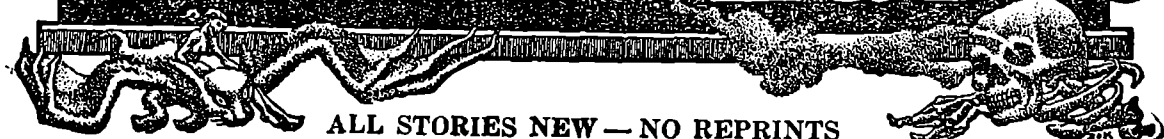


Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS

SEPTEMBER, 1948

Cover by Lee Brown Coye

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Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.

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D. McILWRAITH, Editor

LAMONT BUCHANAN, Associate Editor

The Daughter of Urzun

BY STANTON A. COBLENTZ

Heading by
VINCENT NAPOLI



*A face you
never forget,
in this world or
the next.*

IF I live to be as old as Father Adam, I shall never forget that face. Something strange and ominously suggestive about it instantly caught me, and has never lost its

grip on my imagination. Yet the features were ordinary enough, of a not uncommon Oriental type: the countenance round and swarthy, and a little fat, the low forehead

curved in a comely crescent, the thick lips wide and down-turned with a slightly cynical twist, and the eyes big and black, and lustrous with a faint smoldering quality. It was the eyes, I am sure, that arrested me with that indefinable and horrible fascination; the eyes that leered at me like fathomless wells of evil; the eyes that, beneath their languid long lashes, seemed to contain at once a smirk, a threat, and the hint of a snaky seductiveness.

Nothing could have been more prosy and "normal" than the circumstances under which I saw the stranger. Marjorie and I were seated in a New York subway train on the way to visit some friends in Brooklyn; and had stopped at the Eighty-sixth Street express station when the stranger took a seat just opposite us. She remained there as far as Fourteenth Street—no more than about ten minutes; and during the interval, by some perverse attraction, I could not take my eyes off her. Whether she noticed me I could not say; there was an enigmatic eastern imperturbability in her stare; but probably she had no idea how I shuddered and felt a weirdness about her presence, as if grisly ancient depths of recollection had been stirred; as if she were someone whom I had met before under gruesome, heart-breaking circumstances.

I breathed a sign of relief when she left the train; and was doing my best to forget her when, eight hours later, on returning from Brooklyn, I saw her enter the train and again take a seat directly opposite me! The chances, you say, were vastly against this? I do not deny this; among all the multitudes of passengers in all the hundreds of New York subway trains, the prospects of such a repetition were surely not one in a million. I almost felt, absurd as it may seem, that some intelligence had guided her again to a position opposite me, so that the impression of her might seep still more deeply into my consciousness. For the same baffling reaction was there again, even stronger than before—the sense of something powerful and sinister, with which somehow I had been connected.

When the woman had left the train, Marjorie turned to me, her normally pale face paler than ever, her candid blue eyes distended as if she had seen an apparition.

"Did you notice *her*?" she asked, trying hard to make herself heard above the rumbling of the cars. "I saw her when she got on, and somehow just couldn't keep her out of my mind. She filled me—oh, with the most terrible thoughts, just as if she was a snake that wanted to bite me—or had bitten me once."

Marjorie, I knew, was not one who easily formed unpleasant impressions of people. And I had nothing to say when she imagined that somewhere, somehow, she and I and that mysterious third had been tragically interlinked. But I noticed how convulsively she clutched at my fingers, as if afraid that I might vanish from her clasp.

THAT night I had an eerie adventure—I will not call it a dream, for it had a sharpness, a clarity altogether unlike the ordinary dream experience. The word vision will express it more nearly, though there was nothing mystical or blurred about it; this was, rather, like something I was living through, and all the scenes, colors, sounds and scenes were those of reality.

It seemed that I had been transported to a wide, flat land; beneath a blazing hot, blue sky. To my right a broad sluggish river flowed among its reeds; in the middle of the stream a robed man was clumsily paddling a round, tub-like little boat; clumps of palm trees varied by feathery mimosas dotted the banks; pelicans, cranes, herons, storks and other birds stalked among the rushes, foraging for food; while across the dusty plain to the left, the grim, squat walls of a town arose, formed of a sort of large red brick. I noticed the square bastions, the doors with the semicircular tops, the crudely made decorations of stern, bearded, spear-bearing men and of curious tailed gods with heads like lions or mastiffs and wings like eagles. But all this, while fantastic and grotesque, had an aspect of such familiarity that I do not remember even wondering about it.

A moment later—the transformation seemed instantaneous, and I do not recall traversing the distance between—I was inside the city, threading a narrow, winding street, with the stench of long-accumulated human litter in my nostrils. Above me buzzards flew on lazily flapping wings, look-

ing for some unsavory morsel; lean, hungry-looking dogs skulked ahead of me in packs, snapping at one another and snatching at fragments of food; low hovels built of reeds and clay lined the way on both sides, a few of the less wretched among them being surmounted with conical domes.

With the rapid stride of perfect familiarity, I took my way along that deviously winding alley, and at length plunged into one of the huts and passed through the windowless, mat-paved interior to a sort of small courtyard, where lay large stones for grinding corn, side by side with a great baking oven with its ashes that rarely were allowed to smolder out. Before the oven, wielding the fire-stick designed to relight the flames should they be extinguished, a woman was standing; and though she was black-haired and bare to the waist, and her skin was of an olive complexion and her eyes a deep brown, somehow I knew and was not surprised at knowing that this was Marjorie.

She greeted me with a frown on her work-tired face, which, despite the gathering lines of trial and care, had not quite lost its youthful attractiveness. Words immediately began passing between us; and the strange part of it is that while I knew that they were in some foreign language—and one normally unfamiliar to me—I understood perfectly all that she was saying, and had no difficulty about responding in the same unknown tongue. From her first word, it is evident that she was angry; and what she said may be translated as follows:

"Have you been again to see Erinnu?"

My reply was an equivocation; I know that I was striving shamefacedly to keep something from her.

"By the great god Bel," she swore, throwing down her fire-stick, "you *have* been there! Why else would your clothes bear not the dust of the bricks that you pile—now when the sun is high and the day is made for working? You have been there, Tamman, though you swore to me by the name of glorious Anu that you would go not!"

I remember that a sense of guilt swept through me, but that I answered with denials and evasions; that this but increased

her anger; that my own wrath grew correspondingly; and that after many bitter words, which flew between us like missiles, I turned my back upon her sobbing form and fled the court.

Yet as I stormed out, the sight of our toddling little son Merdoch sobered me. The look in his wondering round dark eyes was like a rebuke; and self-accusation and remorse swept over me as I remembered how well I had loved my young wife Rebo, and how we had laughed and rejoiced together on the housetops at night, before her life had begun to be hollowed out by the weary ceaseless round of household duties: the daily fetching of water from the river, the bruising of the corn and making of the bread, the spinning and weaving and clothes-washing that were women's natural lot in addition to the recurrent burdens of maternity. But now that she was less beautiful than she had been; now that, in the vigor of my young manhood, I had been seen by the Lady Erinnu as I worked as a brick mason on a court of her father's palace; now that I had been flattered and offered favors such as I had never dared dream of before—what right had Rebo to step in my way and halt my advancement with her woman's jealousy?

So I asked myself; but even as I mutely put these questions, my mind was troubled by remorse, foreboding; and fear.

BY AN instantaneous shift, as when the scenes of a motion picture are changed, my environment had been transformed. The mean, low houses were no longer about me; I stood before a huge, squat mass of masonry, marked by deep grooves and projections made in an ordered, patterned manner, and varied with terra-cotta cones of red, yellow and black, and with spiral, triangular and hexagonal decorations of the same hues, giving a bizarre but not unpleasing effect. In front of the low, arched gates, through which one could pass only with difficulty, there was a long, yellowish limestone trough, filled with water and ornamented with figures of women bearing vases; and just within, I could see bearded soldiers bristling with heavy glittering weapons. . . .

In some way, I cannot say how, I had passed the gates; the walls of the building

had closed about me. To my eyes they were stupendous, majestic, although as I remember them now they seem uninspiring enough: the clay floor was covered only with mats; the white plaster walls were bare except for pictures of tailed monsters, half man and half hyena, and of men with falcons seated on their wrists; the furniture consisted merely of some square, four-legged stools with lions' feet, some copper stands containing vases and lamps, a low bed with golden trimmings, and an ivory-inlaid wooden chest apparently used for storage. The light of the chamber, which was about fifteen feet square, was like that of early twilight, the only illumination being admitted through the little, oblong door and the small hole crudely cut in the ceiling.

I know that I waited a long time in this chamber, waited impatiently; and then, with a slow and languorous movement, *she* entered. At a glance I knew that this was the Lady Erinnu; and at the same time, by some superimposed later vision, I realized that she was one with the strange unknown of the subway. There were the same features of a rather commonplace Oriental type, the countenance round, swarthy and a little fat, the low forehead curved in a comely crescent, the thick lips wide and down-turned with a slightly cynical twist, and the eyes big and black, and lustrous with a faint smoldering quality.

However, there was a difference. She was younger now, and more queenly in her bearing; she wore a thick, heavy robe, gaudily striped with green, blue and crimson; immense bracelets studded with colored stones hung from her arms, and she had fantastic-looking earrings, shaped like purple beetles; there were rings on her fingers, and even around the ankles above the soft, heelless leather shoes; her black banded hair held together on her forehead by a fillet, was twisted into a coil on the nape of her neck; and her belt gleamed with the daggers customarily worn by high-born ladies.

A TERRIBLE fascination gripped me as I rose from my little stool to greet her. There was in it just a suggestion of the horror which I had felt at that eerie subway encounter, but there was much be-

sides: a rage, a flame, a fury, a seductiveness that possessed my entire being. She did not speak much, and words seemed little necessary; but when she held out her arms, I opened my own; and in a moment she was throbbing in my clasp, lithe, sinuous, panther-like, a thing of curves and fire, that kindled me as if with some live, poisonous exhalation. Even amid the fervor of my passion, my reasoning mind had not abdicated wholly; even amid the deceptive sweet charm that ravished my mind and spirit as they had never been ravished by anything else on earth, I knew that I was tempting the hurricane, was playing with havoc and ruin, was following a precipice road to disaster. But about that kindled, voluptuous face and that voluptuous warm body there was something I could not have resisted if I would. The snake's folds were enclosing me, but I was wooing the snake's embrace. And I had my moment of storm and joy before she again stood before me, her face no longer convulsed from the depths within; while I, grown soberer now, saw in those black curtained eyes a leer as from unfathomable pits. But when she whispered into my ears the two short words, "When next?" an answer was not long in coming to my lips.



It seemed but a moment before I was away from her again, in one of the narrow, vile-smelling streets between the low reed and clay houses. In my own mind I was making excuses. After all, how could I, Tamman the brick mason, refuse anything to Erinnu, the favorite daughter of Urzun, the king's most powerful minister? Men who had incensed the noble ladies had been

known to disappear mysteriously; and doubtless the crocodiles of the river had dined the better in consequence. Besides, with her good favor to help me, I might be able to rise, and—who could say?—receive the training of a royal scribe, and no longer live in a dingy den in the manner of mere masons but be elevated to a solid, square brick house like those I had often helped to build?

But as these thoughts stole over my mind, I had a vision of the face of Rebo, tear-streaked and pitiful as she toiled to bake my bread and weave my garments; and my mind was crossed with a premonition so black that I shuddered.

THERE were many later scenes that flashed back upon me; scenes in which I again stood with Rebo, angry and arguing. Then there came another episode with Erinnu, when I was with her once more in the palace room, now duskier than ever and lighted with the dim flame of an oil lamp. It seemed that we had been having a serious conversation, and there was much that troubled my mind, although the seduction of that full, round face and those baleful, big black eyes was still upon me. I knew that it was of Rebo that we had been talking, and that Erinnu's words had seared like acid into my brain.

"Put her from you," she urged, as nearly as I can express her peculiar, incisive command. "Put her from you, Tamman; she is but a dead block of clay in your path. With her to drag your feet, you will be all your life as a beast of burden that lumbers with the plow. By the great glory of Shamash! without her I will see that you become a light of the court. My father Urzun will deny me nothing; when you are clad in soft robes, as becomes your new post, and throw a fringed shawl colored like the rainbow above your tunic, you will outshine all the men of the palace. Then you will be a fit partner for the daughter of Urzun."

Punctuated with an embrace, this appeal was difficult to resist. Yet in my heart my fondness for Rebo was not dead, though she had angered me much of late; nor could I forget my little son Merdoch and the duty I owed him. Nothing on earth is more of a curse, a terrible curse, than to be placed

under such a temptation as then tore me: on the one hand my drudge of a wife and the colorless drudging life of duty, until I was early worn out and bequeathed the same weary, toilsome round to my children: on the other hand, this seductive, bright-clad creature whose every touch and look enthralled me, my elevation to the life of the palace, a lucrative post, and a future of luxury and honor.

"As I venerate our great king, I—I do not know, Erinnu," I faltered. And I saw how, at my hesitation, the woman's wide, fleshy nostrils dilated, and little pointed flames began to gather in the sultry black of her eyes.

"You do not know?" she demanded, giving her head an imperious toss which barely suggested what a living fury she might become if denied her way. "Then in the name of Sin the moon-god, consult your mind and find out! I give you till tomorrow to decide if you wish to be as the toiling ass in the fields or as the eagle on his mountain perch. Now go!"

There was no arguing against this abrupt dismissal. It was but a minute or two later, or so it seemed, when I found myself outside the palace gate, beside the yellowish limestone trough, where some draught animals were satisfying their thirst. Twilight lay upon all the houses; but it was not too late for me to see clearly the figure that waited at the side of the road, and almost hurled herself upon me, bitterly accusing.

"Tamman! You have betrayed me! You told me you would go not to see that vile thing in there again! Your son cries, and calls for his father. Your unborn child already begins to gnaw at my vitals. But you disport yourself with a worthless creature of luxury, who knows not what it is to haul wood for the fire, or water from the river. Shame on you, Tamman! You have disgraced us all."

"Disgraced you, Rebo?" I answered, feebly. "Where is the disgrace? I but wish to better our lot."

"By the gods! not my lot. Not your son's! You know it, Tamman!" she wailed, attempting to wind her arms about me in a last despairing appeal. And then, in tones of passion that brought back to mind

the woman I had once wholeheartedly loved, "Have mercy, Tamman! Have mercy on me and your son! Repent of this wicked alliance before it is too late! What use has that base thing in there for such as you? She would not blink her cruel eyes if the lions of the plain devoured you after she had had her will? Take your solemn vow, Tamman, on the ashes of your forefathers, that you will see her not again!"

As I glanced toward the sunset that had spread a hot, red flame beyond the river, something of the dazzle of Erinnu's presence and the glitter of her promises was still upon me. I saw myself arrayed in gaily colored woollens, saw myself in the court, a subject of reverence and envy; and a faint anger possessed me that this woman before me, this woman who claimed to love me, should wish to deny me so much.

"I can take no vow," was all I answered.

IN THE growing dusk, the change that overcame Rebo's features was terrible to behold. The dark eyes flashed fire, the face was distorted with such rage as I did not know her capable of; her voice was edged and incisive as she uttered a curse so frightful that I dared not repeat it, and finished by pointing a finger at me, and shooting out the words, "Tamman, you are my husband no longer!"

Before this denunciation, I stood quite shocked and unbelieving. She had uttered the unforgivable insult, the challenge that few women dared ever speak to their fate and lord, the words that put an end for all time to a marriage. Such words could, indeed, be spoken without penalty by a man, but never by a woman; ancient tradition prescribed a frightful retribution for the wife with the temerity so to address her husband: she would be thrown into the river, and drowned.

Furious as I was with Rebo for her insolence, surely nothing would have been further from my mind than to exact the traditional punishment. But no sooner had she spoken than I became aware of spectators all about us; silent spectators of our quarrel who stood leering in the background and now came forward like ogres bent on their prey. Among them I recognized several guardsmen of Urzun's palace, and a

fearful pang stabbed at my heart as I foresaw the possible consequences.

A CONFUSED, nightmarish period followed; I only knew that I wandered in a-daze, restlessly, consumed by fever. I have a faint recollection of sleeping in a brick court or alley, after groping through dim night streets by the sepulchral illumination of the moon; while in disturbed dreams I seemed to see Rebo, her arms outstretched, pleading and calling. Then all was drowned out in one long, horrible gasp, as if tight fingers were pulling at my throat; and I awoke, and found that it was morning.

Wearily, drawn by some irresistible attraction, I made my way toward the gates of Urzun's palace. On my arrival, I was greeted by some guards, who with evil smirks informed me that the Lady Erinnu desired speech with me. For the first time, I did not look forward to meeting the enchantress; however, there was no possibility of opposing the will of Urzun's daughter.

She greeted me with pleasure and triumph in her great black eyes. Her lion-skin robe gave a wild but faintly intimidating quality to her beauty.

"Rejoice, Tamman!" she threw out her welcome. "I have attended to everything! All is over!"

"Attended to—what?" I gasped, a monstrous fear suddenly flooding over me. "What is over?"

She drew near me with a weaving, snake-like movement; cast me an arch, insinuating look; and answered, in a purring voice, "Can you not guess, my lover?"

I merely stared at her stupidly.

"As the high god Bel is the protector of our house," she went on, wooingly, "I have cleared the path before us. Rejoice, Tamman! No longer is there anyone in our way!"

"By the dust of my fathers, you do not mean—"

"I mean that I have visited the justice of the gods upon *her*. Did she not publicly insult you last night, and put you from her as her husband? Did she not do outrage also to my good name, which has never before been demeaned by a spitfire of the streets? You know very well the penalty for her crimes against the sacred law! So

as not to protract her suffering, I have seen that vengeance was inflicted promptly."

There are some shocks that cannot be absorbed all in one swift stroke. And so now, in the first hideous second, I did not take in the full horror of Erinnu's words. But as I stood staring at her implacable, smiling face, and remembered last night's dreams of Rebo and how she had called to me and held out her arms in appeal and how I had had the sensation of tight fingers pulling at my throat, then suddenly the whole appalling truth swept over me.

"She died swiftly—and suffered little," stated Erinnu.

AS WHEN a river bursts its banks, the full flood of my grief and desolation had overwhelmed me. In a flash of fury, when it came to me that Rebo was gone and that I had been responsible for her death and should never see her again, the love which I had thought dead came stabbing at me, and such sorrow as I had not believed possible filled and overflowed my heart, and my shoulders heaved, and I began to weep with a terrible, heartbreaking grief.

Pitilessly, as I tried to control the outburst, Erinnu stood above me. Not compassion but contempt was expressed in those mysterious black eyes, now grown unspeakably cold and remote.

"As I am a daughter of the high ones," she exclaimed, in a voice that rasped just slightly, "what does this mean? Instead of bowing down to the ground and thanking me as you should, you weep like a baby! I thought you were a man, Tamman!"

I said nothing; I cared little what she might think.

"But do you not see," she urged, her tones becoming softer and a trifle wheedling, "I am your deliverer! We are free now, you and I! Your road lies open before you! Dry your foolish tears, and I will speak to my father Urzun—"

It was strange how suddenly all her fascination had vanished; strange how clearly I saw her now for what she was—a ruthlessly cruel, designing, self-indulgent daughter of vice and luxury; a murderess, the slayer of my poor Rebo, who was really worth more than a thousand Erinnus. Through her I too was a murderer—a co-

murderer of Rebo. And at this thought I was transfixed by remorse; and all my love for the temptress, which I now knew to be not really love at all but passion, became converted into hatred; she seemed more loathsome than all the toads of the courtyard or the snakes of the desert.

Carried away by fury, I let my feelings pour forth in a reckless storm. What words I used I do not recall, but I know that the short, ugly, snarling terms common among mule drivers and goat herders became mixed in my speech; that the epithets "Serpent!" and "Scorpion!" flew in a frenzy out of my lips; that I cursed Erinnu by all the gods of my ancestors and all the powers that reigned in heaven and earth. As I spoke, I was almost gratified to see how her face hardened; how indulgence gave place to incredulous anger, and anger to resentment and pain as of a person unexpectedly stabbed.

When I had finished, she bit her heavy underlip and held back the tantrum which I had courted.

"So! By great Bel!" she answered, with what I knew to be deceptive calm. "I should have known better than to grant my favors to the scum of the alleys. It is well that, dashing down the gifts I have offered so liberally, you have awakened me in time. Yes, it is well, Tamman! I owe you much gratitude!"

All at once her eyes smoldered into fire. She took a step toward me. "Be sure I will repay my debt of gratitude—with interest like that of the usurers of the town! No man speaks as you have done to the daughter of Urzun, and goes away unrewarded! You will have not long to wait!"

She rapped her hands together furiously, then beat with a sort of clapper against the wall. And, a minute later, the armed guards had thrust their way in.

Beyond that, my recollection grows pale. I have an impression of being dragged off, with something thick and heavy over my mouth and eyes; I recall hearing the coarse oaths and jests of the soldiers. I know that I was taken a considerable distance away, while my body was prodded and pierced by the points of spears; then—hours later, or days, or perhaps only minutes, for a confusion lies over this period—there came a por-

tentous silence; after which I heard a voice calling, "Ready!" and, an instant later, felt myself being hurled through the air, felt myself plunging bewilderingly into something cool and wet, gasping and floundering, with heavy weights drawing me down; then a struggle that seemed endlessly protracted . . . agony . . . suffocation . . . darkness . . . nothingness .

I REVIVED to find myself safely at home, in bed, at Marjorie's side. And I pressed toward her slumbering form with the tenderness that we feel toward something infinitely dear that has been lost and then, long afterwards, regained.

I knew that I had undergone something more than a dream. With the impressions indelibly stamped on my mind, I began consulting books of history. But only after days of searching in a large library did I find what I sought, and recognize the details of the life I had witnessed so vividly.

Down to the minutest item—from the nature of the cities to the construction of the buildings, the style of the costumes and the very names of the gods—there was one country that corresponded with what I had experienced; corresponded with an accuracy beyond the power of chance to approach. I had relived a scene from the life of ancient Babylonia!

More than that, now I could realize the part that I had played, the part that Marjorie also had filled; I could understand that we had both existed before in other bodies. And as for that unknown woman of the subway—I recognized who she too was, and why she had startled both Marjorie and me with such aversion and horror. And as I held my wife in my arms, glad of a present love that somehow was all the deeper for the shadow of past tragedy, I was thankful that we no longer had anything to fear from the wiles or vengeance of Urzuns' terrible daughter.

