

The Hyborian Review

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Say good-bye to volume two...

Great REH Quotes

From *The Valley of the Worm*, copyright 1934 by Popular Fiction Publishing Co. for *Weird Tales*, February 1934. I pulled this from my 1987 Baen printing of *Cthulhu – The Mythos and Kindred Horrors*.

James Allison recalls a battle royal against the Picts...

We went to meet them, naked but for our wolfhides, swinging our bronze swords, and our singing was like rolling thunder in the hills. They sent their arrows among us, and we gave back their fire. They could not match us in archery. Our arrows hissed in blinding clouds among them, dropping them like autumn leaves, until they howled and frothed like mad dogs and charged to hand-grips. And we, mad with the fighting joy, dropped our bows and ran to meet them, as a lover runs to his love.

By Ymir, it was a battle to madden and make drunken with slaughter and the fury. The Picts were as ferocious as we, but ours was the superior physique, the keener wit, the more highly developed fighting-brain. We won because we were a superior race, but it was no easy victory. Corpses littered the blood-soaked earth; but at last they broke, and we cut them down as they ran, to the very edge of the trees. I tell of that fight in a few bald words. I can not paint the madness, the reek of sweat and blood, the panting, muscle-straining effort, the splintering of bones under mighty blows, the rending and hewing of quivering sentient flesh; above all the merciless abysmal savagery of the whole affair, in which there was neither rule nor order, each man fighting as he would or could.

In Memoriam:

David M. Romaine (1966-1997)

On Dec. 17, 1997, *The Hyborian Review* lost a leading light -- David Romaine. He was a classic 'conanist completist' -- he had read every Tor offering, and every Marvel Conan story, but still liked the Howard material best. It was cousin David that finally forced me to find the time (read: get off my ass) to develop this 'zine. Later, in one issue, David and I both shared a review. Unfortunately, in mid-1996 David managed to become one of those tragic statistical rarities -- he contracted AIDS from a woman whose ex-boyfriend used intravenous drugs. Within months, David was diagnosed not only with HIV -- but that lump under his armpit turned out to be fast-growing non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. Treatment started way too late.

An Eagle Scout who nearly finished his computer science degree at Washington State University, David tended to be quiet and thoughtful, and he was a good person. All he lacked was the love of a good woman, frankly. His younger brother John has offered to take up the challenge of supplying some Review material as the next year progresses. John brings some fresh enthusiasm to the task at hand, and he's a welcome addition to the team.

David's last days were spent in bed, surrounded by his family, with Pink Floyd in the background while we read aloud his favorite Conan stories. Which beats getting hit by a bus, if you ask me. Say 'Hello' to Bob Howard for me, David. I miss ya.

Cover art on the web - p. 4

Amplifications and Corrections - See page 4.

Story Review

By Garret Romaine



The Frost-Giant's Daughter

Written by Robert E. Howard

Published in 1976 by Donald M. Grant.

Damn, what a great story.

I've already confessed that the best Howard story I've ever read is usually the last one I put down. This one is no exception. Perhaps some day when I'm old and gray I can make an Excel spreadsheet and list all the attributes in rows and columns and assign some kind of value to each of the Howard trademarks. But until then, whenever I'm asked, the answer is: "It depends."

If I'm looking for a story from Conan's Cimmerian hills, this has to be the one. How a man from the scrub oaks of Texas can capture the icy winds and the limitless white expanse of snow is beyond me. But Howard does. I was ready to reach for a sweater by the time I was done.

All of the elements of Howard's best writing are here: crisp storytelling, elegant wordsmithing, and above all, that incredible imagination. I'll see if I can touch on each before I'm done.

'I do not much care for it'

For those who don't know, *The Frost Giant's Daughter* was written during the same span of creative release that gave us the Birth of Conan. [Refer to Patrice Louinet's same-named article in *The Dark Man* #4 for the excellent detective work that properly places 'Frost Giant' in its correct position.]

That birth is much-chronicled; how Howard could write nothing but Conan for weeks; how he drew maps, made a list of names, and built up the entire Hyborian world, leaving clues and hints about the makeup of its countries and peoples. He never worked so hard.

Nevertheless, on March 10, 1932, *Weird Tales* editor Farnsworth Wright mailed back Conan's origin story *Phoenix on the Sword* with suggested changes, but rejected 'Frost Giant' altogether, with the cryptic comment, "I do not much care for it." Later, Howard complained to H.P. Lovecraft that Wright "rejected most of the series."

I can't really surmise why Wright disliked *any* of Howard's work. He could have been worried about over-exposing one of his best writers. Or, he could have been trying not to run up too high a tab with Howard, since WT was having periodic financial difficulties. And in fairness, my own outlook on Howard's talent is tinged with the knowledge of what a giant he truly was; those who read and edited him while he yet lived had no blessing of hindsight. Wright rejected many Conan stories: *The God in the Bowl* and *The Frost Giant's Daughter* are apparently joined by *The Vale of Lost Women* and *The Black Stranger*. Three of those stories cast a woman in danger of slavery, rape, or a whipping, so perhaps Wright was simply a bit squeamish.

Patrice and Rusty Burke have both done a superb job of sleuthing out the various versions of 'Frost Giant'. There are at least three that are easy to get hold of. Rusty reprinted the early one in his *Dark Man* series. Another was clumsily edited by L. Sprague de Camp and appears in the paperbacks of the 60s. But by far the best version is found in Grant's deluxe hardbound book, *Rogues in the House*, circa 1976. It has artwork from Marcus Boas, some eleven colored plates and a bunch more line illustrations.

In this story, Conan is the last man standing in a battle between Vanir and Æsir, when a beautiful woman appears and mocks him. Maddened, he gives chase, only to stumble into an ambush. He kills the woman's brothers and chases her to the very mountaintops before her father, Ymir, rescues her. Hours later, Conan's warrior friends track him down and revive him, staring at the magical veil he still clutches.

First, some housekeeping. There are those who point to this story and feel it is perilously close to an attempted rape. Perhaps Wright rejected it for that reason. Doubtless, Conan had as much in mind as he tracked Atali across the snow. But anyone who wishes to use this as evidence of "Conan the Shit-heel" should look further. For at the end, as he explains to his saviors why he ran off alone across the snows, Conan adequately excuses his rude behavior:

"I saw a woman," Conan answered hazily. "We met Bragi's men in the plains. I know not how long we fought. I alone lived. I was dizzy and faint. The land lay like a dream before me. Only now do all things seem natural and familiar. The woman came and taunted me. She was beautiful as a frozen flame from hell. A strange madness fell upon me when I looked at her, so I forgot all else in the world. I followed her. Did you not find her tracks? Or the giants in icy mail I slew?"

Of course they didn't, and they don't believe him. Then a grizzled old warrior relates the same story, from long ago, when he lay wounded on the battlefield and howled in fury because he couldn't follow her. To me, Howard has given us a reason why his normally chivalrous hero attempted a violent rape – witchcraft! It was a spell that made men follow her, in order that her towering brothers might cut out his heart to lay it smoking on Ymir's board. Without the spell, Conan would not have chased her until his lungs heaved. Those who would paint Conan as a crude and oafish boor had best look elsewhere for evidence.

A Colorful World

Last issue, we looked at Howard's use of color in *The Dark Man*, and found that it was good. At first blush, a story about Black Turloch and a dark statuette would seem to be best in black and white, but Howard tossed in plenty of blood to color the world red. This time, we get a story that should be set mostly in white, yet again, Howard chooses his brush strokes carefully.

Consider these allusions to color:

The snow covered plains struck sheens of silver...
Helmeted heads...tilted red beards and golden beards
Across the red drifts...
Their swords were stained red...
One was bearded and black-maned. The locks and beard of the other were as red as the blood on the sunlit snow shivering into bits of blue fire.
The red-haired warrior died at Conan's feet.
Yellow-bearded warriors lay locked with red-haired slayers...
Now he saw they were neither red nor yellow, but a glorious compound of both colors.
Here eyes were likewise neither wholly blue nor grey.
Her full red lips smiled...

“...Conan of the black hair.”
 Earth and sky swam red to his dizzy gaze...
 The trampled red field fell out of sight behind him...
 Far to the north he caught a glimpse of towering mountains,
 blue with the distance, or white with the eternal snows.
 The snow shone weirdly, now frosty blue, now icy crimson,
 now cold silver.
 The only reality was the white body dancing across the
 glittering snow...
 She was running with effort now, her golden locks blowing
 free...
 The girl’s ivory body was suddenly enveloped in a cold blue
 flame...
 Among the distant blue mountains there sounded a rolling
 thunder...
 She sprang back and faced him, her golden locks in wild
 disarray, her white bosom heaving, her beautiful eyes blazing
 with terror.
 A fleeting instant, sky and snowy hills were bathed in
 crackling white flames, blue darts of icy light, and frozen
 crimson fires.

Howard has quite a bit of leverage with his use of color,
 for the aurora borealis is an ever-shifting palette of hues.
 He pulls those in to mix with his story, to give this top-
 of-the-world witchcraft even more of a fantastic feel.

Contrast the usual description of Cimmeria as a frozen
 wasteland, a whited out wilderness where the everlasting
 snows cover all. Howard instead brings us golden
 yellow and flaming red hair, bloody red snow, silvery
 mail, and those fantastic skylights.

More Gorgeous WordCraft

Those who have read a Review or two will expect now
 to feast on a few passages of wordcraft. As this story is
 from Howard at his finest, rest assured there are
 metaphors and alliterations galore:

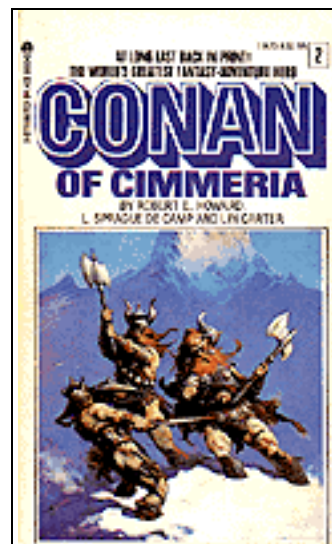
The shouting of the slaughter was hushed
 Slowly...they came, as ghosts might come to a tryst
 A sudden sick weariness assailing him
 The glare of the sun on the snow cut his eyes like a knife
 Swaying like a sapling in the wind, stood a woman
 Her laughter was sweeter than the rippling of silvery fountains
 Her voice was more musical than a silver-stringed harp
 Her ivory body was as perfect as the dream of a god
 “I have heard the wind whispering across the everlasting
 snows.”
 His dark scarred face contorted
 Passion fierce as physical agony flooded his whole being
 Out across the white blinding plain the chase led
 Foam flew from the barbarian’s lips
 Frosty blades of cold flaming light
 Through a shimmering icy realm of enchantment Conan
 plunged doggedly onward
 The giants answered with roars like the grinding of icebergs
 on a frozen shore.
 The speed ebbed from her flashing white legs; she reeled in
 her gait.

In his untamed soul leaped up the fires of hell she had fanned
 so well.
 She writhed her golden head aside, striving to avoid the fierce
 kisses that bruised her lips.

As I mentioned on page one, I had occasion last week to
 read this story aloud, over and over again, while my
 cousin battled his cancer and lost. More than once, my
 voice rose too loud, as I became carried away with the
 story. This is one of those stories that beg to be orated at
 full volume. No matter how many times I would start in
 a whisper, before long the spirit of Howard had me
 fairly yelling it out. More than once I stopped, sweating,
 with the cats twitching and the dog about to start
 barking.

Those Great Covers

Some pretty fair artists have taken their turn depicting
 the battle scene between Ymir’s sons and Conan of
 Cimmeria. Here are three different takes -



Upper left: Marcus Boas, from the deluxe Grant edition.

Upper right: the cover to Marvel’s Conan the Barbarian #16, by Barry Windsor-Smith.

To left: Frazetta’s classic cover from the old paperback.

A Master at His Craft

Howard didn't just toss out a few alliterations and strew a few colors through his story. Consider these other deft touches that show his mastery.

Dialogue to Die For

One thing that I've always envied about Robert E. Howard was the ease with which he worked his characters. For example, a half-naked woman appears suddenly before Conan and flirts with him. As a writer, how would you handle this situation? Here's the way REH did it:

"My village is farther than you can walk, Conan of Cimmeria," she laughed. Spreading her arms wide, she swayed before him, her golden head lolling sensuously, her scintillant eyes half shadowed beneath their long silken lashes. "Am I not beautiful, oh man?"
"Like Dawn running naked on the snows," he muttered, his eyes burning like those of a wolf.
"Then why do you not rise and follow me? Who is the strong warrior who falls down before me? She chanted in maddening mockery. "Lie down and die in the snow with the other fools, Conan of the black hair. You cannot follow where I would lead."

Fine Foreshadowing

Howard had a deft touch for keeping his readers leaning forward. In the beginning of the story, as Atali leads him from the battlefield and the chase begins, Conan warns her about trying any tricks:

"You cannot escape me!" he roared. "Lead me into a trap and I'll pile the heads of your kinsmen at your feet! Hide from me and I'll tear apart the mountains to find you! I'll follow you to hell!"

Of course, we know that she did exactly what he told her not to do, and he made good his boast.

Second, as the race proceeds, Conan runs so hard "The great veins in his temples swelled and throbbed and his teeth gnashed." Later, after killing her brothers and watching her nearly fade from his sight as he stuck doggedly to her trail, Howard stays stuck on Conan's mouth: "But grinding his teeth until the blood started from his gums, he reeled on..."

And how many times does Howard mention the veil Atali wears casually about her hips? That "light veil of gossamer" winds up being the only evidence Conan has that he is not mad, as his saviors see:

He broke off, glaring at the object that still dangled from his clenched left fist; the others gaped silently at the veil he held up – a wisp of gossamer that was never spun by human distaff.

It is very appropriate that the veil is mentioned in the last paragraph of this story. Howard dropped enough clues about it all the way through.

Summary

This is another of Howard's short, concise stories from the period when he was on top of his game. In 1932 Howard was four years from committing suicide. His stories were getting better, his audience was growing, and his skills as a writer were reaching their crest. *The Frost Giant's Daughter* has all the fundamentals of a great story – adventure, sex, and mystery – and is colored and chronicled well. Farnsworth Wright may not have liked it, but I'd hazard a guess that his readers would have. Adding a Brundage cover to the three images found on the preceding page would sure make the collection complete.

After talking with Rusty Burke, it now seems clear to me that, aside from the Sack of Vanarium, a story which unfortunately was never written, this is the earliest Conan tale, predating *The Tower of the Elephant*. Howard himself says that Conan's first adventures are to the north, and not south, as some have speculated. That would make him about 16 years old, just starting his "life in now ways tame." – GR

New Cover Art on the Web

I hope you have a bookmark at the REH-Japan Fan Club site. On Dec. 18 a whole new batch of obscure Howard covers was scanned and uploaded. Files include *The Adventures of Lal Singh, A Gazeteer of the Hyborian World of Conan, The Grey God Passes*, etc. The list even includes *The Garden of Fear* (1945). Add this to the already rich collection of artwork found there, and you'll see why it's a great place to keep coming back to. Try this url:

<http://www.bekkoame.or.jp/~pancra/reh/galle/galle0.html>

Amplifications and Corrections:

Rusty has already admonished me about blaming Baen for the edits to The Dark Man. It turns out I was a bit slam-happy, because Baen simply used the manuscript they were given, and nobody caught the subtleties. It's clear, however, that only the pulp originals are free from controversy, and if Baen does ever get the right to produce a Conan collection, they'd do well to carefully consider their source.

The Hyborian Review is published monthly by Garret Romaine and distributed free via e-mail. Send feedback to: gromaine3@comcast.net. Back issues - <http://www.prosalg.no/~savage/conan/publications>

NEXT Issue: An El Borak story.

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