

A group of TMT editors were sitting around the office enjoying a rare respite from their normally fiendishly busy office routine by trading amiable nonsequiturs, when who should swagger into our midst but TMT's resident barbarian, Dean Latimer. Striding to our Editor-in-Chief's desk with a savage grace and heavy caveman's club in hand, he slapped down a couple CONAN comics (which, judging by their sorry condition, he had already enjoyed in the worst way) and demanded—not asked, mind you, but DEMANDED—that we let him do an article on Marvel's new black-and-white CONAN SERIES. Agreeing to a monster that Dean did indeed seem the logical choice to handle comicbook barbarian chores and knowing an offer that we couldn't refuse when we heard one, we turned the next two pages over to his charge ... and lived not to regret it.

CONAN

THE SUPER-HERO AS SUPER-MEANIE!

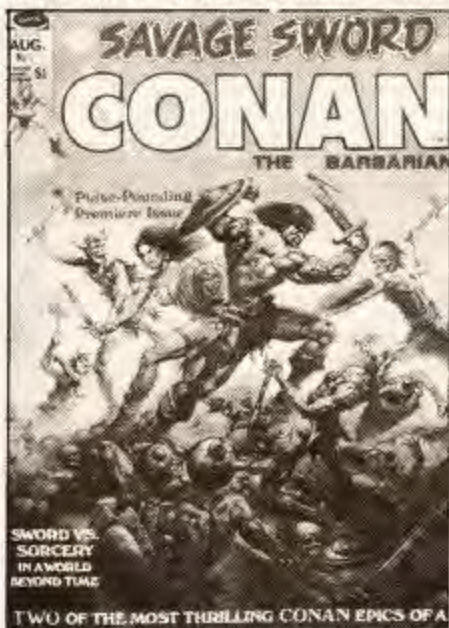
BY DEAN LATIMER

According to Lin Carter, writing in *THE SAVAGE SWORD OF CONAN #2*, Robert E. Howard really wanted to write straight, realistic historical fiction, but couldn't get a foot in the door at *Argosy*, the only decent market for it at the time. Consequently he larded his stories out with supernatural elements and sold them to *WEIRD TALES*. Now, this may have been demoralizing to poor Howard—he shot himself in 1936, at the tender age of 30—but for those of us whose hearts soar

The "Pulse-Pounding Premier Issue" of *THE SAVAGE SWORD OF CONAN* sported a fine bloody cover by Boris Vallejo, depicting Conan and distaff sidekick Red Sonja (a.k.a. the She-Devil of Hyrkania) engaged in furious battle with an axe-swinging pack of skeletal warriors.



Conan the Barbarian, in all his mean majesty, strikes a savage pose prior to sinking his sword into a typical many-headed, multi-tentacled monster. Esteban Maroto's rugged rendition of Robert E. Howard's hero originally appeared as the inside cover of *THE SAVAGE SWORD OF CONAN #1* and is also available in poster form from *THE MONSTER TIMES BOOKSHELF*.



like hawks to the grand Sword & Sorcery legacy he left us, it may have been all to the good.

Because Howard had, quite apart from his bizarre imagination, the makings of a very good writer indeed by purely conventional standards: his prose was crisp and clear, his plots flowed as naturally and effortlessly as mountain creek water, and his characters were at least three-dimensional, if none too complex psychologically. Had he been allowed to write straight fiction, he would probably have developed into what they call an Original Regional Writer; today, with Howard 68 years old, the southwest would be busy with earnest young authors imitating his literary style, and Marvel Comics—pardon me, "Magazine Management"—would never have wrangled a copyright on his early Conan stories, which he would have long ago discredited.

Now that would have been sad indeed,

sad for us and for comics, which cannot have been selling too well lately, the way all the superhero titles have been folding. *SPIDER-MAN*, for instance, formerly the fattest apple in Marvel's superhero bushel, sank recently to the last resort of showcasing a poorly-drawn batch of characters from PBS-TV's *ELECTRIC COMPANY*. Clearly the old Sixties superhero mystique no longer fulfills the public need for vicarious thrills, and these new Conan titles represent a casting-about for some more commercially viable myth.

If the Conan stories succeed in bailing Marvel out, it will be largely because of Howard's imagination, and the differences between Conan as a mythic hero and Peter Parker (or Nick Fury, or Mr. Fantastic, or any of those other deaders), as a contemporary punk. All those former Marvel superheroes, you see, were essentially commonplace jerks who were

accidentally endowed with para-normal powers; whereas Conan is actually kind of heroic demi-god, after the fashion of Gilgamesh and Heracles, who for some reason is restricted to merely mortal powers.

SURVIVAL OF THE MEANEST

This opens certain new possibilities for character development, among other things. Whereas Peter Parker freely exercised unnatural powers in his fight for The Good, Conan, contrariwise, is forever being victimized by unnatural powers, and his fight is primarily for self-survival. He need not therefore be disfigured by that simpering self-righteousness that crippled the erstwhile run of comic heroes, in their world of black-and-white morality. Conan, in fact, is allowed to be a meanie sometimes.

For example, in the story "Black Collosus" in *SAVAGE SWORD #2*, Conan offhandedly remarks at one point that in



BRACING HERSELF, YASMEELA STEPS FROM THE SHADOWS, HER CLOAK HELD CLOSE ABOUT HER...

WHO THE DEVIL IS AN AMBUSH!

WELL, IT'LL TAKE MORE THAN ONE HOODED CUTTHROAT TO--

CROM STRIKE ME DEAD! IT'S A GIRL!

NO ACCOMPLICES ABOUT, EITHER. WHO ARE YOU? HAVE THEY SHUT YOU OUT IN THE STREET TOO?

PLAGUE TAKE THIS TOWN, WITH ITS TAVERNS THAT CLOSE AT MIDNIGHT, SO THAT MEN MAY FIGHT THE BETTER FOR THEIR MASTERS!

This suspenseful scene from "Black Colossus" in THE SAVAGE SWORD OF CONAN #2 was the handiwork of Marvel artists John Buscema and Alfredo Alcalá. Though still just a bit on the posed side, the action artwork in the Conan black-and-whites is certainly strong enough to give Warren's black-and-white line a run for its plunder. Even Roy Thomas displays rare subtlety in his well-wrought adaptations of Howard's tales.

order to protect the princess Yasmela, his current employer, from a popular uprising, it might help to hang a few citizens at random. Can you imagine any Marvel hero, or even villain, proposing such a ruthless, bloody—and politically realistic—tactic? Can you fancy Peter Parker ever saying anything on the order of: "When I served with the mercenaries of Corinthia, we swilled all night and fought all day!"? If Conan happens to be fighting on the "good side" in any conflict, it's not because he has decided, after much asinine self-searching, to wield his powers for God and Christendom; it's simply because the "bad side," being made up of wizards and witches and gruesome abnormal monsters, poses a substantial threat to his well-being.

Scriptwriter Roy Thomas has exercised uncharacteristic good sense in translating Howard's original "Black Colossus" into a comicbook format: the dialogue and narrative are taken straight from the story, with minimal reduction and no perceptible editorial imposition onto Howard's prose. You don't catch Conan talking Marvel talk, which is a signal boon to the script. Best of all, the comic seems to flow with the precise progression of the original narrative, jammed and cluttered in the action-violence passages, yet open and panoramic in the descriptive parts. The black-and-white artwork brings the story wonderfully to life, too. John Buscema's Conan is not perhaps as craggy and Neanderthal as Howard described him, but his nose has been broken, and

some of his expressions are satisfyingly bestial. The backgrounds of most panels are so real that you can actually walk around inside them, except for the night scenes. Then, to compensate for the absence of color, either Buscema or inker Alfredo Alcalá has provided an etchy kind of texturing that works none too well, really. Buscema's artwork is handled better in CONAN THE BARBARIAN, the 25¢ Marvel color monthly.

GEOGRAPHICAL JUMBLE

But most delightful is the attention that has been lavished on minor details of sets and props in "Black Colossus." The world that Howard created for Conan was a wildly anachronistic jumble of historical cultures: Aquilonia was Imperial Rome with overtones of Carolingian Europe; Hyperborea, his homeland, was equal parts Viking Scandinavia and pre-Caesarean Britain; Turan was Seleucid Persia; Afghanistanian frontier; Khitai was China; Zamoria was Arabia, Shem was Old Testament Palestine, Stygia was dynastic Egypt, and so on. This affords the illustrator opportunities for including in the artwork a myriad of archaic visual elements, evoking cultures from the Bronze Age up to the High Middle Ages—and to Cecil B. DeMille's lurid 20th-Century Hollywood-spectacular garishness.

The trick to handling this 4,000-year potpourri of fashion and armament is not to mix them up any more than Howard did. The setting for "Black Colossus," for example, is medieval Koraja, a petty kingdom "carved out of the Shemite lands by Kothic adventurers." It's a Crusader state in Asia Minor, that is, circa 1250, and the domed helmets and chain-mail armor of the chivalry are quite in place; Conan, however, as commander, is decked out in Roman centurion gear, complete with plumed and visored helmet, and short kilt—for a cavalry officer! Ouch. This is just a little jarring, though. As for the Princess Yasmela's outfit—insubstantial diaphanous skirt slit to the waist on both sides, super-cleavage halter bra, and strategic jewelry—it's what all the women in Conan comics seem to wear, regardless of period or culture, and I for one find absolutely no objection to it.

ESCAPING CENSOR'S SWORD

Which deftly segues us to a concluding remark on the price of the big Conan specials—one fat buck—which is the price we have to pay to get out from under the censorious Comics Code Authority. You'd never get away with this stuff under the Comics Code, even today, when it's withering on its long slimy vine.

Not, mind you, that there's any more

visible cheesecake in the black-and-white SAVAGE SWORD series than over the cheaper color BARBARIAN series. In fact, comics in general seem to be celebrating a return to the traditional Phantom Lady style of heroine-drawing that looked so great in the centerfold of Dr. Wertham's SEDUCTION OF THE INNOCENT. The heroine of the last couple issues of CONAN THE BARBARIAN, Red Son-Ya, wore throughout both episodes a ridiculous scale-mail bikini, for example, which was outrageously unrealistic—I mean, if she bled on it, it's rust closed, Roy, and then where would she be?

No, it's the broadening of the moral context provided by Conan that would kill him under the old Comics Code. (Big black-and-white comics, you see, escape the Draconian sword of the Comics Code; and the production costs are what swell the price to a buck.) The color Conan scripts are good enough, to be sure, but they just haven't got the depth of the \$1 scripts, where Conan is allowed to be a meanie.

This may prove out to be the basis for a whole new Golden Age Of Comics. Times have changed. People may just be ready for a superhero who is a meanie.



WHO DID YOU EXPECT TO RESCUE YOU--

--IF NOT YOUR OLD FRIEND RED SONJA?

Conan's old friend Red Sonja, drawn by John Buscema and Pablo Marcos, harks back to the Phantom Lady style of heroine-drawing that, according to our comics scholar, "looked so great in the centerfold of Dr. Wertham's SEDUCTION OF THE INNOCENT." He'll certainly get no argument from us on that score.



This panel served as a full-page introduction to the third chapter of the "Black Colossus" tale and dwells upon Conan's close and constant association with Death, who appears frequently and in many fanciful forms in THE SAVAGE SWORD OF CONAN series.

