THE LURE OF OPHIR

By FRANCISCÁ OLIVEIRA

Until a few weeks ago, probably not more than one person in a hundred could have told you precisely where Lourenço Marques was. Today every newspaper reader is familiar with the name, and thousands of people—members of the diplomatic and consular corps and their families—talk more about Lourenço Marques than about any other city. For it is here that the exchange of diplomats between Japan, Great Britain, and the United States is to take place. Four large steamers—three Japanese and one Italian—are to transport the British and American evacuees from Asia to Lourenço Marques and to exchange them for Japanese who will be brought there from America and England by Swedish and Argentinian boats.

Lourenço Marques is the capital of the Portuguese colony of Mozambique, once famed for its gold and for a loyal time supposed to have been the Ophir whence King Solomon’s Phoenician sailors brought him his gold. With Diego Suarez on Madagascar occupied by the British, Lourenço Marques (with the other ports of Mozambique) is the only large neutral port left in the Indian Ocean and is suddenly—one of the geographical freaks of our time—catapulted into the position of a Shanghai of the Indian Ocean.

What is Lourenço Marques like? Instead of a report by its Chamber of Commerce, we are presenting in the following pages a story about this city and its hinterland. It is written by someone who has lived in Mozambique, driving her car up and down the country, and it is illustrated by some leading Portuguese artists. Read it, and Lourenço Marques will no longer seem unfamiliar to you.—K.M.

H I P S

clicking dully on
green felt, the voice of
the croupier, and then
the metallic whir of the
ball. For hours these
had been the only really
noticeable sounds
filling the large room
besides the hum of
the electric fans which
brought some coolness
into the oppressive heat. Only when
the barefooted boys carried in drinks
did the sounds of a dance band float
through the glass doors into the con-
centrated quiet of the gaming room.

To Bill, sitting at the lower end of
the long green table, this quiet seemed
almost unnatural. It stood in so great a
contrast to the loud, colorful town outside.
And the people, whom a little while ago he
had observed in the
garden of the casino
talking to each other
loudly and with lively
gesticulations, were
now sitting at the
table in an almost
hostile silence.

“Zero,” came the voice of the
croupier, and a long rake pushed a
pile of chips in front of Bill. The
heat seemed to have grown even more
oppressive, and Bill hastily downed a
whisky soda. He wanted really to
get up and walk back to the hotel along the waterfront, but the fascinating dance of the little ball enthralled him just as much as the other gamblers. He made a new bet.

Once more the voice of the croupier: "Noir." The tension relaxed. Bill had won again. His hands felt for his cigarette case. Empty. But before he could call for the boy he saw the open case of his neighbor in front of him, heard a pleasant voice, and looked into the quiet face of a fair-haired man. He accepted a cigarette with thanks. Where had he seen that face before? It couldn't have been on board the ship. Nor had it been last night at his Portuguese business friend's, when they had celebrated the new contract with some bottles of good Portuguese wine. Yet everyone considered as European in Lourenço Marques met in that large stone house with the cool fountain in its courtyard. Perhaps in the afternoon, at the beach? No.

Now he remembered: it had been in the evening, on the Promenade, in the little café near the negro band which had flooded the square with blaring music. Like Bill he had been sitting at one of the little tables and watching the life passing by. The beautiful dark women in luxurious cars, the slightly exaggerated elegance of the men, and the negroes in European clothes and straw hats, swinging their canes. Among them half-breeds, the women unmistakable by the swaying movement of their hips. And then the many children, walking or in perambulators, pressing around the bandstand, watched by their negro nursemaids. Loud colors in the most curious combinations set off against skins of palest olive to darkest brown. That was when he had seen his neighbor before. As fair as Bill himself, he had seemed like an island in the ocean of strange colors. Perhaps he had felt something of the kind himself when he offered Bill a cigarette just now.

"Rouge." Again the croupier pushed some chips toward Bill.

"Darned lucky you are!" said the voice of the man next to him. "How long have you been here in our lovely Lourenço Marques?"

"Three days, and this is the first time I've been to the casino," Bill replied. "Beginner's luck," he continued with a laugh as he placed another bet.

It had become cooler. A soft breeze came through the windows from the sea and blew into the cloud of smoke hanging over the heads of the players. With it came the sound of
voices, motorhorns, cars driving off, while the casino was gradually filling up with people. Opposite to Bill a stout, elderly man sat down and began to appraise the table through his monocle with a proprietary mien. Now and again he leaned toward his companion and whispered in her ear. She did not seem to pay much attention to what he said, laughing absent-mindedly while her dark eyes traveled over the rows of players. When she saw Bill the shadow of a smile flitted across her exotic features. Bill looked into a bronze-colored face with high cheek-bones over which rose dark masses of hair. He saw a mouth whose turned-up fullness was emphasized by lipstick, a neck against whose warm brown color pears stood out almost as if they were alive. Straight, slender shoulders shimmered above a cloud of turquoise blue tulle.

"Noir," came the voice of the croupier. The stout man looked satisfied. He screwed his monocle more firmly into his eye and pushed his winnings over to his companion, whose long, sensitive fingers began to place new bets. In spite of her apparent absorption in the game, however, her glance kept on returning to Bill. After a while, when her companion got up heavily, she remained seated and did not move when he clumsily laid his fat hand on her shoulder. To his, "Come on, Miranda, let's have dinner," she replied in a deep, husky voice: "No, Jack, I'd rather play."

Next to Bill a tall dark man now sat down, who spoke Portuguese. The colors of his tie on the bright pink shirt under his white coat were as loud as the voice with which he called the girls who until then had been standing unheeded behind the chairs of the players. They eagerly seized the chips which the man casually flicked towards them and did not leave his side again. The cut of their eyes, their flat noses, and pointed breasts showed their negro blood. One of them had bleached her frizzy hair a platinum blond. Every now and again the man ruffled it with his hand, so that the girl squeaked, till a warning glance from the croupier silenced her.

In contrast to the Portuguese beside him, Bill was lucky in his play, and when he got up from the table with his pockets full, one of the girls followed him. But he paid no attention to her and went out through the glass doors.

On the dance floor, couples were slowly revolving to the strains of a waltz. Then the band switched to a rhumba, and it was hard to tell who was more affected by the rhythm—the negro band leader or the crazily quivering dancers. Dinner was being served at the tables around the dance floor. There was every imaginable thing on the menu, from crayfish caught along the coast to the finest Russian caviar; from pâté de foie gras via turtle soup to spring chicken, beside every variety of Portuguese and French cooking and the choicest of wines.

All the tables were occupied. Bill wandered around among waiters rushing here and there and negro page boys carrying bets and results between diners and the gaming-room. Finally he caught sight of the man who had
offered him a cigarette earlier on indicating a chair at his table. Bill replied with a grateful nod, sat down, and ordered dinner. It was not long before the two men were in lively conversation.

Peter Berg could not tell Bill enough about his life in Mozambique. As he spoke, the crowded room turned into the vast spaces of the endless bush, jungle, and prairie. Bill seemed to see the Zambezi River flowing milky-white in the blinding sunshine, around little islands and between sandy banks, where crocodiles lay basking in the sun only to whisk back into the water when natives steered their canoes in their direction. He saw the naked bodies of the negroes, propelling the rafts, which served as ferries, with powerful strokes, and heard their monotonous singing. He stood in the dense undergrowth of the bush, which, in spite of the brilliant sunlight, lay in mysterious dimness; he followed the spoor of wild animals, and looked with amazement at trumpeting elephant herds breaking their path through the bush. He saw the Impala gazelles gracefully leaping across the prairie. At night he was wakened by the muffled tom-tom of native drums, to see the fires burning in front of the huts and the negroes dancing round them, swinging their spears and shields. And he sensed the loneliness of the white man in clear, moonlit nights, when no other sound came from the endless prairie and the impenetrable bush but the sinister roar of a lion.

"Twenty years ago I came from Europe into this land of monkeys," laughed Berg with a trace of bitterness. "Although Mozambique is eight times the size of its mother country Portugal, I have been almost everywhere, worked at all kinds of jobs, on sugar and coconut plantations, and met all kinds of people. After all, there aren't many Europeans here; most of the five million inhabitants are half-breeds and negroes. Europeans! The people that call themselves Europeans here! Just take a look at that crowd. Citizens of Lourenço Marques and Europeans! By the way, have you ever been on the old bridge? There is a fine view from there of the native town and the church, which is as old as the town itself. Have you seen the rafts loaded with wood, which pass under the bridge day after day? But why am I telling you all this? I'd much rather hear about your America, where there is no malaria, no sleeping sickness, no disgusting heat, as there is here."

But Bill did not feel like talking. He had no desire to think of the workaday world with its contracts and sober figures: he wanted to hear more about this country, about its people, its life, its doings, which all seemed so utterly different from his own.

"Look at that fat fellow sitting over there by the pillar," continued Berg, when Bill did not reply. "Goldmine magnate from Johannesburg, flies over here every weekend in his own plane, has a suite in the Polana Hotel, and gambles away enough money every evening to last us for our whole lives. The strange call of gold lured me too to this supposed land of Ophir, and I tried my luck with gold digging. But not for long. Next I had a eucalyptus plantation a few miles from here. Because of its hardness, the wood of these gum trees is used for supports in the mine shafts. Together with others I made a good pile at it, till the South African Union had enough plantations and wood of its own and didn't need
us any more. Well, somehow I always managed to fall on my feet again.” Berg laughed and drank to his companion.

“By the way, is it true,” Bill asked, “that the majority of the gold-mine workers in Johannesburg are negroes from Mozambique?”

“I’ll say it is,” grinned Berg, “that’s the main source of income of many of our respected citizens here! The natives are recruited through a central bureau. Three quarters of the wages paid by the South African gold mines goes to the local recruiting office, and the negroes are allowed to keep the rest. For that they work four months underground. Then they go back to their native kraals, while in the meantime the next lot has arrived in the Transvaal. It’s a sort of continuous process, an improved form of slave trade. Incidentally, talking of slave trade reminds me of Miranda—you know, the woman who sat opposite you at the roulette table.”

But Berg got no further with his story. The bright lights had given way to a rosy spotlight. The sound of muffled drums—and in the middle of the hall stood a negro dancer. Bracelets on her arms and ankles rattled as, her head tossed high, she began her stamping dance. A few small pieces of gay colored cloth flapped around her naked body as she began to jerk more and more rapidly, while the drum beats pounded faster and faster. Hot and panting she finally sank to the floor. The band began to play a tango. “Ah, here comes the new dancer! The management has engaged her specially from Paris. Isn’t she wonderful?”

Bill had to agree. The graceful way in which the dancer glided past the tables would have pleased even his most sophisticated New York friends.

A sudden wild shrieking made the band stop. In the middle of the dance floor the platinum-blonde mestiza from the gaming room had the dancer by the hair. The tall, dark fellow, whom Bill had noticed at the roulette table and who was now a little unsteady on his feet, was trying in vain to drag the yellow-haired fury away. A wave of insults broke over him. The spectators began to laugh at this drama of jealousy.

“It is always the same thing,” said Berg. “That blonde is not in the least jealous of the fifteen black Bantu women he is married to. But if a European woman comes and so much as glances at him, even if it is only during a dance, she immediately jumps at her throat.”

“Fifteen black Bantu women and married? Are you trying to pull my leg?”
"On the contrary, my dear chap, I am telling you the absolute truth. This isn't the only man who lives or has lived like that, although I must admit that, without an explanation, the number of his wives may seem a little high. You see, it is simply a matter of arithmetic for that fellow. Somewhere in the hinterland, right in the middle of the bush, on the bank of some river or other, he has a sawmill. For this sawmill he needs labor, and he also needs a wife. There are hardly any European women who would follow him into the bush, and it costs money to keep laborers. But, after all, there are negro women, and, according to the law of the kraal, they must work for the man who marries them—that is, the man who buys them from their fathers for so and so many cows. And, as there is no law to prevent him or the negress from marrying, he goes and chooses the strongest and best-looking girls for laborers. He doesn't have to pay them any wages, for he has married them. After a few years, Nature sees to it that the number of his workers is doubled, and after a while the children work with their mothers. The man has got rich, and when he can't stand the bush any longer he comes here and drinks and gambles away his worries in the arms of women who aren't much better than his negresses. Simply a matter of arithmetic!"

Bill looked after the man, who, gesticulating wildly, was leaving the room with his angry sweetheart. A strange country. People who made their own laws to give free rein to their impulses and instincts. Then he asked: "Tell me, Berg, what was the story about Miranda?"

"Oh, Miranda," Berg answered, "that's another bit of Lourenço Marques. Her grandfather was one of the most notorious slave traders in the country. You needn't look so surprised. After all, it wasn't so long ago that you still had slaves in your own country. Until about 1880 approximately 3,000 slaves a year were shipped from this little corner of the world, and that old Portuguese had the lion's share of the business. All the big old stone houses on the Rua Lisboa with their beautiful trees used to belong to him. He himself lived by the sea, in the house with the Moorish arches, with only servants around him. All black girls. That's where Miranda's mother was born. The old man worshiped her, and she became the richest heiress from the Romino to the Spirito Santo. When she married a Portuguese of good family, the old man gave a wedding which the town still talks of today. After his death the money evaporated. His son-in-law speculated with it on all the exchanges in the world, and what was left he gambled away in the casinos. So Miranda inherited nothing but her mother's beauty and her father's passion for gambling. Night after night she sits there and gambles, and when there is no more money she pawns her pearls, and then God have mercy on the victim her dark eyes have found worthy of putting them around her slender neck again. For some months the lovely creature has attached herself to the Croesus from Johannesburg."

"She's damned good-looking, and, good or bad, I've never met that kind of beauty before," Bill laughed.

"What, have you fallen for that witch?"
Berg teased. "But I told you already, you'll have no luck with her." And with his fingers he made the gesture of counting money.

Bill lit a cigarette with deliberation. "Oh well, let's forget about the girl," he said "I'd rather you told me what you're doing now in this strange country. When were you last in Europe?"

Berg's face lighted up, and he drew up his chair to the table. "I was at home two years ago. That's when I got married, to a girl from home. Now she is living with me on the cotton plantation, not far from the Zambezi. The house I built with the aid of my Zulu negroes overlooks the river, and behind the plantation stretches the bush. You can't imagine what it means to an old nomad like myself, to cultivate my own piece of land, even if I don't make as much money at it as I used to at hunting elephants, at the time when ivory still fetched good prices all over the world. The main thing is that, with the work of my own hands, I have made a little bit of home. At first it was hard for my wife to live with an old bushman like me. That I drank was not so bad," he murmured, "the worst part for her was seeing the children. Do you know Somerset Maugham's stories?"

Bill nodded.

"Well, then you'll understand. I simply couldn't pluck up enough courage to tell her about it beforehand. She swallowed hard, very hard, when she saw the kids. But all she said was: 'How can you let the boy run around in torn trousers like that?' And then she plaited the girl's hair. Now both the kids have been going to school for a year."

Berg's last few sentences went unheeded by Bill. In the doorway at the end of the room stood a dark woman, tall and slim in her turquoise blue dress. She stood there like some wild creature, tense and quiet, alert and appraising. With the long, sinuous movements of a panther she crossed the empty dance floor and went to the bar. The man with the monocle went up to her, tried to persuade her of something, and finally, with a shrug of his shoulders, returned to the gaming room alone. Her eyes did not follow him. They were seeking for something. Now they seemed to have found their objective. She looked steadily at Bill, and over the heads of the dancers her eyes began to speak their silent language.

Berg, noticing this, felt ill at ease. He knew the woman, how unscrupulous she was, and how every act of hers had a certain purpose. Had she bor-
rowed money on her jewels again? No, there they were, glittering and sparkling away on her arms and hands, and around her neck shone the pearls with which her grandfather had once made a nегress his favorite. There seemed only one other possibility: had Miranda fallen for the blond American? With misgiving, Berg watched the game between the two becoming serious.

"I say, old man, how long do you intend to stay in Lourenço Marques?"

Absent-mindedly Bill answered: "Only a week, I am sorry to say. That's when the Boschfontein goes back to Cape Town and from there via Dakar home to New York."

That witch has hypnotized him, thought Berg, seeing Bill's eyes looking across to Miranda again and again.

"You know what, why don't you spend your last week in this country at my place? I'll put you on my truck, and we'll drive out to my plantation. My wife will be only too glad to see a new face. By the way, do you like shooting?"

And when Bill nodded in assent, Berg continued, full of enthusiasm:

"Why, that's splendid! Then you can help me shoot that old lion that has been bothering my natives for some time. The witch doctor is to blame for it all. But what can a white man do against the power of the magician, who fools his people into thinking that he is so almighty that he can assume the nature and form of any animal? They believe him when he says that sometimes he can be as small as a mosquito, another time as big as an elephant, and a third time as strong as a lion. And so, when a lion appears on the plantation like the other day while the women were picking cotton, they don't run away when they see him, but let him come close and, on top of that, kneel down and clap their hands, because that is the proper way to greet the witch doctor in the form of a lion. Of course the lion falls on his prey, and I am the poorer by one laborer. This is the seventh time now that it has happened. Well, it won't go on much longer now, for you're going to help me shoot the lion. Just imagine, if you should come back to New York a successful lion-hunter! What eyes your girl-friends will make?" And he looked at Bill as he laughed.

The latter, however, did not seem at all enthusiastic about Berg's suggestion and declared that he would rather spend the remaining week loafing about on the beach and, of course, in the casino. And he added slyly: "How about a little game now?" But Berg said he was too tired and wanted to go back to the hotel, and, with a shake of the hands, they parted.

A WEEK later, when Berg was in town
again with his truck, he noticed the Boschfontein at the wharf, ready to leave for Cape Town. He suddenly remembered Bill and decided to see him off.

He made his way up the gangplank and through the crowds on deck to the purser's office. There he was told Bill's cabin number and at the same time that Bill had not come on board yet, so he strolled out on deck again.

Leaning on the rail, he looked down onto the wharf and searched for Bill's tall figure among the throng of people coming aboard. As he waited, his gaze wandered off over the town. In the blazing sun the dazzling white façades stood out among the bright red houses of the European quarter, while the native town spread like an ochre stain. Everything lay embedded in a luxuriant tropical vegetation, colorful and mysterious, like the people living there.

A gong sounded, and visitors began to leave the ship. Berg looked around anxiously in the crowd and went back to the purser's office and to Bill's cabin. There was no sign of Bill. It was time to go ashore. He was the last man to run down the gangplank.

The Boschfontein drew away from the wharf, and the blue strip of sea between her hull and the land grew wider and wider. People were still calling to each other back and forth, in Portuguese, English, Hindu, in every language to be heard in Mozambique.

Berg gave one last look at the crowd. Nothing. He shrugged his shoulders and turned back to his hotel. As he walked through the hot streets he felt depressed.