

MAGAZINE OF
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AND STRANGE STORIES

Volume 1

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Robert A. W. Lowndes, Editor

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The Charmer

by Archie Binns

Even at the time when this story opens, the tale of the young man who is lured away from his bride by a strange and seductive woman was over-familiar. One would think that nothing new could be done with the theme. But Mr. Binns proves that one can be wrong, fascinatingly wrong, in such assumptions. It all depends upon the strange woman, you see . . .

MY FIRST STAY in Asia was some time before the 1914-1918 war, and it was extended over seven years, with an occasional furlough. As a subaltern in a British regiment, I saw a good deal of India, and something of Malaysia and Afghanistan. The land was full of mysteries, and things which science would find difficult to explain, but at the time we were chiefly concerned with keeping fit and being very British in the face of the mysterious East. On the day of my departure I was priding myself

on being as sane and solid an Englishman as if I had never been outside the most respectable districts of London.

The last day of those seven years, I spent in Colombo, Ceylon. Shortly before that, I had become engaged to the sister of one of my fellow officers. That morning, as I waited for nine o'clock, when I was to meet Florence and her mother, the future seemed to be as clear and untroubled as crystal. We were to be married with the ceremonies at the Church of

England, and a few hours later would take the P. and O. steamer home to London. My future father-in-law, Mr. Ross-Worthington, had offered me a place in his Fleet Street publishing house, and we would live quietly in Chelsea while I made a name for myself.

Such were the thoughts that revolved pleasantly through my mind as I strolled about Victoria Place in the delicious cool of the early morning. Around me drifted soft voices of the East and the undulating cadence of naked feet. In the street, rickshaws flitted by, with little brown beggar boys running beside them, bowing and throwing perfumed white blossoms to the travelers. Before me lay the Gulf of Manar, with slender coconut palms rising from the very edge of the sand, great steamships anchored to buoys in the offing, and Arab dhows, with knife-like lateen sails, gliding swiftly before a breeze that scarcely fanned my cheek.

Suddenly I came to myself with a start. A rickshaw had stopped beside me, and someone had spoken — called me by name, I thought, though I was not certain. Looking up, I saw a graceful young woman dressed in Indian silk and veiled. For some reason I trembled.

"At your service," I found myself saying, while I removed

my *topee* with an unsteady hand.

The girl leaned toward me ever so slightly. "I am sorry to have disturbed you," she said, "but I am a stranger here and I wish to take passage on the *Sirdar*. Perhaps you could tell me where the ship is to be found." Her voice was like the echo of bells, clear and indefinable, haunting and lovely. It had a delicate accent that suggested every graceful language I had ever heard, yet fitted none of them.

Until that moment I had never heard of a ship called the *Sirdar*, but I felt that if it took all day to find out, it would not be too much trouble.

"If you will wait one moment, I will find out," I said.

"Truly, I shall wait," she answered in enchanting tones. "You are very kind."

On my way to the near-by customs dock I met a native boatman, barefooted, in faded blue dungarees. "Do you know a ship called the *Sirdar*?" I asked him.

"I know the ship well, Master," he answered, gesturing toward the sea. "She sails at ten-thirty. My boat has taken many gentlemen on board this day. Do not take any of the other boats," he added, following me. "They would cut your throat and throw you overboard."

On reaching the rickshaw again, I announced that the *Sir-*

dar was lying off the nearby shore.

The stranger leaned toward me gracefully, like a flower swaying on its stem. "You Britons are so helpful," she remarked in a cool, sweet voice. "When you do not know something, you find out. If you had been a Latin, you would have been too indolent to inquire, and too courteous to leave me without instructions, and I might have been sent in the wrong direction. A Hindu would have told me there was no such ship, and an Arab would have known everything about it, even to the fact that it had just been sunk by some distressing accident!" She laughed softly. "By asking directions one learns much from some people and much about others. Now, thanks to your being a Briton, I have only to find a boat to take me to the ship."

In spite of myself, I was immensely flattered. "As for that," I said, indicating the man who had followed me, "here is a boatman who claims to have taken many passengers out to the *Sirdar*. I shall be delighted to see you as far as his craft."

The girl bowed in gracious assent, spoke to the man in purest Singhalese, and indicated for the boatman to follow. Once, on our brief way to the water's edge, it occurred to me to wonder what Florence would think of my taking part in this little Eastern procession on our

wedding day. But in another moment the thought was gone.

"By the by," I remarked, "this boatman comes highly recommended — by himself. He has indicated that any other boatman would rob you and throw you into the Arabian Sea."

"I looked into his face before I bade him follow," she answered. "What he says about himself is true — about the others, he exaggerates for business reasons."

"Then you are not afraid?" I asked, somehow wishing that she were — a little.

"Afraid?" she repeated, as if unfamiliar with the word. "No, I have no reason to be afraid."

Something about the way it was said gave me a queer feeling. Did she bear a charmed life? A beautiful and apparently wealthy girl who traveled about Asia alone, would need something of the kind. By this time we had reached the dock, where the boatman's craft was lying — a sturdy four-oared boat with the native rowers sitting erect on the thwarts; a trimmer outfit than I had hoped to see. I went through the form of helping my companion out of her rickshaw, but the weight she put on my arm was no more than that of a feather. Her luggage, two dark chests inscribed with curious characters, was put in the cutter, and I prepared to take my leave.

The girl held out her hand.

After a moment's hesitation, she lifted her veil — and my eyes were dazzled by her blonde beauty. I had seen beautiful faces before, with pure, clear-cut features and rose-petal skin, but this one had a fresh, dewy loveliness that made me think of the dawn of creation. Then I became conscious of her large, steady eyes — with dark, unfathomable depths that seemed to hold every secret of the world — and a slight, baffling smile that called up a thousand questions while the eyes held me speechless.

AFTER THAT I WAS no more responsible than a sleep-walker. I found myself insisting that it would be unsafe for her to go out to the *Sirdar* unaccompanied, and she accepted my escort. She dropped the veil over her face again.

The rowers were bending to their work when I heard my name called, unmistakably this time. Turning my head, I saw Dick Worthington, Florence's cousin and my best-man-to-be standing on the dock we had just left, looking after me inquiringly. I called out something about being back soon, and he sauntered away, whistling an air I did not catch. The spell descended upon me again, when the girl began to speak, and Florence and her cousin and mother and my appointment — all the affairs of

the world — seemed unimportant and far away. So intent was I on listening to the music of her speech that afterward I remembered only a fragment of her words.

"I have visited Ceylon before," she told me, "but that was long ago. I came overland from India, and here I took a dhow across the Arabian Sea and up the Red Sea. The dhow was worked across the desert isthmus by the Egyptians, through a water-filled trench, and we crossed the Mediterranean to the Island of Cyprus."

When I again raised my eyes from her veiled face, the *Sirdar* was looming close ahead — an ancient sidewheel steamer of no more than 2,500 tons, built of wood and barque-rigged, with a heavy top-hamper. Just forward of the paddleboxes the thick smoke-stack rose straight up like a factory chimney, held in place by half a hundred guy-wires. There was something unmistakably familiar about the cut of the steamer; I had seen just such things in pictures — the crack transatlantic liners of half a century before. I supposed that all of them had gone to the ship-breaker's yard long ago; yet here was one, with her glory forgotten and her true name obliterated, laboring on through fabulous Eastern seas — the ghost of a bygone century on the opposite side of the Earth.

The boat slid alongside; there was a hurried shipping of oars and brown hands seized the platform of the passenger ladder. I assisted my companion to the platform, and remained standing in the boat uncertain. The curious chests were handed to Arab boys who swarmed down the ladder. The young lady tossed a coin to the boatman, who carried it to his forehead and lips as a sign of thanks, and as he did so I got the impression that it was an ancient gold piece, such as I had never seen before. While I was fighting with my desire to stay and the knowledge that I must go, the girl turned to me. This time she held out her hand without hesitation and raised her veil; and again my eyes were dazzled and I became powerless under her enchanting gaze.

"You have been thoughtful and generous," she said, while I thrilled at the touch of her hand. "I wish you all good fortune."

There was a moment of hesitation, and then my last thread of resistance snapped!

"If you don't mind," I ventured, "I should like to stop on board for an hour and talk to you." She bowed assent and spoke to the boatman in a dialect I did not understand.

"Boatman," I said, handing him a five-rupee note, "come

back for me in an hour — or just before the *Sirdar* sails."

"Yes, Master," he answered, "and do not take any other boat. They will cut your throat and throw you into the sea."

As we climbed to the deck, I was aware of several young men in white suits and *topees* clustering at the rail, and also of a sudden hush of expectation such as occurs when a queen passes in some procession. Strange, I thought, that well-to-do Europeans should travel on this outlandish and unseaworthy hulk!

Taking no notice of the others, the girl said to me: "If you will not be offended, I will see that my stateroom is in order. Before sailing, I hope we shall have an opportunity to talk again."

I stammered that it would be a pleasure, and she was gone. Next moment I was greeted by two fine, fresh-faced young Englishmen — brothers, I supposed, from their appearance.

"Who is she?" both demanded at once.

I must have looked blank and somewhat annoyed. "If you are speaking of the lady I escorted on board," I answered stiffly, "I know nothing about her except that she is a stranger in Colombo who asked to be directed to this ship. As she was unaccompanied; I thought it only proper to see her safely on board."

There was a change of ex-

pression, not only on the faces of the English lads, but on those of a prosperous Dutch planter and an American ship's officer, who had drawn nearer.

"Sorry to have been so inquisitive," one of the brothers said genially, "but we supposed you were some friend or relative. I am Jack Rhodes, and this is my brother, Frank. Both of us are overseers on the tea plantations."

"And I am George Hawkin," I explained, "late of the British Army in India."

All of us bowed.

"There is a curious likeness in our experiences," the elder brother continued presently. "Frank and I had leave to spend a week-end in Colombo. This morning, quite early, when we were strolling about, a rickshaw stopped beside us, and the loveliest voice in the world asked where she might find the *Sirdar* . . ."

"And she called us by name," Frank put in.

"You only imagined that," the other insisted.

I felt myself tremble — I had imagined the same thing!

"At any rate," Jack continued, "we dashed about like lunatics and found the information. The lady was very gracious, and when she was thanking us she raised her veil . . ." He turned on me with a haunted look in his eyes. "Have you seen her face?"

"Yes," I answered quietly, "I have seen."

"When she was gone, we stood there like dummies," he went on. "I had a mad inclination to take passage on the *Sirdar*, just to see that face again. Frank had the same madness — and here we are, about to sail for God knows where, with our jobs gone to pot, very likely."

"What will you gain by it?" I asked.

The younger brother looked at me seriously out of his clear, gray eyes. "We're taking equal chances," he told me. "There won't be any hard feelings, whichever loses."

"Where is she from, anyway?" the American seaman interrupted suddenly.

"Good God!" I cried. "Are you in this, too?"

He nodded. "I'm second officer of the *Mariposa* over there." He indicated a freighter moored half a mile to the north. "Or, rather, I was. This morning I went ashore for some papers. While I was walking around, waiting for them to be signed, a rickshaw stopped beside me, and — you know the rest. If the *Mariposa* sails without me, I can't help it. I must have been hypnotized — still am."

"What about your job?" Frank asked.

"What about yours?" came the response. "It doesn't seem to matter. Only I thought you might know something about

her nationality — this is my first trip to the East."

"She might be a Persian or Arab girl, educated in England," the Dutch planter suggested, launching abruptly into the conversation. "She spoke to me in Dutch, with a slight English accent, I thought."

The rest of us shook our heads as the mystery deepened.

"I have heard Italian voices like hers," someone offered — "not half so lovely, of course."

"Excuse my intruding," said a swarthy and handsome newcomer, "but that is not a good guess. When the young lady asked me to direct her, she spoke Italian that was as beautiful as music, but it had an unfamiliar accent — perhaps that of — some other Mediterranean country, I cannot say."

When it became evident that no one of us knew more than another, the group about the boarding-ladder gradually broke up and drifted away. For my part, I was glad the boatman would arrive soon to take me ashore. The whole affair was as baffling as it was embarrassing. Clearly, the mysterious girl possessed some uncanny power — to speak to men of every nationality in their own language, and make them follow her with a glance! What was her purpose?

BITS OF OUR conversation in the cutter drifted back

through my mind. She told me that on her last visit to Ceylon she had come overland from India. But Ceylon is an island! I recalled that a hydrographic surveyor once said to me that the island had formerly been joined to the mainland. But how long ago? A thousand years? Ten thousand? And she had spoken of the dhow being worked across the Isthmus of Suez, by the Egyptians, through a trench filled with water. Was that her description of the Suez Canal, or did she refer to the primitive waterway that had existed in the time of the Pharaohs? Had she been making game of me?

Around me the Arab seamen were making preparations for sailing; the last hatch was closed, ropes were being coiled down and lashings tightened. A new doubt crossed my mind. What had the stranger said to the boatman in that unknown dialect? Had she told him not to come back, so I would be carried off to an unknown destination — on my wedding day?

I was furious with myself, with the girl, and the others. Colombo seemed dim and far away among its palms, and the sea between darkened with gusts of wind. All at once, the city went out behind a squall of rain, and I was obliged to take shelter in the murky saloon, where the Rhodes brothers were

urging each other, in low tones, to go back.

Presently I realized that the sun was shining again; and as I went out onto the rain-freshened deck I smiled at my fears. The big P. and O. steamer, on which we were going home, had come in, resplendent with white awnings and polished brass, and was being moored to the buoys near us. Then I saw a familiar four-oared boat riding at the platform.

"I wait for you, Master!" the boatman called.

The last of my suspicions passed in a sigh of relief. Before another hour was up, I would be telling Florence about my adventure, and admitting how stupid I was to imagine that a strange young lady had been in a plot to kidnap me. As I started toward the head of the ladder with an apology in my heart, someone touched me lightly on the arm. The girl was standing beside me, and I turned to look into that face of unearthly beauty.

"You thought I had told your boatman not to come back?" she asked, with a shadow of reproach in her melodious voice and glorious eyes. "I only told him not to be late."

Her eyes held me like a spell, and I wondered had I taken opium.

"Forgive me," I said at last. "This is the day of my wedding,

and I must have been a bit upset."

She smiled — a slight, inscrutable smile. "I know. I wish you joy. The ship is about to sail — your boat is waiting, and so is your beloved." Her voice was as baffling as her eyes, and whether it was filled with tenderness or mockery, I could not say. But somehow, a veil seemed to have been drawn between the two of us and the world outside.

"Master, the ship is cast off from the buoys, and is ready to sail!" I heard the boatman's cry faintly, as if it were coming from a great distance.

"Are you not going?" the girl asked me gently.

"Why should I go?" I could hear my own voice, and it sounded strange to me. "I have no desire to leave. I only wish to be where you are."

"What of your affianced?" she continued.

I shrugged.

"What of your home in England?" The enigmatic smile came back to her lips again.

My shoulders answered for me.

"Master, the ship sails!" The voice of the boatman rose like a thin wail, to be drowned out by the thunder of great paddle-wheels. My hands shook as I weighted a five-rupee note with a silver coin, leaned over the massive bulwarks and dropped

the little packet into the man's upstretched palm.

"Gol" I shouted. "I am sailing!"

When I turned to the girl, she laughed softly, and a gleam of triumph stole from the depths of her eyes.

As Colombo faded from sight, a weight seemed to fall from my shoulders, and I began to take interest in the adventure into which I had plunged. Learning that the ship was bound for Dilam, at the head of the Persian gulf, with stops at way ports, I paid my passage to the farthest point and was assigned a stateroom. The Arab purser showed no surprise at my having taken passage without knowing the ship's destination, and the inconvenience of having come away without a kit was minimized by the assistance of my fellow passengers.

THE REST OF the day I saw little of the mysterious girl, though I heard no other topic discussed. Jack Rhodes repeated a conversation he had had with her, from which I learned nothing more than that her name — or perhaps her title — was Miriam of Irak. That evening, as I was standing alone on the after deck, the Italian passenger, Signor Venzini, stopped at the rail beside me. The old *Stardar* was ploughing with slow thunder through the warm, moonlit

sea, and from the deck below came the voice of an Arab boy, singing of the desert.

"I have been talking with Miriam of Irak," Venzini informed me during a pause in the song.

"You are most fortunate," I replied.

"Most fortunate," he agreed, lighting a cigar. "We talked for a whole hour. My heart is still overflowing with ecstasy." After a moment, he continued. "We talked of Leonardo da Vinci. Ah, what the greatest scholars of art would not give to have heard that conversation!" His eyes and the coal of the cigar glowed in the moonlight. "She spoke of the great Leonardo as if she had known him personally. She told me many things which no book records, yet I have reason to believe that they are true."

"Have you found any clue as to who she is?"

"That is a mystery. Yet, I have feelings — things that I guess at, but cannot explain . . . Do you know the works of da Vinci?"

"Some of them," I said.

"La Gionconda — the Mona Lisa?"

"I know it well," I told him. "That picture has always haunted me."

"Do you not see a likeness between Miriam and the Mona Lisa?"

Half-closing my eyes, I called

up memories of the painting until it floated before me. "They are much alike," I said. "The eyes and the smile are very much alike. But Miriam is blonde and slenderer."

Venzini ignored my last remark. "They are the same," he said quietly. "Think of her more-than-mortal knowledge of Leonardo, and the face and smile that have puzzled the ages. What if it was Miriam whom da Vinci painted?"

"Impossible! The woman who sat for that picture has been dead four hundred years."

The man looked at me. "Do you know who sat for it?"

"No — of course not."

"Then how do you know she is dead?"

That night I slept fitfully, and went on deck at the break of dawn. Miriam was standing alone near the bow of the ship, her face unveiled. I went up to her very quickly.

"You are up early this morning," I remarked.

"It is my custom. I never tire of watching the sun rise."

"I hope you slept well," I ventured, thinking of my own sleeplessness.

"I did not sleep at all," she answered calmly.

It seemed unbelievable; her face had the freshness of a child who has just awakened from beautiful dreams. "I am sorry," I said.

A smile came into her eyes,

or perhaps it was the light of sunrise. "Do not be sorry. Sometimes I stay awake for a long time, and sometimes I sleep for a long time."

"What do you consider long?"

"Oh . . . ages," she answered, looking at me solemnly. "What do you consider a long time?"

"Fifty years would be a long time to me," I told her.

Her smooth brow drew itself into a playful frown. "Are you hinting that I look fifty years old?"

"Good heavens — no!"

"How old do you think I am?" she asked with a ravishing smile.

"Not more than twenty," I guessed.

"You should have made it less," she replied serenely. "Women age rapidly in the tropics."

I was silent.

"Truly," she added after a minute, "it was not a bad guess. I am both older and younger than that." Before I had time to ask for an explanation, she spoke again. "The sun has risen and I am going back to the reading that kept me from sleep last night."

"It must be very absorbing," I suggested. "Is it a novel?"

"No, it happens to be a description of the fall of Kish, written in Babylonian," she said.

With that, she left me, more bewildered than ever, and angry with myself for not having asked any of the important questions that had been in my mind.

IN THE DAYS that followed, the old *Sirdar* trundled slowly toward the Persian Gulf, while the merciless heat increased. Under the awnings it was like an oven, and every unsheltered bit of deck was a furnace in the blazing sunlight. The night was little better; but the ship retained the heat of the day; long after sundown the iron work was too hot to touch, and the decks were unpleasantly warm at dawn. Tempers grew shorter; those of us who had started as friendly rivals wrangled repeatedly and ended by ignoring each other. Only Miriam of Irak seemed untroubled; she remained cool and serene and lovely, alike undisturbed by the grueling heat and the taut nerves about her. Could anything trouble her, I wondered?

The fifth evening the Rhodes brothers quarreled violently at dinner. As nearly as I could judge, Miriam had agreed to meet them both at the same hour — or else there had been a misunderstanding. Five days of rivalry and pitiless heat had wrought an unbelievable change in the two. I had seen them first as fresh-faced English lads, care-free and brotherly. Now their faces were white and drawn, and they glared at each other like mortal enemies. I got up from my unfinished dinner and left them, still bickering.

Perhaps two hours later, I was walking restlessly upon the

deck. There was a crescent moon, and light also came from the glow of phosphorus on the water. Miriam and the older brother were standing near the rail. I passed them without speaking and made my way a few feet down the deck, when something made me glance back. In the uncanny light I saw a stooping man, moving stealthily toward them.

The intentions of the intruder were unmistakable, and I bounded across the intervening space and caught him by the arms. With a thwarted cry he drew himself erect, and a knife rattled to the deck. To my horror, I realized that I was holding Frank Rhodes, though the look on his face made him almost unrecognizable.

"Are you mad?" I demanded, after drawing him out of hearing of the others. "Do you want to kill your own brother?"

The savage look died in his eyes, and suddenly he seemed very young and lost, like a punished schoolboy. "Miriam —" he murmured brokenly, "she made me forget everything — my own brother!"

He trembled as I led him to his stateroom, where I left him, crumpled up and sobbing on his berth. Returning to the deck, I put my hand firmly on Jack's arm. "Better go and look after your brother," I told him. "He's in bad shape — a touch of sun, I think."

After a moment of hesitation he turned and left us.

"Miriam," I said when he was gone, "do you know what just happened?"

She looked at me serenely. "What happened?"

"Frank Rhodes tried to kill his brother," I told her harshly, "and you know the cause."

Her face remained unclouded and serene, unchanged except for a slight, enigmatic smile.

"Doesn't that mean anything to you?" I demanded.

Slowly she shook her head. "Nothing," she answered softly.

"Have you no heart, no pity?" I burst out. "You planned all this. You know you possess some unholy power! You knew that everyone you asked for directions you did not need, would follow you. You knew you were ruining careers, breaking up homes, and turning brother against brother. You knew I was being lured away a few hours before I was to be married. Haven't you any pity for your victims, who never did you harm?"

Miriam of Irak bowed her head, until her lovely face rested against my arm that lay on the massive bulwarks, and her breath felt cooler than the outside air.

"Miriam," I whispered, all the anger going from me, "don't tell me I have thrown the world away for nothing? You made me your slave. Can't you show

me a little love — or even pity?"

For several minutes her face remained buried in my arm, and once I thought she was crying. But when she drew herself up and looked at me, she was as composed and untroubled as before.

"Do you ever wish for things?" she asked unexpectedly.

"Many things," I told her. "But since the first day I saw you, I have had only one wish — that you might love me."

"I, too, have only one wish," she answered softly.

"And what is that?" I demanded.

"That I could have some feeling — that I might care — that I might love someone, or be sorry."

"Do you find it so hard?" I asked incredulously.

"I find it impossible," she said simply. "Good night."

When she was gone, I stood for a long time, thinking. It was clear Miriam had told the truth: she had no heart, no feeling; she could care, or be sorry. She was something more than a mortal woman — and something less. But why?

THE NEXT DAY we encountered a hot, suffocating breeze from the desert. By afternoon the sea got up, so that all port-holes had to be closed. The saloon was like an oven, and we did not even attempt to go in for dinner. All this time I saw

nothing of Miriam. The sun set among fiery clouds, and we lolled under the awnings, gasping for air.

My eyes were shut to keep out the awful splendor of that sunset, when I heard a stir and murmur around me. Opening my eyes, I saw Miriam of Irak walking alone on deck, wrapped in a red cloak. Her face was lovelier and more enchanting than ever, but it had a look which I had not seen before, and cannot describe, except to say that it seemed to have a profound meaning, as if she were about to reveal all the secrets of life and destiny and death. In passing, she smiled at each of us, a smile so secret and remote that no one attempted to speak in answer, or to follow her. Even when she was within a few feet of me, I had the feeling that I was witnessing something unreal, in a dream.

Twice more she passed, making a complete circuit of the deck each time, and we did not see her again.

"What does it mean?" Jack Rhodes demanded, as if he had watched the working of a spell.

"Have you never seen a woman walk round the deck of a ship before?" I said, trying to hide the uncanny feeling which the performance had given me.

"Never like that," he admitted. "And I think I never shall again."

"But why did she wear a red

cloak?" Frank asked unsteadily, with a touch of last night's madness still in his eyes. "It seems to have a kind of meaning — that color in this awful heat."

Sleep was all but impossible that night, though I felt I must sleep or go mad. The heat appeared to increase as the night advanced. I remember hearing most of the bells struck up to midnight. I dozed and heard the bell again in my sleep, ringing incessantly. Suddenly I was awake, the loud, brazen clamor filling my ears, and mingled with it was the sound of frantic knocking on doors.

While I was struggling into a few clothes, the thunder of the paddle-wheels ceased. When I stepped on deck, flames were spouting from the forward hatch. The *Sirdar*, laden with an inflammable cargo of oil, was blazing like a torch. Either through carelessness or mishap, the burning foredeck was still turned into the wind, so that the smoke was suffocating everywhere and a constant storm of sparks beat over the whole ship. Boats were being manned and filled, and it was high time.

Was Miriam in one of those boats? I did not see her there, nor in the bewildered crowd on deck. Having noted the location of her stateroom, I plunged forward, buffeted by the heat, only to find a locked door. With frantic energy I burst the lock with my shoulder and all but

fell into the room. Miriam was not there; to all appearances the room had not been occupied during the voyage. I was cursing myself for having broken into the wrong stateroom, when I stumbled over one of the ancient chests I had seen brought on board. By its sound, it was empty. I was about to examine the other, out of mad curiosity, when a swirl of sparks hissed into the room, and I ran aft, blistered and choking. Smoke pillowed on all sides of me.

In the rising, flickering light the Arab captain was standing beside a boat that was about to be lowered, wringing his hands and lamenting that his European passengers were burning themselves to death when there was every opportunity to escape.

"Has Miriam been saved?" I demanded.

"In the first boat," he informed me hastily.

Something in his tone made me doubt his word; but as I stood there, hesitating, I was seized by several Arab seamen and hauled unceremoniously into the boat, which was lowered directly. Later I wondered how many such unwilling rescues had been made.

All night we watched the fiery spectacle of the *Sirdar*, keeping at a good distance to avoid the burning oil that spread upon the water. She sank a little before dawn,

crumpling and going down in an awful hiss of steam.

In the first light of day the surviving boats drew close together, with friends calling anxiously to one another. I did not see either the Italian or the Rhodes brothers. The name of Miriam of Irak was called from every boat, and there was no answer — somehow I had expected it.

We were picked up by the *Clan McKenzie* the same morning and taken back to Colombo. Again I loitered about Victoria Place, where Miriam's rickshaw had stopped beside me on that fatal morning ten days before. Was it really only ten days? It seemed more like ten crowded years since the time when I stood there, so proud and sure of myself — scornful of the snares of the East — the future clear and untroubled.

At the hotel I found a brief note from Florence, saying that Dick Worthington had seen me eloping with a strange woman; she trusted I had chosen wisely and wished me joy, only hinting at the humiliation I had brought upon her.

I SPENT THE next thirty years in hell, gathering a little wisdom, but neither fortune nor position. I had seen England only twice in that time, and then as supercargo of a disreputable freight steamer. The rest of the years I passed on the

coast and continent of Asia — waiting, looking half-expectantly — for what?

I had ample time to consider my ruinous adventure and the beautiful girl of Irak. At first I was obliged to believe that Miriam had been lost with the burning *Sirdar*; every boat had been accounted for, and she was in none of them. Indeed, it developed that no one had seen her since she walked on deck the last evening. And yet, as the years went by, I had an increasing conviction that she escaped. Often in dreams I saw her face with its immortal loveliness and baffling smile, and each time it seemed less possible that such a one could have met destruction. Rather she was a fixed star; and I, a spark flying into the troubled night. I felt certain that she had known of the fire first — even before it happened. What else could explain her appearing before us the last time wearing a red cloak — the symbol of fire that was so soon to overtake her victims?

Was she invoking the demon of fire when she walked three times around the deck, cloaked in the color of flame, smiling to each one in farewell, speaking to none? How could I help but believe that she possessed some supernatural power, stronger than any force of destruction? But the reason for what she had done remained as

obscure and remote as her inscrutable smile.

Then, not long before the second great war, something happened to make the events I have described live again as if they had occurred only yesterday. I was passing along Raffles Place in Singapore, near the Museum. Ahead of me a rickshaw stopped beside a handsome English officer who was loitering at the edge of the sidewalk. A graceful young woman, dressed in Mosul silk and veiled, leaned from the rickshaw and spoke. The officer removed his *topee* as if he were in the presence of a queen. I felt hot and cold by turns, and my heart beat quickly.

Drawing nearer the two, I overheard the young officer say: "I never heard of that ship, my lady, but I can find out in a moment."

"You are very kind and helpful," she answered.

There was no mistaking the caressing tones that had enticed me to ruin and the shadow of death thirty years before. I stopped in my tracks, unable and unwilling to move. The officer unfolded a copy of the *Straits Times* and rustled through it, stopping with his fingers on a small item.

"You will find the *Star of India* near the foot of Robinson's Road," he said pleasantly. "She sails for Hong Kong at

noon. It is a little after ten now."

"I am grateful for such kindness from a stranger," the girl answered, reaching up a slender, graceful hand.

She raised her veil with a quick little gesture, and my eyes were dazzled. Thirty years had made no change in that face; it had the same dewy loveliness that called up the dawn of creation. Perhaps because I had aged, she appeared even younger than before — almost like a child, except for the profound, shadowy depths of her Babylonian eyes and a smile that seemed to hold all the secrets of existence.

The officer gasped in astonishment.

A great cry burst from me like a sob: "Miriam!"

She gave no hint that she had seen or heard me. Slowly the veil fell over that smiling, ageless face. She spoke to her coolie in flawless Cantonese and the rickshaw rolled away. I followed it with my eyes, then with my feet, heedless of everything else, bumping blindly into the English officer, who paid no attention to me. He appeared to be calculating rapidly, and by the look in his face, I knew the snare into which he had fallen.

"You must never see her again," I told him.

"Really," he answered, shaking me off, "I can't be bothered

with you. I expect to see a good deal of her. It happens that I, too, am sailing on the *Star of India*."

"But you said that you had never heard of the ship before!" I protested. "I never heard of it before, either, but I can tell you one thing about her. I know that the *Star of India* is a doomed ship, and that you will meet ruin or death."

"I haven't time to listen to you, old man," he answered hastily, climbing into a rickshaw that had drawn up at the curb. "Take me to the foot of Robinson's Road," I heard him say to the coolie as he was whisked away.

Then I, also, was drawn inexorably to the *Star of India*. I even tried to go aboard, but I had neither the money for passage, nor the prosperous bearing that would get me across the gangplank without being stopped.

When the battered, rusty steamer sailed, I was still on the dock. Miriam was standing at the ship's rail, talking with a young Frenchman. Perhaps a dozen others, all young, all well-dressed, were crowding around. It was a gay and lively scene — to one who did not know . . .

Sometimes Miriam looked in my direction, but never with a gleam of recognition. As the steamer moved from the dock, I kept my eyes fixed on that

haunting, glorious face. If she had given me one sign — so much as the flicker of an eyelid, — I think I would have walked blindly off the dock into the sea.

The *Star of India* never reached any port. Bits of wreckage were picked up in the South China Sea, where the ship was supposed to have foundered in a typhoon with everyone on board. But I know better. There was one survivor . . . at least one . . .

Who is Miriam? I have told my story to some of the most learned men of the East and I

have heard many opinions and the opinions all differ. But I have my own opinion.

There is a legend of a woman who did not eat the fruit of the forbidden tree and therefore remains deathless and ageless forever, beautiful from the dawn of creation, infinite of all knowledge except that of good and evil, without love, without pity. But she has never forgotten that her husband discarded her, and she takes revenge on his descendants through the ages.

The name the wise men have given her is Lillith, Adam's first wife.

