speak a language of their own . . . Then she danced"

By Sax Rohmer

was a sort of passionate desire to *understand*. . .

There was some silent message in every gesture. I heard the call of that age-old language. She was beckoning to me—calling—calling—not to herself with offer of kisses, but to some dim promise beyond—a mist through which she would lead me into unimaginable brightness. . .

And I felt, as I watched, that her body was a living flame: that to touch the amber flesh would be to touch fire.

WHEN the strange dance was finished and she glided from the sordid little stage, Duval's voice brought me back. Some spiritual part of me had been following in the wake of the robed musicians.

"Yes! I told you she was a beauty."

I started—and followed the direction of his glance.

Beckford had half risen from his chair. His gaze was fastened hypnotically upon the stage, now occupied only by the native orchestra. He had allowed his pipe to go out.

There had been no applause.

I stared around. The entire audience, not excluding the Bedouins, gazed dreamily, as men half doped. . .

"She will dance again?"

Duval shook his head.

"Only once. That is the last we shall see of her to-night. Shall we go?"

Beckford uttered a deep sigh, and turned unseeing eyes in the speaker's direction.

"Doesn't she come down—to the tables?"

Duval, still smiling, shook his head again.

"No. Not unless she is invited—and not always then."

"But," I said, "of course she is——"

Duval shrugged, lighting a fresh cigarette from the stub of the old.

"Probably; but——." He left the sentence unfinished. "She vanishes for long periods. She has not been in Aleppo now for nearly a year. She perhaps goes to Egypt—Turkey—one doesn't know."

"Let us invite her to join us," said Beckford eagerly. "Do you mind?"

"Not at all!" Duval showed his white teeth in a gay laugh. "But I warn you to expect a rebuff."

He spoke to a waiter, who immediately hurried off—to return in a moment accompanied by a fat Syrian woman—the proprietress, I gathered.

There was some rapid conversation; I noted many curious glances directed towards us. Duval indicated Beckford; and with many shrugs and much eye-rolling, Madame retired again. Duval smiled at me.

"Everybody knows we have asked Sheba to come down," he said. "Everybody will be surprised if she comes."

Suddenly, the dark head of the dancer appeared, peeping around a corner of the stage. She examined us unsmilingly, with a hard, cold curiosity. She disappeared.

Madame returned, perspiring apology from every pore.

"Gee whiz!" Beckford murmured, "she's turned us down! Can you beat it!"

It was so. Sheba thanked us for the invitation.

RALPH BECKFORD, whose father was a big railroad man in the Middle West, wasn't used to losing anything he had set his heart on. He was about twenty-seven, and counted himself a tough man of the world. Yet Sheba's tactics seemed to surprise him. And, being a good-looking young athlete, his vanity was bruised

In Duval's quarters we learned all that was known about the girl—or all that Duval knew.

"Yes—she has been associated with men. I knew one of them—Lejay. That was last year."

"What did he tell you?"

"I haven't seen him since."

"What!"

Duval shrugged.

"He bolted. At least, we supposed so. I didn't know him well. He had only been sent to us a short time before. Everybody concluded he had gone away with Sheba. He was young and rather a madman, you understand?"

Duval paused, staring oddly at Beckford, then:

"Since I have been adjutant," he went on, "I have had information about this woman. Oh, there is nothing against her. I think she has been questioned."

"About Lejay?"

Duval nodded.

"And others," he added.

"What do you mean?" Beckford asked: "*Others?*"

"Really"—Duval smiled—"I cannot quite explain. My information is scanty. But she seems to be a witch who steals hearts. . . ."

"But," I broke in, "do I understand that this Lejay abandoned his career?"

"Certainly. He was, of course, deprived of his commission!"

"But his family must know the facts."

"No doubt. But, exiled here in Syria, we learn little. And I never knew Lejay's family, nor indeed from what part of France he came!"

ON the following morning I left Aleppo and was away for two days. I was acting for the British Assyrian Society, and I had heard of some very early fragments accidentally unearthed at a village some sixty miles south. The fragments proved to be Roman, and not Phœnician as I had hoped. Therefore, having spent one night in the village, I returned to Aleppo.

The route is not too safe after dusk. But I had little to lose, and I pushed on, anxious for a bath and a reasonable dinner. It was well after sunset before I sighted the tower of the ancient citadel, and my way led me tortuously along by the wall and through a part of the old town with which I was unfamiliar.

Beckford was staying at the same hotel, and I hoped he would dine with me. Just as the idea came to my mind the car turned into a steep and narrow street where tumble-down latticed windows almost met above.

Here, the long-suffering engine ceased at last to function. . . .

And in the silence I heard music.

That music was unmistakable. It was made by the strange, ancient pipes whose strains had accompanied Sheba.

I looked up. I saw a lighted window. A shadow moved across behind the carven screen—a lithe, serpentine shadow. The music ceased. A small lattice was opened—and someone looked out.

It was Beckford!

Recognition was mutual—instantaneous. I was about to hail him—when he drew back.

The lattice was closed.

Silence.

I waited. Then I banged on the black, iron-studded door. Silence. I stepped out on to the uneven, mounting, cobbled street. I looked up at the window. The light was gone. . . .

I never saw Beckford again . . . until. . . .

SOMEWHERE about a year later, having spent six months of that spell in England, I found myself in Cairo with a considerable amount of time on my hands. A chance meeting on the steps of Shepheard's was to have momentous results.

Old Dr. Pfaafer suddenly obscured my view of Sharia Kamel. He was a vast man with a voice like a tin whistle. He sat down in a cane chair facing me. The chair creaked ominously, but survived the shock. A pink gin opened the doctor's heart.

He had obtained a concession to excavate at Baalbek—though why a genial ex-enemy should have thus succeeded where a British society had failed was not too clear.

The long and the short of it was that I settled to run up to Baalbek at the end of the week to have a look at what had been done. Dr. Pfaafer seemed to be pleased with his early results, although I gathered the work to be merely exploratory.

"There is," he told me, "a curious sentiment in the neighbourhood. Even though the very meaning of those old stones is unknown to them, there are fanatics who object to our labours. Obstruct them."

"Obstruct?"

"But yes! I have to *enforce* my rights. It is most curious."

The nature of this obstruction to which he referred was not clear; but when he rose to go he left me with a hazy idea that some of his party had been rocking the boat. The Arab is a sensitive creature.

WHEN I got to Baalbek I put up at the hotel which commands a view of the ruins. I only planned to stay long enough to write a short newspaper article which might stir up sufficient interest in England to enable British archæology to get a look in.

Frankly, I couldn't see that Pfaafer had achieved much. He had cut a crescent-shaped tunnel under the Phœnician pavement uncovered by his German predecessors. At one point he had hit a solid granite wall. And down in the smelly cutting, a lantern at our feet, he slapped this piece of masonry with a fat, affectionate hand. He beamed.

"It will be long and tedious work," he piped. "But beyond this wall, my friends"—a young Englishman who happened to be staying at the neighbouring hotel had obtained Pfaafer's consent to join the party—"beyond this wall, my friends, is the missing link."

"Meaning a monkey?" our companion suggested.

"Ha, ha!" Pfaafer patted his shoulder good-humouredly. "The English are always leg-pullers. No, my friend, not a monkey. The key to open the nursery door—the nursery in which lies the cradle of our human race."

His optimism struck one as excessive, but I said nothing.

Pfaafer, the Englishman—his name was Boyd—and myself lunched together, the doctor's chief of staff making a fourth. I tried to get back to the topic of those obstructions to which our host had referred in Cairo. He proved unexpectedly reticent on the point.

His assistant, however, a very capable American, had rather more to say.

"Whereas in Egypt, for instance, all feeling of reverence for the old gods is lost, here in Syria for some reason one comes across odd survivals. A sort of hereditary memory."

"But they're Mohammedans and Christians and what not," said Boyd.

"It doesn't make any difference. Some of them are of incalculably old stock, and it's in their blood. For instance, there's a most persistent tradition that on the date of the Feast of Baal, fires are seen in the Temple."

Boyd laughed, and:

"When is the Feast of Baal?" he asked.

"To-night!"

It was Pfaafer's piping voice which answered him.

"The Feast began to-night. It culminates at sunrise."

IN my room after dinner, I was making notes for the projected article. I turned up some old material for reference and came across a draft account of the Roman remains at Noman. It had a date jotted on the top of the first page; and I realised that the draft had been written just a year before. I recalled writing it—at my hotel at Aleppo on the night I had seen Beckford look out from the lattice of that mysterious house. . . .

I worked longer than I had anticipated. I realised that there was nothing for it but a nightcap, a final pipe, and bed. I smoked my pipe on the balcony, and watched the moon touch to magic life the mystic ruins of the Temple.

The Feast of Baal. . . .

How little we knew of their mysterious religion! Much had been learned about Ancient Egyptian ritual—so little about Assyrian. Before the shrine of Baal hung an impenetrable veil.

As I undressed and turned in my imagination was busy with the obscure origin of Baalbek and the greater obscurity of the early rites practised there. That Baal—most mysterious of divinities—had been worshipped here before Solomon's time seemed moderately certain. It was a form of Sun worship, of course, characterised by sacrifices, probably human.

Probably human. . . .

I suppose I fell asleep pondering on this probability. There is no definite evidence, however, one way or the other. And I don't suppose I shall ever know whether I woke up once or woke up twice. You shall judge for yourself.

A sensation of heat drew my attention to the window. I sat up in bed and stared.

The reflection of a fire danced redly upon the wall of the room! My first thought—that the hotel was blazing—brought me to the mat in a trice. I ran across. . . .

For what seemed like many minutes, I stood, clutching the sill and staring out.

The fire was in the Temple!

It rose and fell, waxed and waned, somewhere inside the vast building. It gleamed on the six mighty pillars, redly illuminating their lofty capitals.

And its heat reached me. It was like the heat of the sun at noon!

There was no sound. Seemingly no

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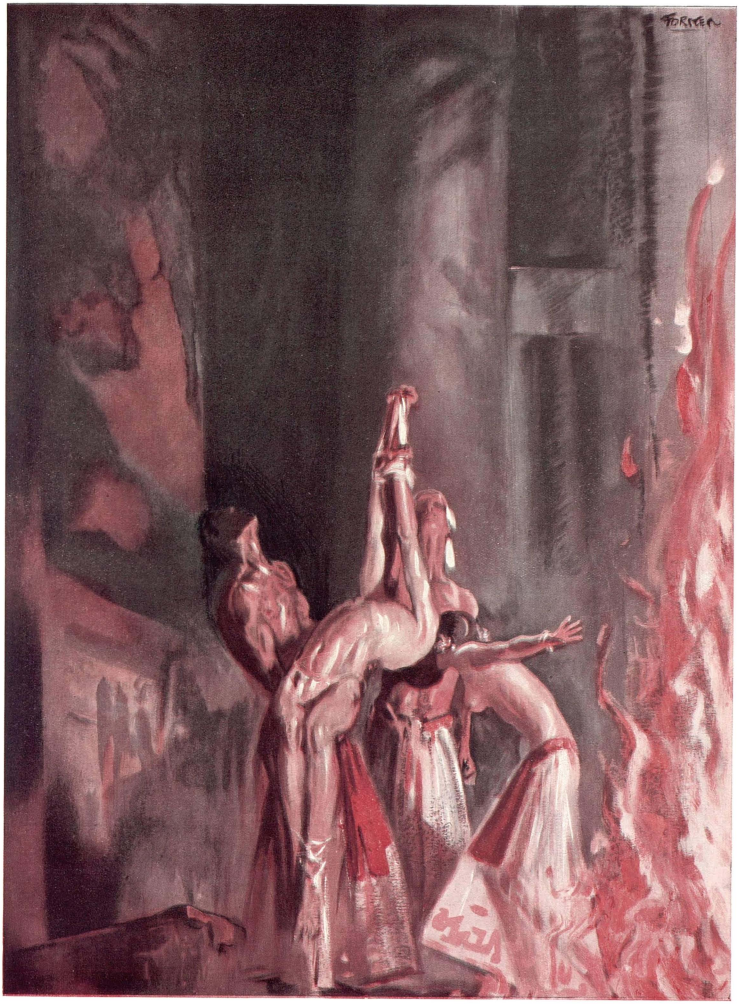

"She seemed to come from the fire—to be a creation of fire. Her gleaming body reminded me of amber . . . of amber . . . of Aleppo . . . of Sheba. She . . . kissed him. One of the men held out a long knife with a jewelled hilt . . ."

Fires *of* Baal: By SAX ROHMER

(*Continued from page* 38)

one else had been disturbed. This, I thought, might be due to the peculiar situation of my room.

I slipped on a dressing-gown, quietly opened the door and went downstairs. . . .

EXCEPT for a concerted howling, apparently of all the dogs in Baalbek, nothing stirred. There were no lights anywhere. There was no moon. Only that distant glare from the Temple broke the darkness of the night.

Having met no one on my way, I presently came to the gate. I had observed, and wondered, that the heat grew and grew as I advanced; so that now it was super-tropical. I found the gate locked, as I had expected. But there was a private entrance to Pfaafer's excavation a hundred yards away.

By this means I entered.

I was bathed in perspiration. No direct light touched me, but a vast radiance which seemed to reach to heaven, swept up from the darkness beyond. It resembled a pillar of fire. Drenched in its ruby wonder the great columns assumed an unearthly loveliness. I might have stood at the brink of all horizons, space demolished, on the steps of that secret bed to which Baal, called Ra by the Egyptians, sinks redly at night to rise golden in the morning.

Fear claimed me.

Perhaps it is strange that up to this point I had been actuated solely by curiosity. I had not paused to analyse the phenomenon. Now, I hesitated.

What was this pillar of fire?

Dogs were howling, near and far. Why was no one but I awake? No one but I . . .

TO turn back now would be to doubt for ever. I must press on. The route I knew. But it led me under a mighty wall, through dense shadows into which no light penetrated. I must scramble along a narrow ledge; I must avoid several danger spots.

I began to advance. My bedroom slippers were poorly adapted to the job, but presently I reached the corner beyond which lay that commanding angle I had in mind, a mass of fallen masonry. I turned the corner.

And the *heat* struck me.

It was as though I faced a furnace and suddenly the doors had been opened—but such a furnace as man has never contrived. Rather it was as though I stood on the verge of the Pit and a wind from its ultimate depths blew upon me. Such heat I had never known. It seemed to scorch my soul.

I shrank back, slipped, clutched at a projection . . . too late. I fell—but I fell no great distance. I was uninjured; bruised but grateful. I could not have suffered another ten seconds of that heat.

Now I lay in protecting shadow. I lay just within a ruined doorway, and in a black darkness—hot, but endurably hot. I could see through . . .

Before a blaze of light which destroyed its surroundings—an infinite curtain of fire—I watched a drama so dreadful that to this very day it sometimes recurs in my dreams, and I wake, clammy, panic-stricken. . . .

(*Continued on page* 203)

Two men, resembling bronze statues, except that my fevered mind rejected the simile because bronze must have melted in such heat, stood on either side of a prone figure. It was that of a man whose white skin gleamed like silver in the radiance of the fire.

He was manacled. I formed an impression that he had very fair hair cut close to his skull. It was a "square" skull—and I knew that the eyes of the prone man would be blue.

A fourth figure appeared—a woman. She seemed to come from the fire—to be a creation of fire. Her gleaming body reminded me of amber . . . of amber . . . of Aleppo . . . of *Sheba!*

But this was not Sheba. Yet, I thought, she surely must be of her family—her tribe—her race. For I had never met any woman, East or West, who resembled Sheba. After that final, inexplicable glimpse of Beckford at the high lattice, I had sometimes wondered if the girl who called herself Sheba might be a survival of some older civilisation.

The bronze figures stooped. As they moved I knew them. They were the musicians who had played the Pandean pipes in Aleppo!

They lifted the captive. I saw his face. His blue eyes, agonised, turned to the woman.

She linked her hands behind his head and kissed him. One of the men held out a long knife with a jewelled hilt. The woman took it, stepped back, and . . .

I found myself running, falling, staggering to my feet—running again, groping in darkness—clutching at stones. Once, weak, trembling, I clung to a great block and looked up. I saw, towering over me, the six pillars, and I thought that my trembling must bring down upon me that mighty cornice which crowns them. . . .

Of my leaving the temple I retain no memory—nor of the way back. I recall opening the hotel door, but I cannot remember closing it. I may have thrown myself, exhausted, on the bed. It is possible. From that sleep of exhaustion I was awakened by a loud cry—a chorus of many voices.

I tumbled out and ran to the window . . .

A spear of light touched the top of the furthermost pillar of the temple.

Cocks were crowing.

It was sunrise.

WHEN I met Pfaafer later in the morning, I said nothing about what had happened, or what I imagined had happened, during the night. I realised that I couldn't offer a scrap of evidence. On the face of it I had been dreaming badly.

I had planned to take a final look around the excavation and then to return. I had small faith in Pfaafer's dreams.

An odd fact came home to me. I couldn't imagine why I had so far overlooked a thing so obvious; but Pfaafer's tunnel ran under the spot from which those supernormal fires had sprung! Was he so wrong, after all? *What* lay beyond the wall which barred further progress?

Suddenly I spoke—or, rather, I thought aloud.

"I should abandon the job," I said.

"What is this?" Pfaafer piped incredulously.

I laughed, wondering how I should escape from so seemingly strange a statement; but:

"With the equipment at your disposal," I quibbled, "I don't see how you can hope to break through. Dynamite wouldn't be allowed, of course."

He stared through his deep-rimmed spectacles.

"This is not the true spirit, my friend," he declared. "Faith works wonders where explosives would fail."

Presently, at a spot which I well remembered, by virtue of certain bruises, I stopped, gazing intently before me.

"Below here" — Pfaafer's voice startled me—"was the altar of sacrifice. This, at least, I shall prove. In Roman times it was changed. But here it was when the Phœnicians worshipped in Baalbek——"

I walked on through the ruined doorway —or what had been a doorway. Then I stood still again.

On the stones at my feet were rusty-looking stains.

"What is this?"

I glanced at Pfaafer.

"Chemico-biological action, I think," he replied. "There have been recent heavy rains."

"Have you noticed it before?"

He shook his head.

"Some kind of minute fungus," he declared.

"But remarkably like a bloodstain!"

Pfaafer laughed, and clapped a huge hand on my shoulder.

"You are too imaginative," he assured me. "The student should *create* nothing: his task is to observe and record."

"I *have* observed," I replied, smiling. "And if I were recording, I should record that I had seen what looked like a blood-stain on the spot formerly occupied by the altar of sacrifice."

Pfaafer laughed more loudly.

"I should be happy to prove to you that you are wrong," he said. "But Steiner, our chemist, has taken French leave . . ."

Those simple words struck a sudden chill to my heart.

". . . I believe he is making a fool of himself with a young Syrian witch he picked up somewhere. Oh, a beautiful creature of her type, but a wild animal. He disappeared yesterday morning. When he returns I shall make a flea in his ear . . ."

"I rather think I have met Steiner," I heard my voice saying. "Hasn't he very fair hair, worn close-cropped?"

"Yes, yes, it is the same. His blue eyes will always get him into trouble. He is too good-looking for a student. No doubt you will remember one another. I expect him by the midday train."

But I did *not* expect him by the midday train. I knew that no one would ever see Steiner again—that my eyes had been the last to look upon him alive.

ON my return to Cairo I found myself let in for a dragoman's job. Some old friends were visiting for the first time, and they seemed to think that it was up to me to conduct them behind the veil of what they were pleased to call "Secret Egypt."

I felt that to do so would be indiscreet: and the native side-shows specially prepared for tourists are pretty uninspiring.

Moreover, I was out of touch with Cairo, which I found greatly changed from the Cairo I had known. I consulted Macalister of the Air Force, but he confessed himself defeated. At last:

"What about Suleyman's?" he suggested. "It's a pretty good show of its kind, and the audience is amusing if the performance is dull."

We settled on Suleyman's, which I hazily remembered—a tawdry dancing place in that quarter which the Anzacs burned down during the world war.

"It's changed hands," Macalister told me. "A woman runs it now. She calls herself Balkis. She has been a good looker, but she's not much of a dancer."

Balkis? What memory did the name arouse? I couldn't identify it.

"A courtesan, of course?"

"No. Probably used to be. But she's settled down. Her husband's blind. They're reported to be a most devoted couple."

THAT night we found ourselves on the raised platform at the end of a stuffy, badly-lighted room, reserved for distinguished visitors. My party was delighted. The discords of the native orchestra and harsh voices of the women seemed redolent of Eastern mystery. When a stout dancer got up and wriggled her person like a dying worm, the women registered shocked disapproval, but mentally prepared lurid reports of "Cairo night-life" for friends at home.

They sipped watered whisky as though they suspected it of being disguised hashish and discussed in thrilled whispers the probable history of this Egyptian and that Greek among the audience at the tables below.

"The star turn doesn't come on before midnight," said Macalister.

I experienced that odd sensation, which one knows, of having heard those very words spoken before and in almost identical circumstances.

"Balkis?"

Macalister nodded.

"Shall we stay?"

It was unanimously decided that we stayed.

At a few minutes after midnight, the group of dancers left the stage and the members of the orchestra moved farther up into their corner. A withered old man in a black robe came on . . . carrying an instrument resembling a Pandean pipe!

I sat suddenly bolt upright—staring, staring.

The music began. I knew it . . .

Sheba appeared!

"Good God!" I whispered.

"What?" Macalister asked.

But I didn't answer him. I was watching the woman. In twelve months she had aged ten years. Her costume was more copious than that she had worn in Aleppo—and it was as well. Then she had been slender. Now, she was thin to the point of emaciation. Her fine eyes still burned with something of their former witch-light—but they burned in a haggard face. Gone was the amber lustre of her skin, and she no longer gave me an impression of being veiled in primeval fire.

She danced mechanically—without inspiration. Once, those haunted eyes were turned in my direction . . . and I knew that Sheba had seen and had remembered me. Long after she had left the stage I sat there staring, staring.

Then I formed one of my sudden decisions. Turning to Macalister:

"Mac," I said, "will you take over for ten minutes? I know that woman—

and there's something I must find out before I leave here."

It was arranged, and I went out at the back of the little gallery and grabbed an Egyptian waiter.

When I told him what I wanted, he shook his head.

"See no one," he assured me; "no one! No one!"

But bakshish solved the difficulty, and, palpably very frightened, he led me along a bare passage, raised a curtain and pushed me into a little room lighted by a broken brass lamp and having some mats and a divan for furniture. He pointed to a closed door approached by two steps, and backed out hurriedly.

I crossed, went up and rapped on the door.

"Come in," said a woman's voice.

I OPENED the door and entered a larger room—one of the queerest I had ever seen. Partly it was oriental. There were one or two very good rugs and some fine brass. Partly it was European. I saw a comfortable lounge chair beside a table on which lay pipes and a tin of tobacco. There was a grandfather's clock in a corner and a black cat lay asleep on an old sofa.

At this table, in an ordinary office chair, a kimono worn over her dancing costume, sat Sheba!

She watched me coolly, and:

"When I saw you I knew you would come," she said. "Won't you sit down?"

Her voice was oddly husky, but not unmusical. She spoke almost perfect English. I sat down mechanically.

"Have you come to ask me about—Ralph?"

"Yes. Where is he?"

She rested her elbows on the desk and her chin in her hands. Always she watched me.

"If I tell you, you must go away—and never tell another soul. Will you promise this?"

"Why should I?"

"Because I shall tell you nothing otherwise. . . ."

"YOU shall not reproach me. . . . I was sworn to what I did. My mother before me—and her mother . . . back, back—beyond the Romans. To this we are consecrated at birth. But now—I finish . . . Because I loved him, I saved him!"

She stood up, facing me proudly. Her eyes blazed with all their old fire. She was transfigured. It was miraculous. Sheba became beautiful again.

Dropping the kimono, she pressed one long finger upon her breast just above her heart. I saw a small stain—a scar—a brand.

"The mark of Baal! Now, you *know!* Any year—any year—at the Feast, they may send for me! But *he* does not know this. He is happy. . . ."

Swiftly, Sheba's expression changed. A slight sound of movement had come from the room beyond. She grasped my arm and dragged me towards a curtained opening. Her features seemed to have grown haggard again.

"You promised! You will not speak—never, never, to anyone!"

I was outside on a bare landing. The curtain fell. But, slightly raising it, I looked back.

A man had entered. In the open doorway he paused. I caught my breath. He wore a rather shabby lounge suit and he held a pipe in his hand. His

face I hesitate to describe. It was all but featureless—so seared by burns as to have lost human semblance! His eyes were gone, but his voice, when he spoke, although the language he used was strange to me, removed my last doubt.

He spoke tenderly, asking a question, I thought. Sheba ran to him and held him in her arms.

Beckford!

Almost I cried it aloud—but recalled my promise in time. As though she suspected that I watched, Sheba turned her head. Her lingering appeal I shall never forget.

She led him to the armchair . . . and I tiptoed away.