

# Black Fire



by Katharine Metcalf Roof

A "DIFFERENT" STORY

A BLUE Egyptian night of stars, the distant wail of native music like the wind of the desert made audible, the vast black pile of the pyramids against the sky; I was alone as the soul in the gulf of eternity is alone, when, breaking the spell of that immeasurable solitude of the ages, I heard a voice.

"The effendi does not fear to be alone before the pyramid of the moon?"

I turned to see Mushad the fakir, who works miracles in the market-place and divines the future in the sand of the desert. Saluting him I answered rather than questioned, "What is there to fear, oh wise man of the East?"

Mushad stared at me for a silent moment with his eyes of the sphinx. "There are men who fear the dark rays of the moon," he said.

In Egypt, legend and mythology can seem more true than history, and I did not laugh. "Are the dark rays of the moon then evil?" I asked.

The Oriental shrugged. "So the old men say." He stood a moment, a figure of symbolic mystery against the night, and raised a majestic arm. "And so believed the great magicians who

raised these—"

I stared at the inscrutable triangular mass against the infinity of sky and desert. "Why are they there, Mushad?" I asked, curious to hear his version. "What did men use them for? The wise men of the West tell us that they are the tombs of the Pharaohs, but the wiser men of the East believe that they were here centuries before the kings of Egypt took them for their tombs."

"Have I not called it," said Mushad, "the pyramid of the moon?"

"Why of the moon?" I asked.

It was a moment before he answered—if you could call his strange communication an answer—

"In the day of the pyramids—so the old men say—they did not worship the true and only Allah, but the sun, the moon, and the stars. And there was in those days a great forgotten wisdom of numbers. And in those days men built by that wisdom of numbers great stones like these, to draw down to earth the magic of the sun and of the moon and of the stars."

I did not laugh at Mushad. "The powers of the sun we all know," I said. "but those of the

moon are not explained so easily. What are the powers of the moon, Mushad? It is supposed to draw the tides and to make mad men madder—what else?”

“There is but one God and Allah is his prophet,” answered the Mussulman.

“I know.” I reassured him, “that it is not your belief nor mine, but—what do the old men say?”

The Arab looked at me with eyes that glittered strangely in the green-blue dusk. Then after a time he answered.

“This, then, is what they say: That while it is the magic of the sun to give life, the moon has power to cause death. And that that which is good in the moon comes with the white light of the new moon, but with the dark rays the magician may work much evil—” He stopped there abruptly and in an instant his face, which had lightened, became impassive again. “Of such is the old men’s tale,” he concluded, and noiseless as a shadow he saluted and passed on.

Left alone I drew out my cigarette case and began to smoke. How long I sat there lost in vague dreams I do not know. But when at length I awoke to some consciousness of time I saw two figures approaching.

It was a man and a woman, I saw as they came nearer, both of them wrapped in the long cloaks of the Orient. They came silently, exchanging no words until they stood before the pyramid. The woman’s hood fell back from her face then, and I saw that she was beautiful in the way that we are accustomed to think of as Egyptian—a primitive unspiritual beauty, subtle yet uncivilized. It was the face of the woman born to conquer men and, if it so chanced, to destroy them.

As they stood before the black mass of the pyramid, talking in low tones, a strange thing happened. The man raised his hand and laid it upon the solid masonry, and as he did so a piece of the stone began to move slowly until it left a square opening like a door. I caught a glimpse

of a narrow passage ending in a long flight of steps leading upward. I rose and stood amazed. That was not the way I had entered the pyramid only yesterday. They passed in, and obeying a sudden impulse I followed them. At the top of the long stairs they paused, and again the man pressed some secret spot in the stone, and again the massive stone swung open and they passed in through the doorway. The next moment a warm glow of light flared up within.

I stole after them until I reached the entrance of the upper chamber; then standing close to the wall I looked in and watched. The first thing that I noticed was the curious quality of the inner atmosphere, for, unlike the hot, imprisoned air in the interior of the pyramids I had visited, it was of an intensely clinging cold, a *burning* cold, yet not like an actual coldness of temperature that chills the blood, rather was it the creeping, exterior, etherous cold of a chemical against the skin.

Neither was the appearance of the room like anything I had seen. It was triangular in shape and in the apex a window opened upon the sky. I seemed to know that the man had uncovered this by the same mysterious means he had used to open the door. Under the blue-green circle of the sky was some sort of apparatus that suggested the modern machinery of refraction and concentration of rays, and in each of the angles of the chamber a clear orange-colored flame burned upon a tripod. In that light I could see them both distinctly. The man was tall and thin with a fine-drawn face of a higher type than that of the woman’s, a type modeled upon the ascetic; but the lower part of the face suggested passions too strong for an easy acceptance of the austere life. His expression as he looked at the woman was set and stern, and showed the ravaged lines of an ill-maintained control. The woman, sure of her power, and, it seemed, almost indifferent of it, was finishing her sentence as I approached.

“And is it to hear ravings such as these that I

have come to this grim place, oh dark priest of the mysteries? Am I then tricked with the false lure of a granted wish? Does the dark priest lack the power he boasts of, after all?"

"Of the powers which I possess thou shalt soon have proof," he said.

But it seemed she was in the mood to torture him, and her next words were cruel and mocking. "Why then, since the priest of the hidden mysteries has all power over the minds of men, can he not create in me the love that he desires? Why must he endure these tortures when it lies within his own power to draw me like a magnet to his arms?"

At her words a violent shuddering seized upon the man, and he clasped his hands over his eyes as if to shut out the sight of her. "Because, oh daughter of sin, there is no warmth in that love kindled of magic. I could indeed make thee my slave, obedient to my will, but my power would be as breath blown upon the blade of a sword that wounds. I would hold thee in these arms and it would be but the image of my own desire given back to me in the mirror. Only the flame born within the soul and body of Sirya, such fire as rages in my blood, can bring me the peace I desire."

The woman laughed and went nearer to him. As she moved I caught the faint fragrance of her clinging draperies, the subtlest of Oriental perfumes. The man stared at her miserably. "Thou dost not love me at all, Sirya. Thine eyes and lips have lied."

She looked up at him with a smile. "I do not love thee, Asuras," she replied in a voice cold as the tinkle of falling water. "Now am I denied my wish?"

"Yes, thy wish—thou shall have thy wish," he muttered. "The gift of eternal beauty. To remain always beautiful as I see thee now before me, never to change, never to grow old."

The woman nodded, the subtlety of her smile making more perilous her sensual beauty. "Never to change, never to grow old." She

repeated it like a cadence. There was a pause during which I had the curious sensation that he was giving her a last chance to escape from something—I knew not what; but she did not speak or make any sign, and after a moment he silently motioned her to a low pedestal that stood directly under the blue-green circle of the sky.

"Now work thy charm quickly and have done," she said with her soft insolence.

The man paled and the lines about his mouth deepened. "Is thy haste so great to have thy wish and be rid of me?"

She smoothed a fold of her thin drapery. "It grows late," she said

The man went nearer to her then. "Sirya," he whispered. "thou hast maddened me. I worship thy fair body as an idol. Before I give thee that eternal beauty—just once; one kiss, one moment in my arms—"

At first I thought the desperate passion of his appeal had moved her, for it seemed that, ever so faintly, she inclined toward him as if the whirlwind of his desire had caught and drawn her. But the next instant I saw that she still held back with her taunting smile.

"Thy reward comes afterward," she said—"after eternity!" And she laughed a little cruel laugh.

Then I saw that a terrible struggle possessed the man! Once I thought that he would seize her in his arms and have his will of her. The next the glittering frenzy in his eyes spoke of murder. I shuddered and glanced away. When I looked again I saw a calm more terrible than his despair upon his features. "So be it," he said in a choked voice, then he turned from her and crossed the room.

I saw him put his hand upon a bit of metal on the wall connected with the machinery overhead, and immediately a clear cold light, intensely blue, poured down upon the woman from the opening above and clung like an evil halo about her head. And in the three corners of

the room the orange flames upon the tripod paled to green, and fancied that I heard a faint cold sound such as the wind makes in ice-locked branches. Then I looked again at the light that poured down from above, and saw that it grew more and more intensely blue—such a blue as the eye has not seen.

And as I watched that deepening flame, a deadly, creeping, primeval fear crept into my heart. Not the fear of civilized man, the mind-born fear, but such terror as the brute creation feels at the approach of the earthquake or the volcano, the fear of life in the prisoner of cosmic disaster.

For standing there, moveless, breathless almost, I saw that which cannot be told. I saw the wicked blue light change to *black*. Yes, I saw with these eyes the dread radiance of the flame that is black.

I looked at the woman, and though she could not see what I had seen, I saw a change come into her face, fear or some emotion. Her eyes sought the man's and a little slowly, as though they were heavy, she half lifted her arms, her body bent slightly outward as in surrender.

"Come to me, Asura," she whispered, "take me now. I love thee, dost hear? I love thee. I wished only to torment thee into greater longing—I would have all the love hast to give. Asuras—thy lips thy arms—" Then her voice changed to a husky, choked note. "Asuras, what hast thou done to me? I cannot move—I cannot go to thee—Asuras, my love—"

As if no longer able to withstand her voice the man drew slowly nearer, his eyes on hers. I thought that he had forgotten his black moon-magic in uncontrollable response to her yielding, but he paused before her without touching her, and his harsh voice was not the voice of love.

"Thy desire was for the beauty that could never age. So have I granted thy wish and frozen thee to a statue with the black fire of the moon," he said.

Then suddenly as a wild wind shifts, he sprang forward like a famished beast and seized her in his arms. And still from above the dread radiance poured down, its dark flames shot with quivering blue. Then in the silence a cry rang out, the cry of a lost soul flung into the bottomless chasms of hell. The man drew back from his beloved, and I looked at the woman under the invisible moon. Frozen, crystallized to a bloodless statue with its evil condensing rays, Sirya, creature of love, stood as he had doomed her to stand in changeless youth and beauty.

Self-frustrated, maddened by the non-attainability he had created, the man writhed cursing at her feet. If the woman of flesh had mocked him, how much more was he tortured by the beckoning body of stone. With a wild cry he flung himself again upon the frozen semblance of the woman he had so ruinously loved, his lips upon her lips of adamant, and suddenly it came to me with a spasm of terror that he stood also under that death-dealing, destructive force of the moon.

I exclaimed aloud and took a step toward him. Was his action forgetful or purposely suicidal? I never knew, for at that moment, impelled by Heaven knows what occult power, slowly, irrevocably the stone door began to move. In another moment it had shut the lovers from my sight.

I turned in a panic and looked down the long flight of steps expecting to see the lower door closed also, but it was not. Like one in a nightmare I fled down and out into the desert.

"And still the effendi has no fear of the evil rays of the moon?" I became aware of the voice of Mushad standing over me.

I looked up at the Arab; I looked at the pyramid. The door by which I had entered was closed, and its smooth surface gave no indication of any place for an opening.

"Mushad." I cried, "can you—can any man open the door of the upper chamber of the pyramid?"

Instead of answering, Mushad inquired quietly: "What is it the effendi has seen in the dark of the moon?"

I told him the truth. "I have seen the inside of the pyramid." Our eyes met strangely in the blue jeweled dusk of the Egyptian night, then again, fear-smitten, I questioned him.

"When men opened this pyramid what did they find?"

"There is a story," said Mushad after a long silence, "an old, old story—that high up within the pyramid there is a room with three corners, and in the center of that room, the moon-made statue of a woman—"

"A woman—"

"A light woman, a courtesan, who seduced the high priest of the moon, the priest whose magic raised these stones."

There was a pause during which chills

indescribable, prehistoric, the chills of forgotten remembrance, of long-dead origins, crept along my spine and into my inner soul which is the source of all knowledge—and I knew that I could never tell the thing that I had seen.

"Or so the old men say," chanted Mushad.

As I turned to go I fancied I caught again a whiff of the mysterious perfume of Sirya, the courtesan who lived in the days before the day of the Egypt of the Pharaohs.

Had it been given to me to see a picture of that immeasurably remote past? Or had the fakir of the desert with his hypnotic art conjured up the weird vision? It was possible, and yet—far down in that submerged region of forgotten things I seemed to know that the thing I had seen had been.