The Hyborian Review

Volume 3, Number 8. August 31, 1998

Laboring, I tell ya...

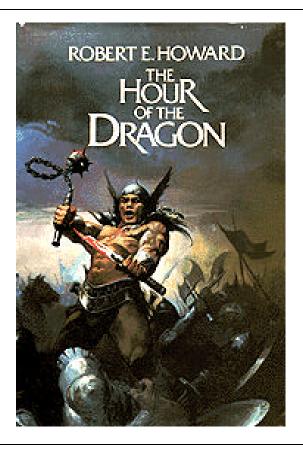
Great REH Quotes

From *The Hour of the Dragon*, Howard's full-length Conan tale, written in the spring of 1934, published serially in *Weird Tales*, December 1935-April 1936.

In a small glade below him four soldiers in Nemedian chain-mail were binding a noose about the neck of a gaunt old woman in peasant garb. A heap of fagots, bound with cord on the ground nearby, showed what her occupation had been when surprized by these stragglers.

Conan felt slow fury swell his heart as he looked silently down and saw the ruffians dragging her toward a tree whose low-spreading branches were obviously intended to act as a gibbet. He had crossed the frontier an hour ago. He was standing on his own soil, watching the murder of one of his own subjects. The old woman was struggling with surprizing strength and energy, and as he watched, she lifted her head and voiced again the strange, weird, far-carrying call he had heard before. It was echoed as if in mockery by the raven flapping above the trees. The soldiers laughed roughly, and one struck her on the mouth.

Conan swung from his weary steed and dropped down the face of the rocks, landing with a clang of mail on the grass... "Dogs!" he said without passion and without mercy. "Do Nemedian jackals set themselves up as executioners and hang my subjects at will? First you must take the head of their king. Here I stand, awaiting your lordly pleasure!"



Reprint info - See page 4.

Conan the Barbarian in The Slithering Shadow

A Review in three parts, By Garret Romaine

The Slithering Shadow, copyright 1933 by Popular Fiction Publishing Co. for *Weird Tales*, September 1933.

Although felt by some to be one of the weakest of the Conan stories, in its way *The Slithering Shadow* is an important work. It has three main strengths:

- 1) the story is a precursor to *Red Nails*;
- 2) Howard's bias toward barbarians; and
- 3) another good whipping scene between two opposite, but equally compelling, female leads.

A Quick Synopsis

In case you don't have a copy of *Conan the Adventurer* handy, this 37-page story is summed up thusly: Conan and his companion are lost in the Stygian desert when they spy a city in the distance. They reach the gates, eat and drink, slay the slithering god that haunts the citizens, and flee back to the desert.

The detailed description would contain a few more clues as to why this is arguably one of the worst Conan stories (although better than anything any pastiche).

It turns out the people are almost continually occupying slabs or mats, dreaming lotus dreams. They are quite advanced – they rub radium gemstones for light, grow food from thin air, and have brewed an elixir to rival Viagra. The bad news is that Thog, a living god, comes once in awhile to snatch them as they dream. Conan learns this from Thalis, a lusty, brassy Stygian babe who decides she'll have to slay Natala to clear a path to Conan. But Thog intervenes, eats Thalis and threatens Natala; so Conan fights him off, getting torn to shreds, but the elixir gives him energy to escape.

The Critics Say...

First, let's give a fairly well-known Howard scholar a shot at the story. Robert Weinberg, who in 1976 published *The Annotated Guide to Robert E. Howard's Sword & Sorcery* [through Starmont House press in West Linn, Oregon] did not give *Shadow* high marks. Wrote Weinberg:

The *Slithering Shadow* is easily one of the worst Conan stories. It has most of Howard's faults with few of his virtues...Coincidence in the story is carried to extremes. The worst, of course, is Conan falling through a trap door at precisely the right moment, exactly in the spot to rescue Natala. Later, after being so badly wounded by Thog, it is a more-than-believable coincidence that has Natala finding the magic elixir that makes Conan good as new...

The plot of the story is equally flimsy. There is little to it other than the fight with the Xuthals and the fight with Thog. Natala is not much of a character either. The girl is in a perpetual state of terror throughout the story and one has to wonder what Conan sees in her. (Weinberg, page 128)

All of which, by the way, is pretty accurate. Weinberg knows his Howard; for example, he once commented that *Beyond the Black River* "is one of those stories that elevates Howard's sword-and-sorcery fiction well above any other that has ever been written." (p. 138) But *Shadow* just doesn't have much going for it, on the surface.

So, under the skin we go, looking at three areas again:

- 1) Xuthal as pre-Xuchotl –a warm-up for Red Nails;
- 2) Barbarians and their lust for life Howard's favorite theme
- 3) Sex that sells a woman with a whip

Xuthal - A Sci-Fi Dream Destination

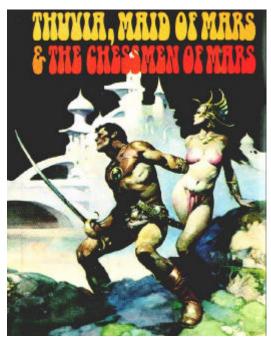
An isolated, rarely visited vacation spot, Xuthal has a lot going against it. For one thing, the Chamber of Commerce is always stuck in lotus-dreams, and not likely to send back any travel brochures. The only way to find it seems to be to stagger unawares upon the walls out of the southern Stygian desert.

The city-state-fortress concept has a long history in science fiction. We discussed the idea lately on the REH-list and one poster (Rodney@fast.net) wondered if this story wasn't pretty fair evidence for Howard reading Edgar Rice Burroughs.

In particular, Rod pointed out these similarities between the Burroughs classic *Thuvia, Maid of Mars* and *The Slithering Shadow*: (REH-list, 8/13/98)

- 1) Both stories involved radium gems for light
- 2) Citizens were in a dream state
- 3) Super-intelligent and scientific beings
- 4) Haunted by predatory gods
- 5) Solitary city surrounded by emptiness

(There's more, but you get the point.)



Frazetta's classic shot of Thuvia, with a fantastic city behind them.

It's the city that first "stars" in the tale. Howard painted Xuthal as a strange, unfriendly place, while seeming to imply that it was made of jade or emerald:

[Conan] saw a wide open expanse, like a court, bordered by the arched doorways of houses composed of the same greenish material as the outer walls. These edifices were lofty and imposing, pinnacled with shining domes and minarets....In the center of the court rose the square curb of a well... (*Adventurer*, page 106)

Once the supposedly dead guard at the gate comes to life, the pace picks up and the weird nature of the tale unfolds. Soon, Conan is prowling the inner parts of the city, which is apparently one giant building connected by walls, corridors and tunnels...

A weird, unreal atmosphere hung over all. Traversing this dim, silent palace was like an opium dream. Some of the chambers were unlighted, and these they avoided. Others were bathed in a soft, weird light that seemed to emanate from jewels set in the walls in fantastic designs. (*Adventurer*, page 109)

Finally, part of the puzzle is revealed. A dark form, a foul, slithering shadow, appears before them and consumes a sleeping citizen. Conan and Natala stumble away, only to discover a waking lotus-eater who believes he has conjured up Natala out of his dreams. Conan seeks to learn more, but the interrogation does not go well:

The man did not at once reply. His dreamy, sensuous gaze rested on Natala, and he drawled, "Of all my rich visions, this is the strangest! O, girl of the golden locks, from what far dreamland do you come? From Andarra, or Tothra, or Kuth of the star-girdle?

"What madness is this?" growled the Cimmerian harshly, not relishing the man's words or manner.

The other did not heed him.

"I have dreamed more gorgeous beauties," he murmured; "lithe, women with hair dusky as night, and dark eyes of unfathomed mystery. But your skin is white as milk, your eyes are clear as dawn, and there is about you a freshness and daintiness alluring as honey. Come to my couch, little dream-girl."

He advanced and reached for her, and Conan struck aside his hand with a force that might have broken his arm. The man reeled back, clutching the numbed member, his eyes clouding.

"What rebellion of ghosts is this?" he muttered.
"Barbarian, I command ye -- begone! Fade! Dissipate!
Fade! Vanish!" (*Adventurer*, page 113)

Not likely, but nice try. Howard has put the usual effete, degenerate inhabitants into Xuthal -- and we'll talk more about this in Part 2. But let Thalis, a Stygian beauty, sum it all up:

This city is called Xuthal; it is very ancient. It is built over an oasis, which the founders of Xuthal found in their wanderings. They came from the east, so long ago that not even their descendants remember the age.

...This city is really one great palace, with every building inside the walls closely connected with the others. You might walk among these chambers for hours and see no one. At other times, you would meet hundreds of the inhabitants.

...They manufacture their own food out primal elements. They are wonderful scientists, when they are not drugged with their dream-flower. Their ancestors were mental giants, who built this marvelous city in the desert, and though the race became slaves to their curious passions, some of their wonderful knowledge remains. (*Adventurer*, page 118)

Then Came Xuchotl

Compare and contrast the description of Xuthal with what you might remember of Xuchotl, the "city of the damned" Howard created for *Red Nails*. In that epic tale, the city was surrounded not yet by desert; the plains on its flanks were littered with the wrecked remainder of a once-flourishing irrigation system. Like Xuthal, the gate was open at Xuchotl; yet instead of a mewling wench on his arm, Conan had the warrior-woman Valeria at his side, sword drawn and ready for battle. Howard also provided a better sense of foreboding in *Red Nails* when he wrote the scene where Conan and Valeria get close to Xuchotl:

The sun rose behind the city, turning the towers to a sinister crimson.

"Black last night against the moon," grunted Conan, his eyes clouding with the abysmal superstition of the barbarian. "Blood-red as a threat of blood against the sun this dawn. I do not like this city." (*Red Nails*, Berkeley, 1977, page 138)

Moodier; darker; grimmer – pick a descriptor. The architecture of the two cities is remarkably similar. Howard again used the motif of a city-palace, where all rooms connect under a single roof. Only in Xuthal, the sky is allowed in; the inhabitants have a central court to enjoy the fresh air. In Xuchotl, a greenish crystal roof covers all, casting a weird pall as the sunlight bounces off the emerald walls:

They were looking into an open street or court as one would have expected. The opened gate, or door, gave directly into a long, broad hall which ran away and away until its vista grew indistinct in the distance. It was of heroic proportions, and the floor of a curious red stone, cut in square tiles, that seemed to smolder as if with the reflection of flames. The walls were of a shiny green material.

"Jade, or I'm a Shemite!" swore Conan.

"Not in such quantity!" protested Valeria.

"I've looted enough from the Khitan caravans to know what I'm talking about," he asserted. "That's jade!" (*Red Nails*, page 139)

In Xuthal, there are catacombs, where the women-folk meet to whip, and where Thog slithers up for a periodic repast. Yet it's a fairly tame environ; Howard serves up no intimation of a foul scent or loathsome odor, nor are bones littered about.

When Howard conjured up Xuchotl, by contrast, it was hellish from top to bottom. The labyrinth below the city was used as the city mortuary. It was inhabited by Thothmekri, a devilish wretch who feasted on the victims of the feud. A ghastly creature, he whiled away his spare time by rooting amongst the bones of dead wizards for weird weapons. The dungeons of Xuchotl are foul and rank, and none but a fool would venture there save to die.

Naturally enough, Howard sent such a soul there. When Valeria stopped whipping the servant girl Yasala, her reward was a vessel of wine splashed in her eyes.

Valeria reeled backward, shaking and clawing the stinging liquid out of her eyes. Through a smarting mist she saw Yasala dart across the room, fling back a bolt, throw open the copper-bound door and run down the hall...when the pirate turned [the corner], she saw only an empty hall, and at the other end a door that gaped blackly. A damp moldy scent reeked up from it, and Valeria shivered. That must be the door that led to the catacombs. Yasala had taken refuge among the dead...[Valeria] shivered slightly at the thought of the thousands of corpses lying in their stone crypts down there, wrapped in their mouldering cloths. (*Red Nails*, page 172)

Yasala, you should have stuck around for the whippin', girl!

But then, as has been the case all along, the whipping scene in *Red Nails* was much grimmer than in *Shadow*. [Prove it, you ask? Sorry. We'll look at those lesbian love scenes, with some quotes from Margaret Brundage and some of her beautiful *Weird Tales* cover art, in Part 3.]

Soft vs. Hard

In fact, every facet of the earlier story is a pale fore-runner of the more intense version to come. In *Shadow*, Conan and Natala witness an evolutionary slide where the citizens are enveloped by their dreamy drug-state and wait patiently for Thog to devour them. In *Red Nails*, the citizenry is intent on nothing save the extermination of their foes. The bottom of the civilized ladder is in sight; the people are devolved to a most barbarous state. They are gaunt, ragged, and ready for death. When the feud is concluded, their slide is complete.

Not so for Xuthal. Every aspect of the city, of the story, of the characters, seems to be pale and at times, almost jaunty. For example, noted Howard scholar Rusty Burke confessed on the REH-list that while he has a soft spot in his heart for *The Slithering Shadow*, which he refers to as *Xuthal of the Dusk*, there was one aspect of the story that was jarring in its presence:

"And what in the world was all that business with being chased around by the locals? It reads almost like some kind of weird Keystone Kops routine or something." (REH-list, 8/11/98)

Weinberg was of the opinion that it was the strength of Thalis, her great whipping scene, and some exceptional dialogue that rescued *Shadow* from absolute rejection. For example, when Thalis is describing Xuthal to Conan, Weinberg cites this exchange as a classic:

"...their lives are filled with exotic ecstasies, beyond the ken of ordinary men."

"Damned degenerates!" growled Conan.

"It is all in the point of view," smiled Thalis lazily. (*Adventurer*, page 122)

Weinberg points out these lines from Conan as worthwhile:

- 1. "By Crom, I'd like to see a priest try to drag a Cimmerian to the altar! There'd be blood spilt, but not as the priest intended!" (page 119)
- 2. "These folk must be either fools or heroes," grunted Conan, "to lie down and dream their idiotic dreams, knowing they might awaken in his belly." (page 119)
- 3. "By Crom," grumbled Conan, "a woman will stop to consider her beauty if the devil himself were on her heels." (*Adventurer*, page122)
- 4. "Oh, Conan, you are wounded unto death! Oh, what shall we do?"
- "Well," he panted, "you can't fight a devil out of Hell and come off with a whole skin!" (page 135)

This final paragraph was more jarring than jaunty:

"Well, they'll remember our visit long enough, I'll wager. There are brains and guts and blood to be cleaned off the marble tiles, and if their god still lives, he carries more wounds than I..."

"It's all your fault," she interrupted. "If you had not looked so long and admiringly at that Stygian cat--"
"Crom and his devils!" he swore. "When the oceans drown the world, women will take time for jealousy. Devil take their conceit! Did I tell the Stygian to fall in love with me? After all, she was only human!" (*ibid*, page 140)

Either that's some elixir, or my moody barbarian has put on a happy face. Novalyne Price told Rusty Burke in *Day of the Stranger* that Howard was often forced to write what would sell; he couldn't always be himself, or write what he wanted. For example, Howard once said of his story *Lord of Samarcand*, published in 1932,

"I don't believe the readers will like it. There isn't a gleam of hope in it. It's the fiercest and most sombre thing I ever tried to write. A lot of milksops – maybe – will say it's too savage to be realistic, but to my mind, it's about the most realistic thing I ever attempted. But it's the sort of thing I like to write... (Letter to Tevis Clyde Smith, 11/31. Page 15, Selected Letters, 1931-1936.)

A little more of that attitude in *The Slithering Shadow* and it would have been a better tale. The next time he developed the theme of strangers entering a lost city, in *Red Nails*, he made it bloody. At the time, he called it his grimmest yarn yet. But enough of *Red Nails*. There are more good things to be said of this story. After all, Howard often rose above the straightjacket a commercially successful character can impose. As H.P. Lovecraft said of REH in his Memoriam:

"He was greater than any profit-making policy he could adopt -- for even when he outwardly made concessions to Mammon-guided editors and commercial critics, he had an internal force and sincerity which broke through the surface and put the imprint of his personality on everything he wrote." (*Skull-Face Omnibus*, page xv)

That's what we'll look at next time. --GR

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prosalg.no/~savage/conan/publications

NEXT Issue: Continuing an in-depth look at *The Slithering Shadow*, Part 2: How Howard constantly slipped in his basic philosophy about barbarians and the decay of civilization around them.

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