

The Hyborian Review

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Right on time...

Great REH Quotes

From *Robert E. Howard, Selected Letters 1931 - 1936*, copyright March 1991 by Necronomicon Press.

Edited by Glenn Lord.

The last letter in the series.

[To August Derleth, 9 May 1936]

Dear August:

I am indeed sorry to learn of the deaths in your family. Death to the old is inevitable, and yet somehow I often feel that it is a greater tragedy than death to the young. When a man dies young he misses much suffering, but the old have only life as a possession and somehow to me the tearing of a pitiful remnant from weak old fingers is more tragic than the looting of a life in its full rich prime. I don't want to live to be old. I want to die when my time comes, quickly and suddenly, in the full tide of my strength and health.

[snip]

The official Barry Windsor-Smith web page - p. 4

Sean Moore: 1965 - 1998

In the minds of *howardist pedantist* Sean Moore was simply -- a pasticher. But after he died in a single-car accident last month in Colorado, we ought to at least mark the passing of someone who was a Howard aficionado, not to mention a subscriber of this rag.

Moore was a good writer. I've reviewed his efforts in the pages of *The Hyborian Review*, and I generally liked his work. *Conan the Hunter* was forgettable, but Moore was just getting started. In *Review* Issue 1, vol.3, *Shaman's Curse* was ably approved by the late David Romaine, who felt that all it lacked was wine and wenching. In his final Conan book, *Grim Grey God*, Moore did an excellent job of reminding us why we enjoy Conan. He blended in the classic pieces of a well-told tale, with references to legends of yesteryear. Like Howard, he tossed in alliterations with well-timed regularity. Then, Moore did the novelization of *Kull the Conqueror*, which he sent me. It was okay, and I for one eagerly awaited his next effort. Alas, it was not meant to be...

Reprint info - See page 4.

Additional Snippets from Kull the Barbarian *By Garret Romaine*

The Curse of the Golden Skull

Written by Robert E. Howard

Published in *Kull*, Bantam, 1978.

[Since it's only a short story, here's the whole damned thing...]

Rotath of Lemuria lay dying. Blood had ceased to flow from the deep sword gash under his heart, but the pulse in his temple hammered like kettledrums.

Rotath lay on a marble floor. Granite columns rose about him and a silver idol stared with ruby eyes at the man who lay at its feet. The bases of the columns were carved with curious monsters; above the shrine sounded a vague whispering. The trees which hemmed in and hid that mysterious fane spread long waving branches above it, and these branches were vibrant with leaves that rustled in the wind. From time to time, great black roses scattered their dusky petals down.

Rotath lay dying and he used his fading breath in calling down curses on his slayers -- on the faithless king who had betrayed him, and on that barbarian chief, Kull of Atlantis, who dealt him the death blow.

Acolyte of the nameless gods, and dying in an unknown shrine on the leafy summit of Lemuria's highest mountain -- Rotath's eyes smouldered with a terrible cold fire. A pageant of glory and splendor passed before his mind's eye. The acclaim of worshippers, the roar of silver trumpets, the whispering shadows of mighty and mystic temples where great wings swept unseen -- then the intrigues, the onslaught of the invaders -- death!

Rotath cursed the king of Lemuria -- the king to whom he had taught fearful and ancient mysteries and forgotten abominations. Fool that he had been to reveal his powers to a weakling, who, having learned to fear him, had turned to foreign kings for aid.

How strange it seemed, that he, Rotath of the Moonstone and the Asphodel, sorcerer and magician, should be gasping out his breath on the marble floor, a victim to that most material of threats -- keen pointed sword in a sinewy hand.

Rotath cursed the limitations of the flesh. He felt his brain crumbling and he cursed all the men of all the worlds. He cursed them by Hotath and Helgor, by Ra and Ka, and Valka.

He cursed all men living and dead, and all the generations unborn for a million centuries to come, naming Vramma and Jaggtá-noga and Kamma and Kulthas. He cursed humanity by the fane of the Black Gods, the tracks of the Serpent Ones, the talons of the Ape Lords, and the iron-bound books of Shuma Gorath.

He cursed goodness and virtue and light, speaking the names of gods forgotten even by the priests of Lemuria. He invoked the dark, monstrous shadows of the elder worlds, and of those black suns which lurk forever behind the stars.

He felt the shades gather about him. He was going fast. And closing about him in an ever nearing ring, he sensed the tiger-taloned devils who awaited his coming. He saw their bodies of solid jet and the great red caverns of their eyes. Behind hovered the white shadows of they who had died upon his altars, in horrid torment. Like mist in the moonlight they floated, great luminous eyes fixed on him in sad accusation, a never ending host.

Rotath feared, and fearing, his curses grew louder, his blasphemies grew more terrible. With one wild passion of fury, he placed a curse on his own bones, that they might bring death and horror to the sons of men. But even as he spoke, he knew that years and ages would pass and his bones turn to dust in that forgotten shrine before any man's foot disturbed its silence. So he mustered his fast waning powers for one last invocation to the dread beings he had served, one last feat of magic. He uttered a blood-freezing formula, naming a terrible name.

And soon he felt mighty elemental powers set in motion. He felt his bones growing hard and brittle. A coldness transcending earthly coldness passed over him and he lay still. The leaves whispered and the silver god laughed with cold gemmed eyes.

Years stretched into centuries, centuries became ages. The green oceans rose and wrote an epic poem in emerald and the rhythm thereof was terrible. Thrones toppled and silver trumpets fell silent forever. The races of men passed as smoke drifts from the breast of a summer. The roaring jade green seas engulfed the lands and all mountains sank, even the highest mountain of Lemuria.

A man thrust aside the trailing vines and stared. A heavy beard masked his face and mire slimed his boots. Above and about him hung the thick tropic jungle in breathless and exotic brooding. Orchids flamed and breathed about him.

Wonder was in his wide eyes. He gazed between shattered granite columns upon a crumbling marble floor. Vines twined thickly, like green serpents, among those columns and trailed their sinuous lengths

across the floor. A curious idol, long fallen from a broken pedestal, lay upon the floor and stared up in red, unblinking eyes. The man noted the character of this corroded thing and a strong shudder shook him. He glanced unbelievably again at the other thing which lay on the marble floor, and shrugged his shoulders.

He entered the shrine. He gazed at the carvings on the bases of the sullen columns, wondering at their unholy and indescribable appearance. Over all the scent of the orchids hung like a heavy fog.

This small, rankly grown swampy island was once the pinnacle of a great mountain, mused the man, and he wondered what strange people had reared up this fane -- and left the monstrous thing lying before the fallen idol. He thought of the fame which his discoveries should bring him -- of the acclaim of mighty universities and powerful scientific societies.

He bent above the skeleton on the floor, noting the inhumanly long finger bones, the curious formation of the feet, the deep cavern-like eye sockets, the jutting frontal bone, the general appearance of the great domed skull, which differed so horribly from mankind as he knew it.

What long dead artisan had shaped the thing with such incredible skill? He bent closer, noting the rounded ball-and-socket of the joints, the slight depressions on flat surfaces where muscles had been attached. And he started as the stupendous truth was borne upon him.

This was no work of human art -- that skeleton had once been clothed in flesh and had walked and spoken and lived. And this was impossible, his reeling brain told him, for the bones were of solid gold.

The orchids nodded in the shadows of the trees. The shrine lay in purple and black shade. The man brooded above the bones and wondered. How could he know of an elder world sorcery great enough to serve undying hate, by lending that hate a concrete substance, impervious to Time's destructions?

The man laid his hand on the golden skull. A sudden deathly shriek broke the silence. The man in the shrine reeled up, screaming, took a single staggering step and then fell headlong, to lie with writhing limbs on the vine-crossed marble floor.

The orchids showered down on him in sensuous rain and his blind, clutching hands tore them into exotic fragments as he cried. Silence fell and an adder crawled sluggishly from within the golden skull.

Short, sweet, and to the point, don't you think? The first time through, I was struck by all the mentions of foliage and plant life. Roses, orchids, leaf upon leaf; and "the thick tropic jungle in breathless and exotic brooding." In the end the orchids shower down in a "sensuous rain." It was as though Howard was working a theme, I thought...

Then I re-read it, and what pulled me in the next time through was Howard the Geologist. If you read the story for geological items, look for metals, rocks and minerals. You'll get the following: granite, marble, rubies, jade, emeralds, iron, silver, gold...then he used dust, caverns, gemmed, mountains, mire and island as geological or geomorphological terms. It couldn't have been accidental...although this phrase: "keen pointed sword in a sinewy hand" read better to me if sword is replaced by the word 'steel'. Oh, well...

Howard dabbled frequently in geological theories. His single continent idea for Lemuria resembles the Pangea supercontinent taught in first-year geology classes. Of course, the theory of continental drift hadn't developed yet, or Howard would probably have used that concept as well. Regardless, he demonstrates over and over again his appreciation for the models of mountain building, and his descriptions of mountain peaks and hidden valleys always seemed to ring true for me.

[These little contradictions always bring a smile to my face, by the way, because it's clear that somewhere in his educational resume, some teacher somewhere must have gotten through to him on the subject of earth studies. I know he read voraciously, and taught himself much of what he knew, but I also know that geological concepts are introduced early in grade school -- witness the paper mache' volcano model most kids make before the fifth grade. What makes me smile is recalling his tirades about education and teachers that he berates Novalyne Price with; for all his complaining, he certainly seems to understand the world around him.]

Back to the story: to twist things around further, it was neither rock nor plant, but a higher life form that lay dead, its bones fossilized into gold; it was an animal, a man, that tracked down the crumbled ruins; and it was an animal, a snake, that ended the story. And of the four elements -- wind, water, land, and fire -- only fire is missing. That is, if you discount the fiery hell of poison in the dead adventurer's veins.

Who's That Man?

Speaking of teachers, notice the whack Howard gets in on the man he's about to kill off. "He thought of the fame which his discoveries should bring him -- of the acclaim of mighty universities and powerful scientific societies." It's pretty clear how much stock Howard put in such institutions. I thought of the tea parties Howard was often invited to by local ladies that wanted to talk to him about writing. He exploded to Novalyne Price that he would never go to another one of those. Yet weren't these same ladies fighting the 'maggots of corruption' that threatened civilization? Weren't those dainty ladies fighting his same battle, in their way?

Or did Howard really fight what he saw as inevitable? There's a passage in *One Who Walked Alone* where Howard confesses to Novalyne that he's thinking about going to church again, going to town functions, resuming a more normal persona. Would that be admitting that society is winning? Novalyne always points out that the same society that Howard says is crumbling is building schools and churches and hospitals and battling back against the forces of chaos. Howard doesn't want to hear it, because it flies against his pet theory -- the one that motivates his heroes and makes him money. He's hoist on his own petard, so to speak, and it serves to drive him further away from weird fantasy tales and closer to the westerns he dreams of writing. There, the heroes will be normal men fighting for normal things; readers would instantly sympathize with the heroes and hiss the villains.

In *Golden Skull*, Howard takes full advantage of the opportunity to set up the explorer as not quite sympathetic. At first, I thought to myself 'How cool; a long-lost shrine on a misty island!' I was ready to cheer the hero, to hope he would make it back to The World. The idea of fame and fortune certainly popped up in *my* head. But Howard had dropped enough clues -- the threats of the wizard and his blasphemous curses, the mist, the beard and mire on the man...all good foreboding, on a very subliminal level. I should have known what was coming...

The man lost Howard's sympathy when he conjured up images in his head of turning the discovery into wealth and fame. Greed turned to grief by the time the author was done. Was it coincidence that an adder was conveniently coiled inside the golden skull? Not in Bob Howard's universe.

There are some gorgeous alliterations in this story. "Vines twined thickly..." or "Wonder was in his wide eyes" are both excellent. The way the orchids "flamed and breathed" or the way "the green oceans rose and wrote an epic poem in emerald" marks this as true Howard prose.

Summary

At 1,200 words, 'Golden Skull' will never rank as one of Howard's immortal works. It barely even fits into the Kull collection, as the great King is referred to only in passing.

But as an example of what was great in Howard's writing, this little yarn has much to recommend it. It has his classic trademark alliterations and metaphors bursting off the page. The sorcery element is powerful, especially with all the gods the wizard calls on -- you might not have even known there were that many!

And the cynicism about civilization, scientific societies, and powerful universities is eminently Howardian. Yet for all that, it is the idea of this story being the equivalent of a da Vinci pencil sketch that appeals to me the most.

Howard experimented often with the hero just offstage. This was discussed for awhile on the REH mailing list in late March, and I'll recap here. Keep in mind that Kull never appears in *The Altar and the Scorpion* either; in that small story, two lovers flee an evil sorcerer to their pagan altar and plead with the scorpion god to save them. Kull is rushing to the rescue, bound to arrive too late, so Howard sends in a scorpion's sting to save the day.

In REH's Conan series, there are several stories where he is actually nothing but a bit player: *Wolves Beyond the Border*, *Drums of Tombalku*, and *The Black Stranger*. In 'Wolves', Conan's stirring up rebellion of the Aquilonian state is mentioned, but he stays away from a leading role in the majority of the story. 'Drums' and 'Stranger' follow similar tracks. In 'Drums' he shows up at the last minute to rescue his friend, and the rest of the story is almost anti-climatic after that, even with kings dying and riots in the street. Howard has enough confidence in his hero to keep him out of the limelight until needed.

In fact, even in *A Witch Shall Be Born*, you might recall that Howard used a series of letters to compress the timeline greatly -- letters that discussed Conan, surely, but served to keep him from center stage. The correspondence rushed the story headlong, basically preventing the creation of a book-length story (to our everlasting chagrin...)

These plot devices and tricks of the trade came from only one place -- the hundreds, if not thousands, of stories that Howard read in his "between" times. Novalyne Price recalled that whenever Howard was between stories, he read for hours, then he'd take a break and jump in his car and travel around, talking to folks he saw throughout the countryside. He would hang out on Main street, shoot the breeze, and generally research like a grad student.

At one point, Novalyne tried to show him where the last Indian was killed in the Cross Plains area. She related the story as she'd heard it, and was proud that it had happened so close to her own backyard. Howard, who had already given her a bunch of crap about how his mother had picked her out as part Indian the minute she laid eyes on Novalyne, just stood there and listened, amused.

When she asked what was wrong, he then revealed that according to the research he'd done over the last month, he had never heard of a busier Indian -- the rascal had been killed in at least three different places!

What any successful writer will tell you is that you have to be as crazed at your reading and researching as you do your writing. Talking comes in third, but it's a close third. Writers are basically communicators, and to read Price's book about Howard, it quickly becomes obvious that what he called 'shooting off his mouth' was his way of working out stories aloud. Price could feel it at times, and let him go on even when it was her natural inclination to tell him to shut him up. What's interesting is that he advised her against telling people stories that she intended to write down, because the fun of telling it for the first time is then lost to thin air. Yet he seemed to be doing it all the time. One can only wonder if this isn't just another of his amazing contradictions.

Writers are also natural copycats. When a writer such as Howard reads a story with a new, interesting plot device, he's going to tuck it away and try it out some time. Like many other devices he tried out with Kull, Howard eventually would do the job even better when he wrote up his Conan yarns.

The full range of Howard's writing skills never ceases to amaze me. What I like about this story is that it is so concisely drawn. The length is easy, the pace is excellent, the images are clear and graphic, and the writing is rich.

It's a story that would make an interesting test for a budding Howard purist -- you could change Kull to Sarkon or some such made up name and put it in front of them, and then dare them to guess the author. -- **GR**

Barry Windsor-Smith -- The Web Page

Check out Barry's web site, or better yet, check out a stunning rendition of Smith's Conan at <http://www.barrywindsor-smith.com/mcconan3.html>.

If this doesn't make you yearn for the good ol' days of Conan the Barbarian 1-24, you've been watching Rolf too long.

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: Marvel recovers somewhat.

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