

The Hyborian Review

Volume 5, Number 1.

April 30, 2000

Back in black...

Great REH Quotes

From *Selected Letters, 1923-1930*, a snip from Howard's correspondence with Harold Preece, dated 20 October 1928 (p. 19)

I wish I had money – I'd take several courses in anthropology and the various phases of antiquity, and spend the rest of my life exploring ruins in out-of-the-way corners of the globe. The future of the race interests me little; the present but a little more; the past, greatly. An occultist of my acquaintance, who has gone deeper in the matter than any man I ever knew, says I have a very ancient soul, am a reincarnated Atlantean, in fact! Maybe if there's anything to this soul business, or to reincarnation, that theory is maybe right. Sure I live in the dust of the past and my dreams are seldom of present or future, but I am ever treading roads of the dim ages and strange are some of the figures whom I meet and strange the shapes who stare at me.



Reprint info - See page 4.

Shadows in the Moonlight

By John Romaine and Garret Romaine

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[This issue marks the debut review of John Romaine, a voracious reader of Howard for nearly two decades.]

When Howard was on top of his game, the results could be breathtaking. By April of 1934 Howard had certainly mastered Conan the Barbarian – but, with just two years left to live, it was scant solace. Nevertheless, let's take a look at *Shadows in the Moonlight* for two reasons:

- 1) It shows Howard's anthropological questing in its depiction of yet another man-ape menace; and
- 2) This is the third Conan title with the word, or a derivative of the word, 'shadow'. Why?

Introduction

Robert Weinberg, author of *The Annotated Guide to Robert E. Howard's Sword and Sorcery* (Starmont; 1976) describes *Shadows in the Moonlight* as "excellent", and points particularly to the mystical, otherworldly element to the tale. The overview is this: after raiding Koth, Zamora and Turan, Conan and his Free Companions join up with the Kozaki just west of the Vilayet Sea and Turan. Conan and the Kozaki are lured by the Turanians into a trap near the Ilbars River, close to the Vilayet Sea. Conan escapes, picking up the baggage of a runaway wench and rowing all night to the Isle of Iron Statues, where he encounters a giant man-ape in the jungle, statues that come to life, and a roving band of pirates. By the end of the story, Conan has taken over as captain of the crew, won the girl, and is free to resume his career of plundering the Vilayet.

Says Weinberg: “The story is pure escapism. Howard, by this time, was a master of his craft, and many elements are woven into the story, giving it a satisfying complexity. There are three major plot threads. One is the supernatural element, with the black statues in the moonlight. The second is the mysterious enemy in the treetops that threatens Conan and Olivia. The third string is the pirate band. All elements are well handled and tie together nicely so that something is constantly happening.” (p. 112)

Man-Apes on the Loose

When Howard constructed Thak, in *Rogues in the House*, he built a truly repellant creature meant to register bestiality, serving to juxtapose the human strain residing in the monster. First, the beast: witness the fear in Murilo’s voice as he asks the dazed priest about his house pet:

“In Mitra’s name, Nabonidus,” gasped Murilo, shaken, “what is it?”
“That is Thak,” answered the priest, caressing his temple.
“Some would call him an ape, but he is almost as different from the real ape as he is different from a real man. His people dwell far to the east, in the mountains that fringe the eastern frontiers of Zamora. There are not many of them, but if they are not exterminated, I believe they will become human beings, in perhaps a hundred thousand years. They are in the formative stage; they are neither apes, as their remote ancestors were, not men, as their remote descendants may be. They dwell in the high crags of well-nigh inaccessible mountains, knowing nothing of fire or the making of shelter or garments, or the use of weapons. Yet they have a language of a sort, consisting mainly of grunts and clicks. I took Thak when



he was a cub...” (Grant; 1976. p. 47)

Part man, part beast. Yet Thak struck back at his overlord when least expected, and took control of the manor. And Howard makes sure we know that even Nabonidus is worried about this enemy. At one point, the priest is shaken and nearly incoherent, babbling about the strength of the ape-thing. Finally, of course, Conan subdues the creature in a heroic fight, and the Red Priest is left to feel pity for his slave, released by death.

“Nabonidus was staring down at the still figure as if he could not believe his own eyes. Black, hairy, abhorrent, the monster lay, grotesque in the tatters of the scarlet robe; yet more human than bestial, even so, and possessed somehow of a vague and terrible pathos. Even the Cimmerian sensed this, for he panted: “I have slain a *man* tonight, not a *beast*. I will count him among the chiefs whose souls I’ve sent into the dark, and my women will sing of him.” (Grant; p. 63)

Another great Howard concoction was met in *Hour of the Dragon*. Here, Howard introduced the gray ape of the Vilayet which Conan was forced to fell in his escape from the dungeons of Nemedra. Where Thak was intelligent enough to strike and overpower his master, exhibiting faint signs of human understanding, the gray apes of the Vilayet had no such human attribute. Still, Howard was merely interested in posing an interesting threat to Conan’s escape:

“What it was he could not tell, but it was heavy and huge, and yet it moved with more than human ease and swiftness....Now the thing was emerging from the cell and was again advancing up the corridor, its misshapen head close to the ground. It paid no more heed to the locked doors. It was smelling out his trail. He saw it more plainly now; the gray light limned a giant anthropomorphic body, but vaster of bulk and girth than any man. It went on two legs, though it stooped forward, and it was grayish and shaggy, its thick coat shot with silver. Its head was a grisly travesty of the human, its long arms hung nearly to the ground. Conan knew it at last – understood the meaning of those crushed and broken bones in the dungeon, and recognized the haunter of the pits. It was a gray ape, one of the grisly man-eaters from the forests that wave on the mountainous eastern shores of the Sea of Vilayet. Half mythical and altogether horrible, these apes were the goblins of Hyborian legendry, and were in reality ogres of the natural world, cannibals and murderers of the nighted forests. (Putnam; 1977, p. 50)

Once Conan had sunk a stout poniard into the ape’s chest, there was no lingering look into the dying eyes, no pronouncement of human pathos. And, indeed, Howard painted this menace as merely inconvenient; otherwise, it might have been somewhat unremarkable if not for the comparison with the terror of *Shadows in the Moonlight*:

“Out of the shadows of the cliffs moved a monstrous shambling bulk – an anthropomorphic horror, a grotesque travesty of creation.

In general outline it was not unlike a man. But its face, limned in the bright moonlight, was bestial, with close-set ears, flaring nostrils, and a great flabby-lipped mouth in which gleamed white tusklike fangs. It was covered with shaggy grayish hair shot with silver, which shone in the moonlight, and its great misshapen paws hung nearly to the earth. Its bulk was tremendous; as it stood on its short, bowed legs, its bullet-head rose above that of the man who faced it; the sweep of the hairy breast and giant shoulders was breathtaking; the huge arms were like knotted trees...(Conan the Freebooter, p. 131)

Weinberg claims that “apes are a popular menace in Howard stories and he used the theme as often as possible without being too repetitious.” In truth, Howard pitted Conan against snakes, man-bats, and wizards plenty of times, and gave enough variety to avoid the appearance of being devoid of new ideas. What is interesting here is that Howard couldn’t just leave it at a giant ape – it had to have evidence of human qualities, as well as intelligence.

In *Shadows*, Howard gave us several clues to the “human” qualities in the ape. First, it threw a boulder at Conan and Olivia. Overhand, presumably. Second, it fought in silence, without the roars and defiance of an animal. Third, there’s this sentence: “Olivia, half fainting, saw the ape heaving, thrashing, and writhing, gripping, manlike, the hilt that jutted from its body.” And fourth, Howard imagined that the beast reached their island sanctuary by clinging to a piece of driftwood during one of the Vilayet’s infrequent storms.

What a Fight It Was

Before we leave it, what an epic struggle Howard painted between the gray ape and Conan. “This was less a struggle between man and beast than a conflict between two creatures of the wild, equally merciless and ferocious,” Howard wrote. And he made sure Olivia saw it: “she sensed a kinship in the antagonists that was almost appalling.”

One of Howard’s best traits as a writer was his economical style. While his prose might turn purple, and his sentences could run to the wordy end of the spectrum, he rarely lingered over scenes that needed no extra emphasis. The battle between these two opponents is swift and deadly. Howard did a remarkable job describing the battle, communicating just how strong and fast Conan really is.

Howard uses the words *instant*, *speed*, *swiftly*, and *quick* to impart the sense of speed to the fight. “Conan’s action was a blur of speed Olivia’s eye could not follow,” REH

writes at one point. “Only the iron neck-muscles of the Cimmerian saved him from a broken neck at that instant,” Howard writes later.

Conan’s incredible speed is the only thing that saves him as he evades the deadly grasp of the ape-man. Could Howard fans accept anything less? Truly, this is great stuff!

For, in classic Cimmerian fashion, the fight is a bloody one. First, Conan hacks off a limb, shearing “through one of those massive arms between shoulder and elbow. A great spout of blood deluged the sword as the severed member fell, twitching horribly, but even as the sword bit through, the other malformed hand locked in Conan’s black mane.” Mercy! The fight progressed, and Howard’s prose kept its compact craft. While some critics might complain that Howard’s style of writing contains overly long sentences, he does break them well with punctuation. In fact, he uses commas, colons and semicolons as well as anyone in the business.

[Unfortunately, the most common version of this story is found in *Conan the Freebooter*, and where Howard ends and deCamp starts is a mystery without *Weird Tales* pages to peruse. While it is best not to assume anything, most of the passages quoted here at least “feel” like true Howard.]

The fight progresses quickly, over several paragraphs, but Howard has warned us that the struggle “which lasted only seconds, [...] seemed like ages to the paralyzed girl.”

In the end, the strength of the son of Cimmeria is his best defense. “His left hand darted out to clamp on the beast’s squat throat, his left knee was jammed hard against the brute’s hairy belly.”

Isn’t this one of the best fight scenes ever written by Howard? The reader can almost find himself holding his breath in tense anticipation of what happens next.

“The Cimmerian resisted...with his left arm rigid as iron, while the sword in his right hand, wielded like a butcher knife, sank again and again into the groin, breast, and belly of his captor. The beast took its punishment in awful silence, apparently unweakened by the blood that gushed from its ghastly wounds.” (p. 132)

Any other mortal man in Conan’s place would already have been torn to pieces. The fight is awful; man triumphs, but barely. Howard makes sure to remind us that our hero is human, at least, and feels pain. “Crom! [the Cimmerian] panted. “I feel as if I’d been racked! I’d rather fight a dozen men. Blast him, he’s torn a handful of my hair out by the roots.”

Interestingly, the great ape vanquished by Conan is not the only animal featured in the story. One additional “character” from the island menagerie that must be mentioned is the great parrot. Introduced early in the adventure, but still very much alive in the end, the parrot gives the story more volume and mystery, and lends more supernatural suspense to the iron statues. It is almost as if Howard used the parrot to transition from the dead ape to the next complication.

“Crom!” muttered the Cimmerian. “Here is the grandfather of all parrots. He must be a thousand years old! Look at the evil wisdom of his eyes. What mysteries do you guard, Wise Devil?”

Abruptly the bird spread its flaming wings and, soaring from its perch, cried out harshly: “*Yagkoolan yok tha, xuthalla!*” and, with a wild screech of horribly human laughter, rushed away through the trees to vanish in the opalescent shadows. (p. 108)



Unfortunately, “*Shadows in the Moonlight*” didn’t make the front cover of the April, 1934 issue of *Weird Tales*. How little they knew back then. --JR

The Beast Within

One might wonder why it’s worthwhile to conjure up so many words about the animals of this Howard story. After all, the wench Olivia is much more compelling. But in reality, Olivia is “just another girl” in the Conan universe. With her regal background and courtly ways, she is a civilized counterweight to Conan’s Cimmerian heritage. Where she is weak, he is strong. Where she swoons, he grits his teeth.

REH gives his hero a frighteningly animalistic fury in the opening scenes of this tale -- unlike most Howard yarns:

...a terrible apparition burst from the reedy jungle, sounding an inarticulate cry of hate. Olivia, staring up from the ground, saw what she took to be either a savage or a madman advancing on Shah Amurath in an attitude of deadly menace. He was powerfully built, naked but for a girdled loincloth which was stained with blood and crusted with dried mire. His black mane was matted with mud and clotted blood; there were streaks of dried blood on his chest and limbs, dried blood on the long straight sword he gripped in his right hand. From under the tangle of his locks, bloodshot eyes glared like coals of blue fire....

The stranger’s bloodthirsty joy was terrible to behold. His jaws champed spasmodically, froth appeared on his blackened lips....

“Ha!” It was the bark of a timber wolf. “Shah Amurath, the great lord of Akif! Oh, damn you, how I love the sight of you -- you, who fed my comrades to the vultures, who tore them between wild horses, blinded and maimed and mutilated them -- ai, you dog, you filthy dog!” His voice rose to a maddened scream, and he charged.”

The swooning slave girl never expects Conan to survive the first charge, but he does. He is, after all, not an animal. Not that it’s easy to tell, when the downed Shah asks for quarter and Conan hacks the man to pieces, frightening the girl out of her wits. But when he turns to face her, the animal in him is gone. “There was a difference in his bearing. His bloodshot eyes were sane. It was as if the blood he had just shed had quenched the fire of his frenzy.”

Thus does Howard balance Conan against not only the true nature of berserk fury, but the civilized nature of the rest of the world. Here are two far more civilized people, far less barbarian. Both soon find their lives are in the hands of this massive man. One will regret it severely; the other will find salvation from the slavery and bondage of civilization. Yet at the same time, man-apes and other barbarous creatures have no hope in matching their limited wits against the Cimmerian mind, nor in opposing steel with tooth and talon. -- **GR & JR**

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NEXT Issue: *Shadows in the Moonlight*, Part 2.

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