



The Scarlet Citadel

Robert E. Howard

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Robert Ervin Howard (1906-1936) was an American pulp writer of fantasy, horror, historical adventure, boxing, western, and detective fiction. He is well known for having created the character Conan the Cimmerian, a literary icon whose pop-culture imprint can be compared to such icons as Tarzan of the Apes, Sherlock Holmes, and James Bond. Voracious reading, along with a natural talent for prose writing and the encouragement of teachers, conspired to create in Howard an interest in becoming a professional writer. One by one he discovered the authors that would influence his later work: Jack London and Rudyard Kipling. It's clear from Howard's earliest writings and the recollections of his friends that he suffered from severe depression from an early age. Friends recall him defending the act of suicide as a valid alternative as early as eighteen years old, while many of his stories and poems have a suicidal gloom and intensity that seem prescient in hindsight, describing such an end not as a tragedy but as a release from hell on earth.

The Scarlet Citadel Details

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From Reader Review The Scarlet Citadel for online ebook

Shawn says

A rolling adventure of Conan and perilous sorcery.

Johnnie says

Full of intrigue, monsters, a giant snake and a battle against overwhelming odds. King Conan's kingdom has been taken by a magician in concert with a harsh tyrant seeking a throne. Conan must free himself from the dungeons of foul creatures, mass a small army and smash the pretenders to his kingdom, and he does this with sword and a sorcerer of his own. However, we learn that Conan much prefers a sword that pieces flesh over the dark arts. This was an exciting thrill read.

Ulrich Krieghund says

In the tenth day of the month Yuluk, of the year of the Gazelle, the barbarian king finds himself trapped in the dungeons beneath the Scarlet Citadel of the foul sorcerer Tsotha-lanti:

"Of this Kothian wizard dark tales were told; tousle-headed women in northern and western villages frightened children with his name, and rebellious slaves were brought to abased submission quicker than by the lash, with threat of being sold to him. Men said that he had a whole library of dark works bound in skin flayed from living human victims, and that in nameless pits below the hill whereon his palace sat, he trafficked with the powers of darkness, trading screaming girl slaves for unholy secrets."

This fantastic short story contains a soul-torturing plant whose roots are set in Hell and a wizard named Pelias that Conan rescues while in the pits below the Tsotha's citadel.

I used this story as part of a D&D adventure. Statistics for Pelias can be found in CB2, Conan Against Darkness for first edition Dungeons and Dragons. I was delighted when the player using Pelias used an animate dead spell to have the corpse of jailer unbolt a locked door--just like Pelias did in Robert E. Howard's story. I was then able to read this passage from the story:

"For the body of Shukeli stirred and moved, with infantile gropings of the fat hands. The laughter of Pelias was merciless as a flint hatchet, as the form of the eunuch reeled upright, clutching at the bars of the grille. Conan, glaring at him, felt his blood turn to ice, and the marrow of his bones to water; for Shukeli's wide-open eyes were glassy and empty, and from the great gash in his belly his entrails hung limply to the floor. The eunuch's feet stumbled among his entrails as he worked the bolt, moving like a brainless automaton. When he had first stirred, Conan had thought that by some incredible chance the eunuch was alive; but the man was dead—had been dead for hours"

Lance Lasalle says

Nothing deep here in this novella from the early thirties, at all. Just colorful action-packed stuff and great world-building. Not a deep theme or multi-faceted character in sight, and all the more satisfying for that. The middle third felt more like a synopsis; oddly the novella could have easily been stretched to a novel. As it is, a King is captured, a kingdom invaded, a coup d'etat undertaken, overthrown, a revolution started and defeated, and the siege of a city by a 40 000 plus army broken --all in less than a week in story-time. Stretching the plausibility factor, I suppose, but fuck it.

Riley says

Intense imagery and very deep lore.

Alex James says

This was another great Conan story, more complex than The Phoenix on the Sword. There is a battle described, and the consequences of treachery are explained more. There were more sorcery elements involved than with The Phoenix on the Sword.

The prose was fantastic as well. Some of the writing makes very good writing look stale: 'As a thunderbolt strikes, Conan struck, hurtling through the ranks by sheer power and velocity'.

I must say, despite my observation that Conan stories tend to follow a predictable formula, they are getting better and are some of my most favourite sword-and-sorcery tales.

Ruben Giró says

Alguns fragments molt identificables d'aquí van servir per fer la primera peli (la serp, per exemple).

Katherine Simmons says

Highly enjoyable romp, giant snakes, living poisonous plants, and of course our hero battling against betrayal of allies to save his lands.

Lyn says

Lana Kane, Malory Archer, Cheryl Tunt, Ray Gillette, Cyril Figgis, Pam Poovey, Dr. Krieger and Sterling Archer sit in Malory's office, drinking and discussing Robert E. Howard's 1933 Conan short story "The Scarlet Citadel"

Ray: He had a five foot long broadsword.

Lana: Er, phrasing.

Sterling: I mean COME ON! It's freaking CONAN the FREAKING BARBARIAN – even more, in this one he's King of Aquilonia.

Malory: Remind me again of why we're discussing a 70 plus year old fantasy short story?

Pam: I thought you liked 70 year old short stuff?

Malory: And what is that supposed to mean, Ms. "I like sweaty barbarians"?

Cheryl: What's wrong with that?

Cyril: Of course this is the first mention of the wizard Pelias and Conan's relationship with him in terms of his kingdom's well being.

Sterling: Are you kidding? Dude. Bros before apparent threats to national security.

Krieger: Not to mention Howard's detailed and meticulous world building. Even in this short work we see the interworking and rivalries between Koth, Ophir and other Howardesque states. Really amazing when you think about it, and damned entertaining. Archer, are you drunk again?

Sterling: I'm scared if I stop all at once, the cumulative hangover will literally kill me.

Cheryl: I liked how he was a naked prisoner but didn't give up and fought his way out of the dungeons – that was hot.

Sterling: CONAN THE BARBARIAN, KING CONAN!!! I can't hear you over the sound of my giant, throbbing erection! But, wait, wait, you KNOW the best part don't you?

Lana: Don't say it –

Sterling: Conan was in the DANGER ZONE!

Kamas Kirian says

Another wonderful tale of standing up and fighting for what's right. The story rips along at a fantastic pace. If anything, possibly a little too fast. The last chapter seemed a little rushed, hence only 4 stars. I love how well REH is able to express his world building in so few pages, just by giving hints or making brief

references to past events. Conan is the only well developed character, though Tshotha wasn't badly done. Most of the rest barely had physical descriptions to go along with their short involvements to the plot.

imircm says

The story has some of Howard's best world building. There's plenty of violence and plenty of darkness. The expected Conan feline and serpent references make their appearances, as do a giant snake and a bit of sorcery to move things along. As usual, Robert E. Howard's pacing and use of rhetoric device to urge the reader forward is in full force.

Marne says

Another exciting Conan story!

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Ailish says

So far this series is all a bit dark. Lots of violence with some sorcery round the edges, but no redemptive elements. I was hopeful for a few moments when Conan rescues a stranger and seems to find a friend, but he turns out to be another slightly cracked dark sorcerer, and Conan decides he is better off without him.

Michael Sorbello says

Intense and brutal, with mysterious sorcery and an enraged Conan to hype it up. Finishes with a huge and visceral clash with a mountain's worth of bodies left in the wake.

Seth says

This was an awesome tale of King Conan and his escape from a treacherous Wizard, who's intentions were to seize Aqualonia. It was just a really good time!

John says

A man's man type of book. Bring out the beast and fight back to reclaim what you lost. Indiana Jones would wet his pants if he had to face the snake Conan deal with.

Paul says

This is the second or third time I read this story. Solid Howard Conan. If any complaint, the events are rushed and many times a bit forced, but a great story overall.

Perry Whitford says

The second of Robert E. Howard's original Conan Chronicles both starts and finishes in the best possible place for a Conan story- a bloody battlefield. Some time into his reign as the king of Aquilonia, Conan finds himself tricked into leaving his kingdom.

Traveling south with a small force seemingly in aid of King Amalrus of Ophir, the Cimmerian soon discovers that his former ally has betrayed him, decimating his overwhelmed army in concert with his supposed oppressor, Strabonus, king of Koth.

The two renegade kings are themselves controlled by the fear-inspiring Tsotha-lanti, the Kothian wizard, of whom it was said that 'he had a whole library of dark works bound in skin flayed from living human victims, and that in nameless pits below the hill whereon his palace sat, he trafficked with the powers of darkness, trading screaming girl slaves for unholy secrets'.

Not a nice man then.

Captured and caged by the wily wizard, Conan is taken to Tsotha's imposing citadel, high on a hill above all Koth, 'like a condor stooping above its prey, intent on its own dark meditations'. There his triumphant captors give him the choice of exile or death, to which he responds, in typical fury, "Free my hands and I'll varnish this floor with your brains!"

Whilst word of his death reaches his people and the plans of his foes prepare the ground for them to ride into Aquilonia and claim their prize, Conan is left alone in those nameless pits below the citadel, enchained and the intended prey of a venomous eighty-foot long snake, 'Satha, the Old One, chiefest of Tsotha's pets'.

A somewhat jarring interlude of racist curses aside (and to be fair, they are bandied about by both black and white characters), 'The Scarlet Citadel' is a rollicking ride of a short story, as weird and wonderful as any in the series.

Bentley ★ Bookbastion.net says

Another exciting jaunt into King Conan's world. Conquering the kingdom of Aquilonia brings no rest to

Conan as betrayal, treachery and warfare abounds in this second short story originally penned by Howard in 1933.

One thing I'm thoroughly enjoying about these classic pulp fantasy fiction stories is the way they defy expectations. Classic literature often invokes a sort of stodgy, historical feeling. The prose is undeniably different, and plot movement often didn't look the way it does now, with its constant movement and focus on action that we see in so many works of fiction today. In the two Conan stories I've read thus far, Howard has defied that expectation entirely.

The plotting is tight, and this story is chock full of action, magic and intrigue. One unexpected surprise is the amount of cosmic horror elements that Howard works into Conan's world. The bad guys are nefarious and dangerous at all times. The world building remains top notch, although it's definitely a world I would never want to step foot in given the sheer brutality of it.

There was a few pages of painfully dated and culturally insensitive material that did turn me off a tiny bit - but once the story advanced past that bit it picked up speed again in quick measure.
