

The Hyborian Review

Volume 3, Number 1.

January 30, 1998

Wouldn't Howard have rooted for the Broncos?

Great REH Quotes

From *Rogues in the House*, copyright 1933 by Popular Fiction Publishing Co. for *Weird Tales*, January 1934. *I've always liked this scene; it's after Conan's jailbreak when he pays his former mistress a visit.*

Conan went up the stairs and halted at a door he knew well of old. It was fastened within, but his blade passed between the door and the jamb and lifted the bar. He stepped inside, closing the door after him, and faced the girl who had betrayed him to the police.

The wench was sitting cross-legged in her shift on her unkempt bed. She turned white and stared at him as if at a ghost. She had heard the cry from the stairs, and she saw the red stain on the poniard in his hand. But she was too filled with terror on her own account to waste any time lamenting the evident fate of her lover. She began to beg for her life, almost incoherent with terror. Conan did not reply; he merely stood and glared at her with his burning eyes, testing the edge of his poniard with his calloused thumb.

Barry Windsor-Smith update - p. 4

Additional Scenes in TWWW?

Did you know that there is a DIRECTOR'S CUT for TWW? It's on the laser disc version.

There are at least two scenes found on the disc that were dropped for the theatrical release. Check out the last scene on side one and the first scene on side two.

What you'll find is a conversation between REH and Novalyne during their hillside picnic -- he wants to know if she's ever had an "ancestral memory." She admits that she often dreams about an Indian. Howard convinces her that this is what he means by the term ancestral memory, and to prove his point he tells her that his mom thought that Novalyne might be part Indian.

The first scene on side two takes place inside Bob's car on the ride home from that picnic. It reconnects HP Lovecraft to the story via a letter sent to Bob that is effusive in its praise. (Jim Keegan posted this info on the REH mailing list.)

Reprint info - See page 4.

Story Review: El Borak

By Garret Romaine

The Daughter of Erlik Khan

Written by Robert E. Howard

Published in December 1934 by *Top Notch*.

Taking a break from Hyboria, I wanted to talk about a Howard character that recently piqued my interest. El Borak wasn't just another character Bob Howard dreamed up -- he *was* Howard himself, thrust personally into his stories. As I found myself swept away by the excitement of this story, I realized that when I conjured up an image of Francis Xavier Gordon, I saw Robert E. Howard in desert garb.

Unlike Conan stories, for example, the hero doesn't continually tower over all other characters. Where Conan was already taller than six feet (and Howard) by his 15th winter, El Borak is compact. From the first page of this story, which by the way is also the first in the series, El Borak is shorter in stature than others around him. Yet there is a vitality to the man that no mortal can miss. Here is the passage where Howard introduced his character to the world:

"Gordon was shorter than his companions, but his physique did not suffer by comparison with either the rangy Pembroke or the more closely knit Ormond. He was one of those rare individuals at once lithe and compact. His strength did not give the impression of being locked up within himself as is the case with so many strong men. He moved with a flowing ease that advertised power more subtly than does mere beefy bulk.

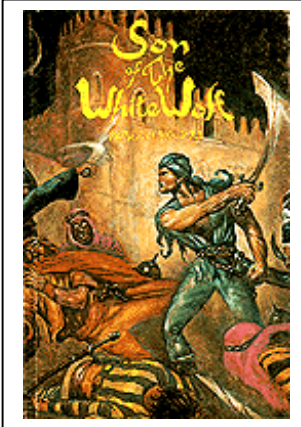
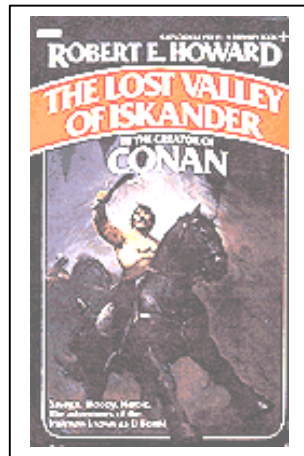
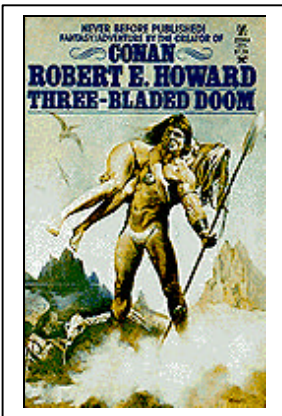
Though he was clad much like the two Englishmen except for an Arab headress, he fitted into the scene as they did not. He, an American, seemed almost as much a part of these rugged uplands as the wild nomads which pasture their sheep along the slopes of the Hindu Kush. There was a certitude in his level gaze, and economy of motion in his movements, that reflected kinship with the wilderness."

Compare this passage with a 1932 picture of Howard:



The vitality of the man certainly comes through; he's muscular and well-built. He's not overly intimidating, save perhaps for the scowl. But he looks like the kind of guy you wouldn't mind bringing along for a night of tortillas and red wine in an out of the way dive across the Mexican border.

Now, compare him to some of the artist's renderings for El Borak off the Web:



CW, from top left: Enrich; CW Cody; unknown; Boas.

For my money, I can't tell you which of these were closer to what Howard imagined. The one in a diaper seems a bit of a stretch; in fact, anyone showing a lot of skin in the desert may be touched in the head. Marcus Boas has taken his lumps on the REH mailing list lately, so perhaps I should let it go.

And anyway, the point is this: El Borak is another manifestation of Howard. But what is his degree of Howardness, if you will? Here's a stab:

Hero	Howardness
Cormac Mac Art	72%; not well developed
Bran Mak Morn	75%; too native
Black Turlogh	80%; too dark
Solomon Kane	85%; single-minded
Kull	88%; strong and smart
Conan	92%; big, strong, smart
El Borak	94%; short, dark, Irish

Okay, it ain't scientific. And frankly, I don't know where to put Kirby O'Donnell, Steve Costigan, or Breckinridge Elkins. I would have loved to hear Howard orally render ol' Breck, however. He may turn out to be closer than I think!

El Borak's Written Legends

In his 1974 forward to the paperback version of *The Lost Valley of Iskander*, Darrell C. Richardson refers to five El Borak stories penned by Howard. Three are included in that book, named for the fragment of the same name:

- The Daughter of Erlik Khan
- Hawk of the Hills
- The Lost Valley of Iskander

The sequel, *Son of the White Wolf*, has these stories:

- Blood of the Gods
- Country of the Knife
- Son of the White Wolf

However, *The Last Celt* lists these additional stories under the heading Francis Xavier Gordon:

- Three-Bladed Doom
- A Power Among the Islands
- The Coming of El Borak
- El Borak
- Intrigue in Kurdistan
- The Iron Terror
- Khoda Khan's Tale
- The Land of Mystery
- North of Khyber
- The Shunned Castle
- Untitled ("Gordon, the American ...")

I look forward to running into these some day; I fear I may not be much use in reviewing another El Borak story until I do...

I'm not clear yet on why I like El Borak, frankly. He seems to appeal to the part of me that watches and re-watches *Lawrence of Arabia*. There was a time when these Arabian adventures were all the rage. Howard's stories greatly resembled the Talbot Mundy and Howard Lamb yarns of the same genre, and Howard is known to have enjoyed these writers greatly.

What Howard brought to El Borak, however, was a quality generally lacking in the pulps of the day. It was the same imprint he left on his other works: a vivid imagination, excellent story-telling, and his storied wordcraft.

Interestingly, even at a story length that more closely resembles a novel, Howard was able to bring to bear his metaphorical and alliterative guns at muted, but effective levels. Nobody will ever mistake an El Borak tale for the beauty of *Frost Giant's Daughter* or *Tower of the Elephant*; those yarns were dripping with Howard's writing style. El Borak receives less beautiful brush strokes, but makes up for the lack with a fast-paced, straight-ahead style and plenty of adventure.

Nobody will ever mistake an El Borak tale for the beauty of Frost Giant's Daughter...

In comparing El Borak to Conan, another issue arises: demeanor. Conan was moody, but given to giant mirth as well as melancholy. Francis Xavier Gordon, or Gordon of Arabia, as he was once called, has much less interest throughout these tales in either wine or women, much less song.

In fact, Howard never really explains the motives of this popular character. At the end of one story, he's told he'd make a great advisor to the King or some such diplomatic posting, ridiculous as it sounds. El Borak isn't interested; nor, it seems, does he care much for the gold his men saddle up at the fabulous mines.

So if not women, nor wine, nor treasure, what's left? Pure Adventure? Certainly, that suits Howard's style better than the banishments and exiles of his other heroes. In all my readings, Gordon never longs for the Texas soil of his homestead. He has no ambition to return to a giant spread and a thousand head of cattle.

In other words, compare Gordon of Arabia to Lawrence of Arabia. Especially the final scenes where Lawrence is being driven through the desert, and the driver says, "Goin' home, sir!" Lawrence looks as though he can't even think about what that means, or what he'll do. Gordon is no doubt in the same predicament; adventure first, and damn the future. Better to die with his boots on, pistols blazing, than plan life on the front porch.

What amazes me continually about a small-town writer like Robert E. Howard is his ability to transport himself, his characters, and his reader, to a land where none of the three have ever been. In the effort, Howard obviously gives us only the land as it should be, not as it truly is.

[Not that there's anything wrong with that...I once had a boss who noted that if the engineering group could just make the products the way I described them in my manuals, we'd all get rich. All those features sounded better the way I documented them than they really worked, unfortunately.]

Then again, this is adventure writing. Reality belongs elsewhere. Lost valleys, tractless deserts, and forgotten peaks sounded great in the 1930s, when the world was still giving up many of its secrets. For a reader in the '90s, there's a lot of giant lenses floating in space that would speak against any peculiar land form going unnoticed for very long. But back then, it all worked much better; Egypt was giving up King Tut, the Yucatan was found full of lost cities, and it was easier to imagine lost treasures and forgotten cities.

Thus, Howard goes to Arabia and he succeeds. Sure, his Arabs are all cut from stereotypical cloth: the leaders are merciless, the outlaws are landless, and the women are few and fetching. When an Arab talks of foreigners, he is respectful, as in this interrogation:

"He and the sahibs talked long together, but what they said I know not. But Ormond Sahib killed the man who had gone to fetch the priest..."

Bismallah and *ferenghi* are two popular words that Howard carefully italicizes; in future stories, *sahib* is italicized as well, but not here. The oaths and expostulations of the Arabs are always tightly constructed. Howard senses the rhythm and construction of Arab speech (or what he imagined it should be) very well. He needs to do this, so that nothing slows the pace. Deserts are always hot and rocky; leaders are cruel and vain; and dialogue is clearly either English or Arab. Sure it's formulaic and melodramatic, but so what?

Last issue I was entranced by Howard's ability to capture the essence of the far north. In a way, I chose this desert tale to continue that discussion by way of juxtaposition. Be it mountains or oceans, glaciers or quicksand, Howard knew enough of each to keep his story moving through the elements. It didn't matter that he had never been frostbit or sunburnt to a crisp. He had a feel for using nature in his stories that would never kill his heroes, but always made them stronger.

Oh, The Story!

The Daughter of Erlik Khan refers to an Indian beauty named Yasmeena who somehow ends up as a goddess in a gilded cage in the fabled forbidden city of Yolgan, home to a mysterious devil-worshipping cult. Gordon finds a treasure for his men and eventually rescues the princess. But only after a spirited fight that earns him yet another name to go with El Borak (the Swift): he is now known as Son of the Sword.

Strangely, El Borak does not have much chance to show off his prowess with the pistol in this story. He assures us that all Arabs know of the abilities of El Borak with a handgun, but those attributes are developed better in other stories.

Heavy Hints of Howard

Despite the fact that this was a fast-paced adventure yarn, closer to his detective stories than to his Conan tales with all their beauty, Howard fans find many find passages. Here are some of the better ones:

The fighters revolved about each other in swift curvets and gambados, their blades flashing and grating without the slightest pause, turned red by the rising sun. (p.22)

His gaze sought the white cap of Mount Erlik, ghostly in the starlight, then swung to the point where he knew Yolgan lay. He had been there before, himself, had heard the deep roar of the long bronze trumpets that shaven-headed priests blow from the mountains at sunrise. (p.15)

The camp with its faded tents and tethered horses was the one spot of sentient life in a scene so vast and broodingly silent that it was almost daunting. To the south, stretched an unbroken rampart of hills climbing to snowy peaks. Far to the north rose another more broken range. (p.7)

And as always, Howard's bent toward the study of men: here's Gordon the Anthropologist and Gordon the Archeologist --

Gordon saw the monks who were the ruling caste in Yolgan striding through the bazaars -- tall, shaven-headed men with Mongolian features. He wondered anew as to their exact origin. They were not Tibetans. Their religion was not a depraved Buddhism. It was unadulterated devil worship. The architecture of their shrines and temples differed from any he had ever encountered anywhere. (p.46)

Those shaven-headed men could be wandering a Stygian temple in another Howard story; it could be Solomon Kane wondering at the temple construction rather than Gordon. It isn't hard to see how these heroes all blend together, their only commonality being their degree of resemblance to Howard himself.

To determine which character is most like Howard, you need to understand a great deal about the writer and the man. In a letter to H.P. Lovecraft dated September 22, 1932 Howard writes,

"Yet when I look for the peak of my exultation, I find it on a sweltering, breathless midnight when I fought a black-headed tiger of an Oklahoma drifter in an abandoned ice-vault, in a stifling atmosphere laden with tobacco smoke and the reek of sweat and rot-gut whiskey -- and blood; with a gang of cursing, blaspheming oil-field roughnecks for an audience. Even now the memory of that battle stirs the sluggish blood in my fat-laden tissues. There was nothing about it calculated to advance art, science or anything else. It was a bloody, merciless, brutal brawl. We fought for fully an hour -- until neither of us could fight any longer, and we reeled against each other, gasping incoherent curses through battered lips..."

Whether it happened like that or not, it tells a lot about Howard. Not a single one of his characters would have come out second best in such a brawl. -- GR

Barry Windsor-Smith Interview

I recently found a copy of *Spectrum*, with Sorbo/Kull on the cover. It was Vol. 1, issue 11, from September 1997. No, it's not The Howard issue -- that's being planned for later by Win-Mill Productions, 1912 E. Timberview Lane Arlington, TX 76014. This issue has a fine interview with BWS, who had these cranky comments in response to some pretty good questions: "Conan was so restrictive because it was a Marvel comic, and now more than ever Marvel is the antithesis of originality. Marvel Comics and the readers of Marvel Comics wish only for the status-quo of a proven formula--the comfort of commonality in its lowest form."

In Conan vs. Rune, Conan is drawn with somewhat of a John Buscema-ish look. Was this at Marvel's insistence...?

"You rather have the idea, it seems, that Marvel has the power to insist on things where I'm concerned. They have no such power, and that is why they lie to me. Conan/Rune is another Marvel print job that I have a hard time looking at, so I'm not going to scan the pages looking for some imagined hint of Buscema-isms. Other than impaling myself with white hot metal objects, drawing Conan in the style of John Buscema is right at the top of my list to avoid at all costs."

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: Now that the video is out, why not try a *real* Kull story? Find out which one in 30 days.

finis