

The Hyborian Review

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Alas poor Kull, we knew him well...

Great REH Quotes

From *The Last Ride*, copyright 1935 (under the title *Boot-Hill Payoff*) by Magazine Publishers, Inc. for *Western Aces*, October, 1935. The book "The Last Ride" is by Berkeley-Medallion, June 1978, published by arrangement with Glenn Lord.

Young Buck Laramie is tied to a chair in the outlaw hideout, serryptitiously working on his bonds.

"You'd better talk," snarled Harrison. "I've got men here who'd think nothing of shoving your feet in the fire to roast. Not that it matters. We're all set anyway. Got ready when we heard you'd ridden in. It just means we move tonight instead of a month later. But if you can prove to me that you haven't told anybody that I'm the real leader of the gang – well, we can carry out our original plans, and you'll save your life. We might even let you join the outfit."

"Join the—do you see an snake-scales on me?" flared Laramie, fiercely expanding his arm muscles. Another strand parted and the cords fell away from his wrists.

"Why you—" Murderous passion burst all bounds as Harrison lurched forward, his fist lifted. And Laramie shot from the chair like a steel spring released, catching them all flat-footed, paralyzed by the unexpectedness of the move.

One hand ripped Harrison's Colt from its scabbard. The other knotted into a fist that smashed hard in the banker's face and knocked him headlong into the midst of the men who stood behind him.

"Reach for the ceilin', you yellow-bellied polecats!" snarled Laramie, livid with fury and savage purpose; his cocked .45 menaced them all. "Reach! I'm dealin' this hand!"

The Video is Coming!

I'm not talking about Sorbo's Kull movie, either. Check page 4 for that disaster. I had the following encounter last week at a Blockbuster Video.

[Young, female Generation Whiner behind the counter] May I help you?

[Customer] Yeah, can you look up a movie for me?

[Blonde] <sigh> Sure.

[Customer] It's called "The Whole Wide World".

[Blonde] (flipping through newest release sheets) Nope, I don't see it. You sure about the name?

[Customer] Yep. It was in town last December, but only for a week. It was supposed to be out in video this summer.

[Blonde] Hmm. I don't see it. Let me ask. (turns and bellows) Hey, Jerry. You ever heard of "The Whole Wide World"?

[Manager, a young, male 20-something with a string-thin goatee]. Sure, isn't that the movie about the guy who wrote 'Conan'? It has Vincent d'Onofrio and Renee Zellwegger.

[Customer] (startled) Yeah, that's it. Any idea when it will be out in the stores?

[Manager] Any week now. It got screwed up in distribution.

[Customer] So, like in September?

[Manager] No, more like in 1997.

[Customer] Maybe before Christmas? It would make a great stocking stuffer.

[Manager] For sure by then.

So there you have it. The video gods may smile on us yet. They give, and they taketh away.

Kull movie is the disaster we all predicted - p. 4

Reprint information is also on page 4.

Rogues in the House: A Review (Part I)

by Garret H. Romaine

Rogues in the House
by Robert E. Howard
Weird Tales, 1934



Sometimes I wonder why it is so difficult to have a favorite Howard story. It always seems to be the last one I've read.

Such is the case with *Rogues in the House*. It has a lot going for it – a great story, strong characters, wonderful dialogue, and beautiful writing. The pace is slow and winding for the first half, but the frenzy at the end is mighty indeed.

For some Howard aficionados, this may be “just another Conan story.” Nothing momentous occurs – no empires are toppled, no kingdoms crushed. There’s no cast of thousands encamped in the field, preparing for battle, and in fact, there isn’t even much of a love interest – she’s a double-dealing wench.

Also missing are the magical moments one might expect from a wizard. Howard’s depiction of “Nabonidus, the Red Priest, who was the real ruler in the city” ultimately reveals not a man of black arts and sorcery but a scientist, whose fiendish traps and clever constructions are ahead of his time, perhaps, but not supernatural.

With that in mind, I’ll look at *Rogues in the House* from three different angles in my continuing quest for Howard purism:

- 1) The tightness of the plot
- 2) The richness of the characters
- 3) The beauty of the prose

A Plot For the Ages

The plot is a time-honored hero’s dilemma: slay a man to save your life. For example, in *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome*, the most forgettable of an otherwise excellent trilogy, Max is allowed into the sanctuary of BarterTown in trade for killing an annoyance. “Who’s the bunny?” he asks with a snarl.

Conan is similarly motivated. A fat double-dealing priest has given up Conan’s Gunderman partner in crime. Conan slays the part-time stooge and part-time fence. But the Cimmerian’s girlfriend betrays him to the police, and he winds up in jail. It is here that he is interviewed by Murilo.

“Would you like to live?” asked Murilo. The barbarian grunted, new interest glinting in his eyes.

“If I arrange for your escape, will you do a favor for me?” the aristocrat asked.

The Cimmerian did not speak, but the intentness of his gaze answered for him.

“I want you to kill a man for me.”

“Who?”

Murilo’s voice sank to a whisper. “Nabonidus, the king’s priest!”

The Cimmerian showed no sign of surprise or perturbation. He had none of the fear or reverence for authority that civilization instills in men. King or beggar, it was all one to him.

Howard takes few pains at this point to defend his bully’s homicidal tendencies. Conan has little choice, of course, but to agree to the job. Otherwise, it’s the executioner’s ax. But murder most foul, is that really a hero’s specialty?

It is for this one. We don’t even know, at this point, just how sinister the Red Priest is. All we do know is that Nabonidus whacked off the ear of one of Murilo’s friends, presumably after slaying the wretch. Howard isn’t concerned just yet about laying out in enormous detail the justifications for killing Nabonidus. But have little doubt – this man will die eventually.

When Howard gets around to it, anyway. Like a banker savoring a fine cigar, Howard really lingers over this story. Right now, the pace is slow. Conan is unlocked from his wall shackles and fed a hearty meal behind bars, but the jailer who would free him in an hour’s time instead finds himself jailed for past mis-deeds. Word reaches Murilo that Conan’s escape attempt has failed. What a tease: the plan moves one step forward, then one step back. The author is certainly in no hurry, seeming to ponder over even the slightest details.

For example, once the Cimmerian makes his own escape and reaches the city streets, he ponders the philosophical dilemma of whether he actually owes Murilo anything. After all, he brained the new jailer on his own, using the beef bone he gnawed on for dinner. Yet, he decides, he wouldn’t have had the meal in the first place, nor been freed of his heavy shackles, but for the intervention of his noble friend. Ethical dilemma solved, the reader would expect that Conan should proceed post-haste to the house of the Red Priest and expunge his debt.

No way. Howard has another scene in his head to unfold, and he’ll bring it out in his own sweet time. Remember, this is forward/back territory. Yes, Conan is free. But Conan needs to head over to the Maze to tie up a loose end.

First, Conan discards his ragged tunic. Then Howard tosses in some of his classic foreshadowing, the crux of most of his best stories. “As he went he fingered the poniard he had captured – a murderous weapon with a broad, double-edged blade nineteen inches long.” If you can’t tell that this weapon will be a central feature of the end of the story, you can go sit in the corner with Roland Green right now.

That done, Howard steps back and describes the Maze with a richness in contrast to its putrid contents. He must have been impacted as a younger man by some wild frontier town, because he put a Maze-equivalent in many of his stories. This one is especially grim:

It was indeed a maze of black alleys and enclosed courts and devious ways; of furtive sounds, and

stenches. There was no paving on the streets; mud and filth mingled in an unsavory mess. Sewers were unknown; refuse was dumped into alleys to form reeking heaps and puddles. Unless a man walked with care he was likely to lose his footing and plunge waist-deep into nauseous pools.

Back in the early days of Hollywood, theatergoers were shocked when James Cagney smashed half a grapefruit into the face of a nagging woman. Howard's take on the same theme is to have Conan hold his ex-girlfriend by the ankle and drop her smartly into a reeking cesspool. First, of source, he slays her new boyfriend. No loose end there. But note that Conan is not such a murdering marauder that he hacks up women. No, that fabled Cimmerian chivalry is still at work.

Sure, he's killed the double-dealing priest, the jailer, and the new boyfriend so far in the story, and is looking forward to at least one more slaying. But didn't they all have it coming? The priest had Conan's Gunderman buddy hung. The jailer was an idiot. And the new boyfriend didn't have the decency to wait until Conan was more assuredly out of the picture.

Actually, one gets the idea Howard cared little for such subtleties. Conan might as well echo Popeye at this point: "I yam what I yam."

Assemble the Rogues

Howard keeps the pace moving forward during Conan's excursion into the Maze by dispatching Murilo himself to the house of the Red Priest. The young nobleman does not know Conan has escaped, and believes his only hope is to attack himself. For if Nabonidus reveals to the king that Murilo has been selling state secrets to foreign powers, all is lost. It is this knowledge that steels Murilo's spine whenever his fears begin to halt his quest.

Still, Murilo's puny attempt to murder the Red Priest stops dead when he gets a look at Thak, a half man, half ape creature who has chosen this night to mount a one-creature insurrection. Thak has killed the house pets and the butler, and tossed Nabonidus into the dungeon. Then the ape-man donned the clothes of his former lord and assumed the master's position on his great throne-like chair. Before Murilo can drive his blade into his enemy's back, Thak turns and with one grinning leer, freezes Murilo into unconsciousness. Soon, Murilo comes to in the dungeons, and after being joined by Conan, they stumble upon Nabonidus, so the trio is complete.

"You are in good company with that cutthroat," murmured Nabonidus. "I had suspected you for some time. That was why I caused that pallid court secretary to disappear. Before he died he told me many things, among others the name of a young nobleman who bribed him to filch state secrets.

Are you not ashamed of yourself, Murilo, you white-handed thief?"

"I have no more cause for shame than you, you vulture-hearted plunderer," answered Murilo promptly. "You exploit a whole kingdom for your personal greed; and, under the guise of disinterested statesmanship, you swindle the king, beggar the rich, oppress the poor, and sacrifice the whole future of the nation for your ruthless ambition. You are no more than a fat hog with his snout in the trough. You are a greater thief than I am. This Cimmerian is the most honest man of the three of us, because he steals and murders openly."

"Well, then, we are all rogues together," agreed Nabonidus equably.

Wonderful stuff there. Howard keeps his plot tight, reinforcing the first scene and buttressing the rest of the tale in a single speech. And notice how little space it takes him to tack on some more evidence for his general views on barbarians vs. civilized men.

Picking up the Pace

Finally, events begin to rush and tumble over each other as an uneasy alliance is formed. "Your bully's knife yearns for my throat, Murilo," notes the Red Priest. But Conan is stayed, if for no other reason than to find some escape from the pits.

Here Howard peels more of the mystery from Nabonidus as he reveals the scientific basis for much of the Priest's power. A complex set of mirrors allows a view of all the rooms in his domain. The men peer into the silvery orbs and the story of Thak is told. Again, no mystery there – he is but a beast raised from a cub to serve as a slave. Yet tonight, that slave has revolted.

More suspense quickly follows. Howard needs to paint a more grisly fate that might await an enemy of the Red Priest. He pulls in a few more rogues to do so. A small group of nationalist patriots have apparently been seething under the grip of Nabonidus. They have also chosen this night to pay him a deadly visit. With shields down and defenses in tatters, they easily gain entrance to the manor but, in full view of the trapped allies in the dungeon, Thak springs yet another trap he has learned from his master. What follows is some of the most gruesome of Howard's writings:

"He remembered!" Nabonidus was exulting. "The beast is half a man! He had seen the doom performed, and he remembered! Watch, now! Watch! Watch..."

In the middle of the ceiling hung a cluster of gold buds; these had opened like the petals of a great carven rose, and from them billowed a gray mist that swiftly filled the chamber. Instantly the scene changed from one of hysteria to one of madness

and horror. The trapped men began to stagger; they ran in drunken circles. Froth dripped from their lips, which twisted as in awful laughter. Raging, they fell upon one another with daggers and teeth, slashing, tearing, slaying in a holocaust of madness. Murilo turned sick as he watched and was glad that he could not hear the screams and howls with which that doomed chamber must be ringing. Like pictures thrown on a screen, it was silent.

Outside the chamber of horror Thak was leaping up and down in brutish glee, tossing his long hairy arms on high. At Murilo's shoulder Nabonidus was laughing like a fiend.

"Ah, a good stroke, Petreus! That fairly disemboweled him! Now one for you, my patriotic friend. So! They are all down, and the living tear the flesh of the dead with their slaving teeth."

Murilo shuddered. Behind him the Cimmerian swore softly in his uncouth tongue. Only death was to be seen in the chamber of the gray mist; torn, gashed, and mangled, the conspirators lay in a red heap, gaping mouths and blood-dabbled faces staring blankly upward through the slowly swirling eddies of gray.

If any needed proof that the Red Priest was a man ripe for murder, it has been presented. The Cimmerian, whom the reader most aligns with, is sickened by the display. Murilo, another reader favorite for all he has done for Conan, and for being at least heroic enough to face his enemy with a sword in his hand, is also taken aback. Only Nabonidus revels in the atrocity at hand. Truly, he must die.

The frenzy at the end is hectic indeed. Howard's battle scene with Thak is one of his best – Conan has his legs locked around the monster, but cannot find a vital spot with his poniard. Frazetta's cover art for the paperbacks is legendary, and made a fitting poster even if the bodily mechanics seemed a bit off.

Finally, a chair to the head stuns Thak, "and in that instant Conan, gasping and streaming blood, plunged forward and sank his poniard to the hilt in the ape-man's heart." All nineteen inches, presumably!

Howard manages to make Thak almost sympathetic when the beast dies. "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."

With Thak dead, Nabonidus tries to renege on his earlier deal. He stops long enough to taunt Conan and Murilo, thinking the barbarian is too tired from his battle to do anything. Yet Conan's warning should still be echoing in the Red Priest's ears: "When I cannot stand alone, it will be time to die," Conan roared, disdaining the support of Murilo. Conan hurls a chair full in the priest's face and brains him. The night's killing is complete.

From the slow, winding nature of the first 20 pages to the frantic gut-wrenching climax, the course of the story covered only about 12 hours of time. Howard's plot is so tight, when the rays of dawn tinted the morning sky, the reader is almost surprised. And in keeping with the brisk conclusion, there isn't even time to loot the joint. What a classic! Part II in 30 days. - GR

Kull Movie Panned by USA Today

USA Today had the first review I could find. I snipped a few lines out – it may be gone soon from their site, but the rest (written by Susan Wioszczyna) is at this url: <http://www.usatoday.com/life/enter/movies/lef900.htm>

At one point, cut-rate beefcake hero Kevin Sorbo is drenched with camel urine. Still damp, he sneaks around a couple of guards before attacking them. One guy sniffs and says, "Something stinks." At which point, Kull pops up and admits, "It's me." <snip>
Not that Sorbo, also TV's Hercules, is horrible. But with his David Lee Roth fancy pants and shampoo-ad locks, his general vapidness typifies this whole uninspired enterprise. This cleaned-up version of Kull, the brawny spawn of '30s pulp writer and Conan the Barbarian creator Robert E. Howard, isn't appreciably different than Sorbo's Herc. Except Herc has a keener sense of humor. The best quip the dull Kull can summon is when someone informs him his nubile bride (Tia Carrere<snip>) is really a 3,000-year-old witch. The stunned groom sputters, "She said she was 19." Ha, ha.'

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

NEXT Issue: *Rogues in the House - part II.*

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