

The Hyborian Review

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The God has a long reach...Oh, a cursed long reach!

Great REH Quotes

From *Rogues in the House*, originally published in *Weird Tales*, January 1934. This is from my Ace edition. (sorry) *Hired by Murilo to murder The Red Priest, Conan instead finds himself fighting Thak, the man-ape.*

Conan was fighting like a wild beast himself, in silence except for his gasps of effort. The black talons of the monster and the awful grasp of those misshapen hands ripped and tore at him, the grinning jaws gaped for his throat. Then Murilo, seeing an opening, sprang and swung the chair with all his power, and with force enough to have brained a human being. The chair glanced from Thak's slanted black skull; but the stunned monster momentarily relaxed his rending grasp, and in that instant Conan, gasping and streaming blood, plunged forward and sank his poniard to the hilt in the apeman's heart.

With a convulsive shudder, the beast-man stared from the floor, then sank limply back. His fierce eyes set and glared, his thick limbs quivered and became rigid.

Conan staggered dizzily up, shaking the sweat and blood out of his eyes. Blood dripped from his poniard and fingers, and trickled in rivulets down his thighs, arms, and breast. Murilo caught at him to support him, but the barbarian shook him off impatiently.

"When I cannot stand alone, it will be time to die," he mumbled, through mashed lips. "But I'd like a flagon of wine..."

"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."

A Mailing List?

There is some interest among the electronically connected Howard fans of the world in putting together an Internet mailing list to discuss all things Howardian.

For those of you unfamiliar with a mailing list, the premise is quite simple. A group of people subscribe to the LIST, and when one person posts a question, opinion, or thought to the list, everyone gets it, and usually very quickly.

Respondents can then reply to the general list or to the individual. Discussion 'threads' develop around topics and can sometimes take on a life of their own.

The advantage is the timeliness of the debates – you can go back and forth between two or three (or more) people in a small amount of time.

Of course, flame wars are always fun, and I suspect the purists can rout the pastiche-lovers without too much trouble.

If you're interested, send an e-mail to REH-fans@xenite.org.

If you have questions, contact Patrice Louinet at plouinet@inext.fr.

Story Review

by Garret H. Romaine

The God in the Bowl

Author: Robert Ervin Howard

Donald M. Grant; 1975. Art: Richard Robertson

This is the second half of the famed Grant edition, taken from Conan's days as a youth and after *Tower of the Elephant*. Interestingly, the story was rejected by *Weird Tales*, and wasn't published until 1952 in *Space Science Fiction*. As to why Farnsworth Wright rejected it, I'm not clear on that. I asked Rusty Burke, and he said there's no definitive record or letter. Rusty points out that many feel this is one of Howard's weaker Conan stories. But I think it's still pretty damn good, and I'll tell you why...



A One-Act Play

This story would make a perfect 60-minute television script. The compactness of the yarn, plus the minimum number of scenery changes, is almost uncanny. The characters are strong, and the dialogue is excellent. Howard set the entire piece around Conan's attempted theft of a bauble from the famed museum of Kallian Publico. The youth had the misfortune to stumble onto the murder of the proprietor, which he soon found himself accused of. The thrust and parry of the dialogue shows Howard at his best, and the bloody ending was red indeed.

The story starts out, you'll recall, with Arus the watchman discovering the strangled form of his boss. "It is not pleasant to come upon Death in a lonely place at midnight," says Howard to end that first paragraph.

Howard is once again up to his old tricks of jam-packing a first paragraph to set the story rolling. Here, he introduces Arus, a blubbing fool of a man, gone clammy with sweaty perspiration over the death of his unloved master. "He stared at the unlovely corpse that sprawled on the polished floor before him," did Arus, uncomfortable at the thought.

After penning this unlikely alliteration (sprawled/polished) Howard then spends three paragraphs completing the stage, describing the museum, insulting the corpse, mentioning his trafficking in relics and antiquities – and the story moves ahead nicely. Just as Arus marvels that the master was not robbed of his valuable rings, up strides Conan as though he owns the place.

The description of the young barbarian is crisp and compact, done in a single paragraph as usual, and capped with this sentence: "From under a mop of unruly black hair smoldered a pair of dangerous blue eyes." We learn again that Conan is from the wastelands, is burnt bronze, and is well-nigh naked but for loincloth and high-strapped sandals, as was his wont in his youth. And, of course, that he is **dangerous**. Nice foreshadowing!

We all know how young and lawless Conan was, but even now, there are the beginnings of wisdom. Witness the mind-reading that goes on here:

Arus had edged his way to the wall, and now he took hold of a thick velvet rope which swung there, and jerked it violently. From the street outside sounded the strident clang of the bell that hung before all shops and establishments to summon the watch.

The stranger started. "Why did you do that?" he asked. "It will fetch the watchman!"

"I am the watchman, knave!" answered Arus, bracing his rocking courage. "Stand where you are; don't move or I'll loose a bolt through you!"

His finger was on the trigger of his arbalest, the wicked square head of the quarrel pointed straight at the other's broad breast. The stranger scowled, and his dark face was glowering. He showed no fear, but seemed to be hesitating, in his mind as to whether he should obey the command or chance a sudden break of some kind. Arus licked his lips and his blood turned cold as he plainly saw indecision struggle with a murderous intent in the foreigner's cloudy eyes.

In other words, Conan was over-ruling his first instinct, to try to hack his way home. For the sake of the story, it was good that he stuck around, of course, but it was also logical.

Conan knew he was innocent of that crime, even if he had already broken in and conspired to steal. It may not be totally in keeping for him to place his trust in civilized law, but he may have been unable to argue with the massive crossbow aimed at his heart.

The idea that Arus could read Conan's mind as the youth struggled with his decision is great writing, in my view. This is a time in Conan's life when he wasn't too adept at diplomacy and deceit. And from what I've read, I don't believe Conan had what could be called a "poker face" until later in his life. His emotions were too close to the surface to hide easily. Thus Arus was able to watch Conan's eyes as the young barbarian sized up his opponent, found him weak, yet spared his life. Details such as this make Howard's writing richer than a Khitan moneychanger.

Now comes dialogue aplenty. Soon Conan and Arus are joined by Demetrio, a fairly astute head policeman, and Dionus, his ham-fisted lieutenant. Where Demetrio truly wishes to understand what has happened, Dionus wants merely to extract a confession out of Conan. Just as Dionus threatens to begin, Demetrio holds him back:

"Just a moment, Dionus," ordered Demetrio curtly. "Fellow, I am chief of the Inquisitorial Council of the City of Numalia. You had best tell me why you are here, and if you are not the murderer, prove it."

The Cimmerian hesitated. He was not afraid, but slightly bewildered, as a barbarian always is when confronted by the evidence of civilized networks and systems, the workings of which are so baffling and mysterious to him.

Howard pulls off a neat trick here, making Demetrio seem sympathetic by virtue of his intellect. As the tale unfolds, more and more evidence seems to point to the fact that Conan could not have committed the murder. For one thing, he would not be likely to strangle the victim, as he is carrying a sword and obviously knows how to use it. "These Cimmerians are a bloody race, born with a sword in their hand, as it were; I never heard of their killing a man in this manner," reasons Demetrio. And if he has come to rob, why did he not take those rings? Plus there are locked doors and limited keys enough to fill up a full one-hour Perry Mason episode. Taking his cues from the great mystery writers, Howard is certainly stretching the limits of the sword and sorcery genre by weaving in his dabblings in the mystery racket.

In its way, the story also peripherally pounds home the basic tendencies of the barbarian, so out of water in a civilized realm. This is important as a sub-thread, adding complexity to the tale. The hero is confused, perplexed, suspicious – basically out of control of his environs.

That situation is somewhat risky to lay on a hero, but Howard balances the tension nicely. Especially when Demetrio asks Conan about being accused of murder.

Demetrio looked at the barbarian. "You understand what he said?" asked the inquisitor. "What have you to say?"

"That any man who touches me will quickly be greeting his ancestors in Hell," the Cimmerian ground between his powerful teeth, his eyes glinting quick flames of dangerous anger.

Mark that as Conan's first true threat. Dionus still wants that blade, but it will take more than words to disarm Conan, as the bully finds out when he reaches for the young barbarian's weapon and gets Threat #2:

With a heathen curse Conan leaped back, whipping out his sword with a viciousness that made the keen blade hum. "Back, if you value your dog-lives!" he snarled, his blue eyes blazing. "Because you dare to torture shopkeepers and strip and beat harlots to make them talk, don't think you can lay your fat paws on a hillman! I'll take some of you to Hell with me! Fumble with your bow, watchman -- I'll burst your guts with my heel before this night's work is over."

Classic Conan! They're crisp, direct lines and full of murderous intent. The temperature in that kettle of violence is rising higher thanks to the likes of these fools. No comic, and no pastiche by any other author can match that simple scene. Sign me up for Pastiche Anonymous, because I'm hooked on Conan, but I swear I'm pure at heart. Curses and warnings and insults, oh my! Howard is doing a splendid job of cooking the stew. How many more times will Conan have to threaten violence before blood is spilled? Any bets on who dies first? And if there is a fight, and he does lash out, any guess as to whether the watchman gets kicked? The foreshadowing here is legendary for a short story.

But Howard adds more characters, to bring the brew to a rolling boil. A chariot clatters by on the street outside, and Demetrio orders the driver and the rider hauled in. Soon, Promero, a witless clerk, is easily beaten into submission by Posthumo, who once gouged out a girl's eye to make her talk, and the plot is revealed.

Dionus shot a quick glance at Conan to see if he were properly impressed.

"You see what happens to those who cross the police," he said.

The Cimmerian spat with a sneer of cruel contempt for the moaning clerk.

"He's a weakling and a fool," he growled. "Let one of you touch me, and I'll spill his guts on the floor."

Another threat, another promise? That's #3. In any case, the revealed plot is simple enough. It seems that Kallian Publico has lusted for a 'gift' sent by the minions of Set to a priest of Ibis. Overcome by curiosity, convinced that something of great wealth lay in the ancient bowl with the strange hieroglyphics, Kallian Publico hatched a scheme to steal the contents and blame the theft on Arus. The fresh chisel marks are there to see, but the lid is off and the bowl is empty.

Now, a final player is sent onstage: Aztrius Petanius, the lisping, delicate nephew of the governor. It was he who enlisted Conan to steal a golden bauble from the museum, presumably to pay off gambling debts or some such silliness. Hanging around the alley outside, the fop is captured by a guard and brought to face Demetrio.

Here, then, is a chance to exonerate Conan from the murder. Demetrio even offers to let Conan escape, rather than be subjected to a life in the mines, which is the usual sentence. But all young Az can do is pluck at a phantom thread on his embroidered sleeve and stifle a yawn. There goes Conan's alibi...his head seemed to droop in sullen resignation. But if one could see Conan's eyes, beneath those great brows, one might discover Conan is calculating the odds and whom to strike first. It brings to mind one of the classic scenes from *The Outlaw Josey Wales*, when the pistolero is confronted by four Union soldiers while his hands are full of groceries. "How did you know which one would draw first?" the chief asks later. All Conan *seems* to care about is how he will exact revenge, but give him more credit than that. He wants to live as much as any man, and in a heartbeat, he figures out how to accomplish it while paying off on his earlier threats:

He struck with no more warning than a striking cobra; his sword flashed in the candlelight. Aztrius shrieked and his head flew from his shoulders in a shower of blood, the features frozen in a white mask of horror. Cat-like, Conan wheeled and thrust murderously for Demetrio's groin. The Inquisitor's instinctive recoil barely deflected the point which sank into his thigh, glanced from the bone, and plowed out through the outer side of his leg. Demetrio went to his knee with a groan, unnerved and nauseated with agony. Conan had not paused. The bill which Dionus flung up saved the prefect's skull from the whistling blade which turned slightly as it cut through the shaft, and sheared his ear cleanly from his head. The blinding speed of the barbarian paralyzed the senses of the police and made their actions futile gestures. Caught flat-footed and dazed by his quickness and ferocity, half of them would have been down before they had a chance to fight back, except that Posthumo, more by

luck than skill, threw his arms about the Cimmerian, pinioning his sword-arm. Conan's left hand leaped to the guard's head, and Posthumo fell away and writhed shrieking on the floor, clutching a gaping red socket where an eye had been.

Conan bounded back from the waving bills and his leap carried him outside the ring of his foes, to where Arus stood fumbling with his crossbow. A savage kick in the belly dropped him, green-faced and gagging, and Conan's sandalled heel crunched square in the watchman's mouth. The wretch screamed through a ruin of splintered teeth, blowing bloody froth from his mangled lips.

Then all were frozen in their tracks by the soul-shaking horror of a scream, which rose from the chamber into which Posthumo had hurled Promero, and from the velvet-hung door the clerk came reeling and stood there, shaking with great silent sobs, tears running down his pasty face and dripping off his loose, sagging lips, like an idiot-babe weeping.

All halted to stare at him aghast – Conan with his dripping sword, the police with their lifted bills, Demetrio crouching on the floor and striving to staunch the blood that jetted from the great gash in his thigh, Dionus clutching the bleeding stump of his severed ear, Arus weeping and spitting out fragments of broken teeth – even Posthumo ceased his howls and blinked whimpering through the bloody mist that veiled his half-sight.

What a passage! I can read those long sentences over and over again, and each time, I like them more. The genius of Howard is there for all to see. I don't even need the epic artwork of Barry Windsor-Smith; I can run this past my minds-eye with ease. The dripping blade, the moaning victims, the deadly silence – great work. This was no slash and strike sword fight, worthy of Zorro or the Three Musketeers. Conan fought as a barbarian, gouging eyes, severing ears, kicking and punching and using every weapon at his command. What sweet justice to gouge out the bully Posthumo's eye, just as Howard foreshadowed earlier in the tale.

What a shambles he turned that passageway into! By the end, all have fled save Conan, and he ventures into the next room to see for himself what the problem might be. The contents of the bowl are finally revealed to the reader as a great son of Set, sent by the wizard Thoth-amon. But Conan is not swayed by the handsome, questing visage he sees above a screen. "Come," it beckons to him, and he does so with his sword flashing, in his second beheading of the eve.

Conclusion

I cannot for the life of me fathom why this story was rejected. Rusty Burke reckons there was too much standing around and talking, and not enough action, and that might be why some don't cotton much to it.

Others have wondered if it isn't just a weak story, period. L. Sprague de Camp seems to have taken a cleaver to it, whacking away alliterations and changing words all over the place. But that's nothing new.

What I see when I read *The God in the Bowl* is a story Howard could only have written for Conan. No other major character I can think of would have walked down that hallway – not Kull, not Turlogh, not Bran. Certainly not Kane. They weren't thieves. Perhaps El Borak? No other Howard character would have worked so well as Conan. Like them, he was fearless in the face of danger, but to my mind, he was smarter, which made him almost the equal of Taurus the Nemedian. He doesn't lie well, yet – he claims to be at the museum to steal food, for example – but these things come with age...

One of the clever constructions Howard used was his subtle way of ratcheting up the stress in the atmosphere. For the story needed the many tensions Howard built in: the tension between aristocracy and workers (Promero vs. Kallian Publico); the tension between city dwellers and the hillman Conan; the tension between a sword and a crossbow; tension between an inquisitor and a victim; and the tension between Ibis and Set. The many sub-threads add a richness to the story that may go unnoticed the first time through. But each juxtaposition is like a thread in a tapestry, weaving through the tale.

The chronology of this particular story is intertwined with the birth of Conan. You'll recall that Wright rejected *The Frost Giant's Daughter* outright, but suggested edits to *Phoenix on the Sword*. He also appears to have rejected *God in the Bowl* at the same time, as Howard once made reference to the fact that Wright had rejected "most of the series." In his essay, *The Birth of Conan*, Patrice Louinet proved the point. Seeing as how Conan is very nearly the same age as in *Tower of the Elephant*, in fact even still wearing his high strapped sandals, there is little doubt the stories were written at the same time. But *Tower* was published, and *Bowl* languished until 1952. I imagine it was rejected by *Weird Tales* simply because it didn't have enough strange creatures on bat wings with dripping fangs. I liked the dialogue, and the Face was enough fantasy for me, but your mileage may vary, and I accept that. - GR

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

NEXT Issue: The new Conan comic; an in-depth look.

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