

Statue of Limitations

By: Walter Giersbach

Arthur Pennington telegraphed McAllister, his curator in London, that he would be delayed yet again. Perhaps in a few weeks he could catch a *dhow* down the Euphrates to Dubai and find a steamship home from Cairo. He just knew his third trip back to Mesopotamia would finally be rewarding. Meantime, it was his curse to be stuck in this world of damnable heat, sandstorms and lice.

McAllister, ensconced at the museum like a sausage in a bun, wouldn't be happy. Frankly, Pennington didn't give a damn. He was so close to making an incomparable discovery — exceeding any of those in the British Museum — that he would remain months, if necessary. He was wagering his career on stories he had heard about the lost city, knowing the new year of 1930 would mark success or ruin.

After breakfast, he ordered his translator and guide to bring around the Austin sedan. The little wog wasn't smart, but he was reliable. Salem, pronounced *Sah-lém* with a soft Middle-Eastern accent on the vowels. Solemn Salem, whose inscrutable eyes were pools of deceit that spoke of Baghdad's secrets to which the British would never be privy.

Pennington headed to a dusty town four hours south of Baghdad, site of a temple referred to in the Epic of Gilgamesh — a goldmine of antiquities if his theory proved out. Rumors had it that farmers were bringing up potsherds and utensils, religious figurines and stones from long-gone Mesopotamian and Babylonian cities pre-dating Athens and Sparta, Alexandria and Rome.

Hours later, Salem turned off the dirt road onto a trail that was hardly more than an animal track. Presently, a collection of mud and thatch huts appeared.

With Salem doing the talking, they found a wizened old man in the nameless village. While chattering continuously in an Arabic dialect Pennington didn't understand, the man led them to a mizzen heap of trash. Using bare hands and feet, the old man pushed aside the offal and brush to uncover the shoulder of a statue. He stood back expectantly.

White marble glowed in the light of the hot afternoon sun. Pennington could hardly contain himself. Eagerly, he kneeled and uncovered the figure of a woman, life size and still glowing with an inhuman spirit after more than twenty-five centuries. Clearly, it was Babylonian. It was Ishtar, the fertility goddess, holding a vase from which water flowed down her skirt. Pennington dusted off his khaki jacket, seeking an air of nonchalance. His nervous fingers found a cigarette and matches.

Shrugging dramatically, he turned to Salem. "Offer the farmer six dinars."

The old man held up ten fingers. Pennington grimaced. "Eight," he said, reinforcing his bid with eight fingers.

The man dithered, looking from Pennington to Salem, and then to the distant mountains.

"Tell this disgusting creature he is getting a very good deal," Pennington told Salem.

"Tell him I will be back in two days. Our car is not big enough to take it with us now. Anyway,

the arms are broken off. See. It is not a good statue. Tell him I really only want the head because it has an interesting nose. Eight dinars is more than generous.”

Salem and the man chattered for ten minutes while Pennington’s patience grew thin. “It’s too damned big to take now. I’ll come back for it in two days. Make him understand he has a broken statue of no damned interest to anybody. *Eight dinars!*”

The pair argued for another five minutes and then Salem said the farmer agreed. Pennington could hardly keep from jumping up and shouting *Huzzah* as he and Salem returned to the Austin.

The next day, Salem secured an old Mercedes lorry with a wooden bed. It was in sorry shape, but was the best they could rent in the city. Baghdad itself was becoming an antique, a remnant of the Great War that marked the destruction of the Ottoman Empire. Pennington checked to make sure Salem had filled the water bags and that there were two spare tires and enough petrol to carry them on the day-long trip.

He got onto the bench next to Salem and motioned him to start the truck. Leaning back on the dusty seat, he lit a long cigar — his last Macanudo — and dared to dream of what lay ahead. The cigar masked the odor from Salem’s body, though he could do nothing about the lice.

Four hours later, the town appeared on the horizon, a dusty mound threatened by the shifting sands. Pennington grew agitated. The statue would soon be in the truck and then crated for a long sea journey with him to London. Finding this noble sculpture of Babylon’s goddess would ensure his reputation the way Schumacher’s name had soared among archaeologists after he found the lost city of Troy. Lectures at the Explorers Club would follow, and a promotion, scientific papers, receptions in his honor.

The farmer stood silhouetted against the sun where they had left him, waiting as though he too had become a dusty statue. The Mercedes sputtered to a stop and Pennington jumped out.

“I want my statue,” he demanded of Salem. “Tell him.”

The farmer smiled broadly through yellow teeth.

“Here. In the cloth,” Salem said. He pointed to a bundle on the ground.

“No, the statue, dammit! Not that bundle of rags. Where’s my statue?”

Salem was uncertain. “You said you wanted the head. That the statue was no good. Broken. He cut off the head and broke up the rest to repair his wall.”

“You idiot!” Pennington shrieked.

The farmer cringed without understanding.

Salem stepped back. “Eight dinars for a head is a very good price, boss. The statue was broken.”

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Walt Giersbach’s fiction has appeared in *Bewildering Stories*, *Big Pulp*, *Corner Club Press*, *Every Day Fiction*, *Everyday Weirdness*, *Gumshoe Review*, *Lunch Hour Stories*, *Mouth Full of Bullets*, *Mystery Authors*, *OG Short Fiction*, *Northwoods Journal*, *Paradigm Journal*, *Pif Magazine*, *Pulp Modern*, *r.kv.r.y*, *Short Fiction World*, *Southern Fried Weirdness*, *The Short Humour Site*, *The World of Myth* and *Written Word*. He was 6th place winner of the 79th annual Writer’s Digest writing competition in October 2011. Two volumes of short stories, *Cruising the Green of Second Avenue*, have been published by Wild Child (www.wildchildpublishing.com).