

The Hyborian Review

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Recipe for disaster...one muscleman, one dwarf, and a weekly script

Great REH Quotes

From *The Grey God Passes*, copyright 1975 by Glenn Lord (acknowledging August Derleth, 1962. This is a slim, blue book with illustrations by Walt Simonson, published by Charles Miller.)

The battle is over, and Black Turlogh has hacked away the soft copper slave ring around young Conn's neck. "Look up there – in the sky!" cried Conn. "The grey man! It is he! The grey man with the single terrible eye. I saw him in the mountains of Torka. I glimpsed him brooding on the walls of Dublin while the battle raged. I saw him looming above Prince Murrogh as he died. Look! He rides the wind and races the tall clouds. He swindles. He fades into the void. He vanishes!"

"It is Odin, god of the sea-people," said Turlogh somberly. "His children are broken, his altars crumble, and his worshipers fallen before the swords of the South. He flees the new gods and their children, and returns to the blue gulfs of the North which gave him birth. No more will helpless victims howl beneath the daggers of his priests – no more will he stalk the black clouds." He shook his head darkly. "The Grey God passes, and we too are passing, though we have conquered. The days of the twilight come on amain, and a strange feeling is upon me as of a waning age. What are we all, too, but ghosts waning into the night?"

Marvel Still Hemorrhaging!

I smile every time I see one of these stories. This is from an AP feed

Marvel Entertainment Group fired three top executives in early September in a desperate effort to slash costs. Interim president Joseph Calamari let go of its president and chief operating officer, fired the executive vice president of strategic alliances, and let go of the executive vice president of communications.

Why care? At one time, this was the creative center of the Hyborian world, which spawned first 24 now immortal issues of Conan the Barbarian. But judging from the three lightweight issues of Conan that came out lately, this corporate giant should die.

Want more blood? Marvel won bankruptcy court approval for the \$7 million sale of its Asher Candy Co. assets. Marvel's second quarter loss widened to \$41.9 million from \$11 million a year ago. Marvel shares are now as low as \$2.12 per share.

But wait, there's more. Marvel is now sinking into the slime of the toy business. Executives have unveiled a \$600 million pick-up sticks plan to reorganize the company by gluing the healthy parts onto profitable toymaker Toy Biz Inc.

Overall, demand is down for sports cards, trading cards, stickers, and comic books. Marvel missed the digital push and was never able to follow through with an alternative for the '90s teenager. The poor quality of their current productions ensures continued misery, too.

Necro press updates online catalog - p. 4

Change in mood among Howard heirs? see page 4.

Rogues in the House:

A Review (Part II)

by Garret H. Romaine



Last issue we looked at the incredibly tight plot elements of *Rogues* and found that it was good. This time, the richness of the characters deserves attention.



A Collection of Compelling Characters

While first and foremost a Conan story, *Rogues in the House* revolves around three well-wrought men – Nabonidus, the astute Red Priest; Murilo, an apparent scoundrel; and Conan, a murderous barbarian. Somehow, Howard makes Murilo a sympathetic figure, makes the clever Red Priest do something dumb, and at one point calls Conan the most honest man of the three, because he steals and murders openly.

The Cast

Here are the main characters and their fate in parentheses:

Conan, the Cimmerian bravo (bloodied)
Murilo, a young aristocrat (saved)
Nabonidus, the Red Priest (dead)
Thak, a half-man, half-ape servant (dead)
Athicus, the unscrupulous jailer (jailed)
Petreus and his nationalist band (all dead)
Arus, the double-dealing priest (dead)
the un-named former lover (soiled)
the lover's new boyfriend (dead)
the un-named Gunderman deserter (dead)
the one-eared court secretary (dead)
the servant Joka (dead)
a second jailer (dead)

Out of that group of 15 individuals, only four survive the story. Almost as bad as the end of Hamlet!

Let's take a look at the principals and see what lies beneath the surface.

Murilo

The readers' sympathy bounces from Murilo, to Conan, to the Red Priest, and then to Thak, a subhuman. Finally, Murilo steps forward with a stout chair and saves the day, in order to send Conan on his way with a horse and a sack of gold coins.

Yet it is really Murilo who comes out ahead in this story, doubtful as that seemed at times. For Murilo was the man with the problem who needed Conan badly enough to rescue him from the executioner. It was Murilo whose scheming and treason had brought him to near ruin. Yet Howard never induces the reader to despise the young nobleman.

Howard was already a proven master at spinning his mysteries, leading the reader on a murderous spree away from, then back to, his primary antagonist. By starting with Murilo, Howard also sets up the eternal barbarism vs. civilization roulette that he loved to toy with.

First, we fear for Murilo, who has the Red Priest on his trail. We don't know why until later; shockingly, Murilo has been selling state secrets to the highest foreign bidder. All we know is that Nabonidus is on to him, and is almost fiendish in his sorcerous abilities.

The introduction is succinct: "Murilo, for all his scented black curls and foppish apparel, was no weakling to bend his neck to the knife without a struggle."

Howard paints Murilo as more than the average court fancy. What Murilo has that the average spineless courtier lacks is guts. He doesn't run at the first sign of trouble, he hatches a scheme. And when news reaches him (erroneously, it turns out) that the scheme has failed, Murilo takes sword in hand and invades the domain of the Red Priest on his own.

True to form, however, Murilo manages to faint when he gets a glimpse of Thak, the hairy half-ape creature Nabonidus has let off his tether. After all, Howard has to make sure we understand the inherent weakness in the civilized male. Thus Howard causes Murilo to swoon and tosses him into the dungeon.

Nabonidus

In previous stories, Howard was known to linger over his initial description of principal characters. Here, the introduction to Murilo was but a single sentence. And Nabonidus gets even less of a bio – he is the owner of an "enigmatic" gaze, and is acknowledged as the real ruler in the city. But we don't know if his skin is dark, if his nose is long, or if he has scars on his cheeks. As if sensing that the pacing of his tale was at risk, Howard has little time for detailed development of the physical characteristics of his Rogues.

As the primary antagonist, The Red Priest is a worthy foe. Fiendishly clever, with traps and tricks dotting his estate, the man is obviously ahead of his time. But in delving further, we know very little about his background. What sect of Mitra or Set does he belong to? Who are his followers? Where is his temple? What is his background, and where is his home country? We have no clues if he is from the south or the east, from Khitai or Stygia. Yet it matters little.

Last issue, we saw that Nabonidus wasn't such a bad guy up until the point where nationalists led by Petreus stumbled into his lotus trap. Then his true nature was revealed. The Red Priest watched in glee as the lotus-maddened assassins slashed and hacked each other to pieces. Yet he was also utterly shaken and in a panic when he thought about being torn to bits by Thak. He is at least complex, with his science and his wisdom, which he dabbles in while looting the small city-state.

However, in the final analysis, Nabonidus was "just another villain" as his death scene unfolded. He not only sought to break his promise to forget Murilo's treason, Nabonidus also planned to toss Conan and his boss into the acid vats. This may have been the final note Howard felt compelled to add.

By stopping to taunt his foes, Nabonidus committed the primary folly of many campy villains. Time and time again in the TV series *Batman*, it was the lengthy soliloquy at the end that gave the hero time to untie his

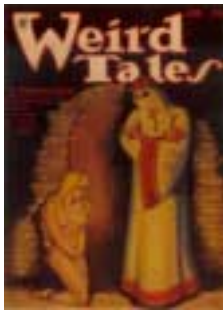
hands and call in the rescuers. This time, Conan has only to pull up a piece of spare furniture and brain the bad guy. If there is a weakness to the story, it is in the death of the Red Priest. But, after all, it isn't his story now, is it?

Conan, a Cimmerian

The usual introduction of Conan is slipped into this story some three pages deep. "Even in the dim light of the dungeon, with his limbs loaded with chains, the primitive power of the man was evident. His mighty body and thick-muscled limbs combined the strength of a grizzly with the quickness of a panther. Under his tangled black mane his blue eyes blazed with unquenchable savagery."

Yep, that's Conan. In two more pages, Howard reveals his hero's name, but we all know this as a Conan story, pure and true. I count this as the third Conan story in chronological order – after *Tower of the Elephant* and *God in the Bowl*. *Tower* came out in March, 1933, but *God* didn't see print until 1952. This story was

published in January, 1934. Here's the cover; it's a bad scan.



Of course, Conan wasn't written in chronological order, but that's a different analysis. The point here is simply that Conan was still a young, brawling bravo, given to murder and mayhem, but Howard gives us clues that the character is already well on the

way to development.

For example, Conan is already chivalrous toward women. He does not kill the girl, even though she not only betrayed him, but found another lover in short order. In this story, just surviving is something. Instead of killing her, he just dropped her into a cesspool. All that was hurt was her dignity.

Second, Conan has his principles about a deal. Even though Murilo's plan to spring him from the hangman's noose wasn't completely successful, Conan will pay back the debt. He is out, and he is grateful. After he sees to his ex-girlfriend, of course.

Third, Conan is one brave man. To get all three Rogues out of the Red Priest's cellar, Howard must get them past Thak.

Nabonidus drew back, shaking like a leaf. He gripped Conan's shoulder. "Man, do you dare pit your knife against his fangs?"

The Cimmerian's eyes blazed in answer.

Now that's a hero. Good luck, Thak. You'll need it.

Still, my favorite line in the story is earlier, when Murilo is negotiating with the Red Priest to get out of the priest's basement. Conan sees the discussion as unnecessary; once he has slain his foe, he can collect his reward. All this talk is driving him crazy. But Murilo, ever resourceful, makes a sudden change in plans.

"You should know how to get out of these rat-dens," said Murilo. "Suppose I agree to spare your life. Will you help us to escape, and swear to keep silent about my thievery?"

"When did a priest keep an oath?" complained Conan, comprehending the trend of the conversation. "Let me cut his throat; I want to see what color his blood is. They say in the Maze that his heart is black, so his blood must be black, too--"

Now that's a barbarian. Direct and easy to understand, and straight to the point. Perhaps a bit bloodthirsty, but he is on the payroll. Later, when he has slain Nabonidus, he is moved to remark upon the widening crimson pool around the body, "His blood was red, after all."

The Rest of the Crew

What is left of the cast is a series of one-liners and bit parts. Thak, of course, leads the way, with a lengthy on-stage presence leading up to the grand finale fight. But the rest are either dragged offstage on a shield or hauled away in chains. Some are only spoken of, in passing. Arus, the double-dealing priest, and the Gunderman deserter who teamed with Conan – both are dead before the story can start.

The Gunderman gave me a fit briefly. In *The Hall of the Dead*, it was a Gunderman that battled Conan before joining forces with him to loot ancient Larsha. As they part at the fountain of Ninus, Nestor the Gunderman is bound for the barracks of Aghrapur, while Conan is intent on good pickings in the west. So the thought occurred to me, "Could this be the same Gunderman, rejoined with Conan in Corinthia?"

The answer is probably no. *Hall* was apparently written mostly by L. Sprague de Camp from a Howard outline found by Glenn Lord in 1966.

I'd like to know more about that outline, of course, but as I reread the story, I found little of Howard in it.

It is possible that de Camp simply inserted the Gunderman retroactively, leaving the seeds of another story teaming the two thieves, to take place between *Hall* and *Rogues*. It's also possible that this isn't the

same Gunderman. There were a cursed lot of them running around.

Summary

According to Glenn Lord in the latest REHUPA, there were no spare manuscripts for *Rogues in the House*. One explanation could be that Howard just pounded the thing out in a single take, and thus there was nothing left to save.

It's hard to know, of course. But the story has elements that suggest a writer at the top of his craft. The well-paced, tightly scripted plot is amazingly fast. The dialogue is sparse and clear. And the characters are superbly crafted to stay out of the way of the story.

There are numerous passages of alliteration and metaphor that reveal Howard's touch with prose. But two issues is enough for this gem. Perhaps some day in the future, an essay on Howard's greatest prose would be worthwhile. For now, mark me down for believing this to be one of his greatest stories. - GR

Howard Heirs Are 'Feeling Your Pain'

This strange message came in via the Savage web page discussion board. Make of it what you will...

I need to remain anonymous, but please take my word for the following information as being true. My source is about as accurate as you can get in this matter.

There is currently a push from within the estate of Robert E. Howard to concentrate on Howard's original vision regarding all of his works, and to firmly establish Howard himself as one of (I personally think he's the main reason for sword & sorcery's popularity today) the founding fathers of modern sword & sorcery. Though a publisher has not yet been chosen for this honor, it is planned that all of Howard's original Conan stories, uncut and unaltered by anyone, will be published at some point in the near future (near hopefully being within a year, I believe and hope). Personally, I would like to see Baen Books handling this, especially after their excellent and recent printing of their "Howard Library".

In any case, rest assured that for all of us purists, there is hope that Howard will be re-discovered by the public in his full glory. My own hope is that any new stories printed later, based on Howard's works, will strive to match Howard's original vision as closely as possible (individual differences in actual writing styles aside, of course). I also hope this means that the Conan TV series will be saved from itself--I think the writers of the newer Conan stories, like Jordan, Carpenter, etc, should be writing any new TV stories and re-formatting

Howard's stories into TV-script form, not whoever is writing the episodes now.

By the way, from what my source seemed to be implying, and what seems obvious to me, is that it isn't the Howard estate or Conan Properties that is responsible for mistakes like "Kull The Conqueror", "Red Sonja", "Conan The Destroyer", and likely the rest of the Conan TV series, but it is actually Hollywood itself--namely, hack writers, producers and directors, who knew or know nothing about Howard's original vision and are in it just to make a buck (Howard's estate and CPI are just trying to create a wider interest in Howard and his stories, after all, something we'd all like).

Here's to hoping that the future for Howard and his creations is even brighter than anyone has guessed!

Necro Press Updates Online Catalog

An e-mail from Marc A. Michaud posted this good news: Necronomicon Press has updated their website to make the online catalog easier to use. Along with their pre-defined category pages, it's now possible to do keyword searches to help you find a particular title. Just go to <http://www.necropress.com> and click on the new "online catalog" link.

And the even bigger news is that they now offer *secure* online ordering for credit card purchases. They can still take orders by phone, fax, and regular mail ... but for many of you they believe this new method of ordering will be the easiest yet. (Don't worry--if your browser doesn't support secure connections, you'll still be able to use the online catalog from a special link on their homepage.)

Says Marc: "We'll be [improving] our site over the coming weeks and months ... please don't hesitate to contact us with your suggestions and comments." <http://www.necropress.com> or marc@necropress.com phone: (401) 828-7161 or fax (401) 826-1151

The Hyborian Review is published monthly by Garret Romaine and distributed free via e-mail. Send feedback to: gromaine3@comcast.net. For back issues, try <http://www.intercom.no/~savage>

NEXT Issue: The new Conan TV show and a shot at *Kull*.

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