

DARK AGNES DE LA FERRE RED SONYA

Three Stories by Robert E. Howard



THE DUNYAZAD DIGITAL LIBRARY
WWW.DUNYAZAD-LIBRARY.NET

Dark Agnes de La Fere
Red Sonya
Three Stories by Robert E. Howard

“Sword Woman” and “Blades for France”
not published during the author’s lifetime
“The Shadow of the Vulture” first published 1934

The Dunyazad Digital Library
www.dunyazad-library.net

The Dunyazad Digital Library (named in honor of Shahrazad’s sister) is based in Austria. According to Austrian law, the text of this book is in the public domain (“gemeinfrei”), since all rights expire 70 years after the author’s death. If this does not apply in the place of your residence, please respect your local law.

However, with the exception of making backup or printed copies for your own personal use, you may *not* copy, forward, reproduce or by any means publish this e-book without our previous written consent. This restriction is only valid as long as this e-book is available at the www.dunyazad-library.net website.

This e-book has been carefully edited. It may still contain OCR or transcription errors, but also intentional deviations from the available printed source(s) in typography and spelling to improve readability or to correct obvious printing errors.

A Dunyazad Digital Library book
Selected, edited and typeset by Robert Schaechter
First published (originally on milletre.net) August 2010
Release 1.02 · April 2014

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robert E. Howard was born in a small Texan town on January 22nd, 1906, as the only child of the traveling country physician Dr. Isaac Mordecai Howard, and his wife Hester Jane Ervin. During Howard's early years the family moved from one small Texas town to the next, relocating every year or two, until in 1919 they finally settled in the hamlet of Cross Plains, where Dr. Howard would be a well-respected general practitioner — here Howard would spend the rest of his life.

Howard started to write early — from childhood on, he had known that this was what he wanted to do — and he turned into an incredibly prolific author, covering a wide range of action and adventure genres. Howard wrote to earn a living, and since the magazines that bought his stories were paying poorly, he had to make up for this by volume. He was a careful writer, usually writing outlines and several drafts of his stories before he submitted them, but he wrote fast, rarely ran out of ideas (or of older stories to re-use and improve), and above all he was an unremitting worker: *“Writing is pounding out one damn yarn after another, pounding them out whether you want to or not ... the only way I can get anything done is to keep pounding away”* (as quoted by Novalyne Price Ellis, in her biography *One Who Walked Alone*).

Howard pounded away at historical fiction, fantasy, adventure, horror, boxing, western, detective and comedy stories, and also at several hundred poems — though these, he knew, would not be published by the magazines he was writing for.

All this time, Howard's life was troubled. From early age on he suffered from depression, and then he was burdened by the chronic

illness of his mother. It was she who in his childhood had installed in him the love for literature and poetry, and he felt very close to her — when she became bed-ridden, it was he who became her caregiver for many years until her death. His unsteady commercial success as a writer did not mitigate the pain of his depression, and a longstanding on-and-off love affair with the only woman he had ever been closely acquainted with was leading nowhere. On June 11th, 1936, when he was told that his mother would not awake from the coma into which she had fallen, he felt released of his duty to her, walked out to his car, took a gun he had borrowed from the glove box, and shot himself.

ABOUT THIS EDITION

The three stories that are combined in this small e-book are all that we have, in their creator's own writing, of two most remarkable adventure heroines.

The two stories about Dark Agnes in particular, *Sword Woman* and *Blades for France*, demonstrate how far ahead of his time Howard was when he was at his best. Even today, the uncompromising radicalness with which Agnes repudiates traditional female gender roles is stunning. It is noteworthy that Agnes, very unusual for Howard's writings, is the first person narrator of these stories.

Given the potential of this fascinating character, it disappoints us that we will never learn more about her and her further adventures and life. We can only find some comfort in the knowledge that to her, at least, a much longer life was given than to her creator: "*Indeed, in those days men were iron,*" are her words — and such words can only be spoken when looking back, from a ripe old age, on days long past.

A third Dark Agnes story in circulation, *Mistress of Death*, written by Gerald W. Page, allegedly based on a draft by Howard, fails to do justice either to Howard's literary skills or to the heroine's character, and is not included here.

Of Red Sonya we have, and know, even less — she appears in only one of Howard's stories, and there not before the fourth chapter of seven. She has little to do, except lending her name, with the "Red Sonja" who has become a popular heroine of stories, comics and movies by generations of Howard epigones.

The story in which we meet Red Sonya, *The Shadow of the Vulture*,

not only acquaints us with a formidable female fighter, but also shows us Howard's serious interest in history. Except for a few minor inaccuracies, and, of course, the fictional elements, the Siege of Vienna and its historical background are described authentically.

For the present edition the misprinted name *Roggendrof* was corrected to *Roggenndorf*, and, more relevant, *Semmering* to *Simmering* — the former being a mountain some 50 miles south of Vienna, while the latter is the Viennese suburb where Suleyman the Magnificent indeed had pitched his tent.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Sword Woman	8
Blades for France	53
The Shadow of the Vulture	80

SWORD WOMAN

1.

“Agnes! You red-haired spawn of the devil, where are you?” It was my father calling me, after his usual fashion. I raked my sweat-dampened hair out of my eyes and heaved the bundle of fagots back on my shoulder. Little of rest was there in my life.

My father parted the bushes and called into the glade — a tall man, gaunt and bitter, darkened with the suns of many campaigns, marked with scars gotten in the service of greedy kings and avaricious dukes. He scowled at me, and faith, I would hardly have recognized him had he worn another expression.

“What are you about?” he snarled.

“You sent me into the forest for wood,” I answered sullenly.

“Did I bid you begone a whole day?” he roared, aiming a slap at my head which I avoided with a skill born of much practise. “Have you forgot this is your wedding day?”

At that my fingers went limp and the cord slipped through them, so the bundle of fagots tumbled to the ground and burst apart. The gold went out of the sunlight, and the joy from the trilling of the birds.

“I had forgot,” I whispered, from lips suddenly dry.

“Well, take up your sticks and come along,” he scowled. “The sun heels westward. Ungrateful wench — accursed jade! — that your father should be forced to drag his old bones through the forest to bring you to your husband.”

“Husband!” I muttered. “Francois! Hoofs of the devil!”

“Will you swear, wench?” snarled my father. “Must I lesson you

again? Will you flout the man I have chosen for you? Francois is as fine a young man as you can find in all Normandy.”

“A fat pig,” I muttered; “a very munching, guzzling, nuzzling swine!”

“Be silent!” he yelled. “He will be a prop to my old age. I cannot much longer guide the plough handles. My old wounds pain me. Your sister Ysabel’s husband is a dog; he will give me no aid. Francois will be different. He will tame you, I warrant me. He will not humor you, as have I. You will eat stick from his hand, my fine lady.”

At that a red mist waved across my sight. It was ever thus at such talk of taming. I dashed down the fagots I had mechanically taken up, and all the fire in my blood rushed to my lips.

“May he rot in hell, and you with him!” I shrieked. “I’ll *not* wed him. Beat me — kill me! Use me as you wish! But I’ll never share Francois’ bed!”

At that hell flamed into my father’s eyes, so that I should have trembled but for the madness that gripped me. I saw mirrored there all the fury and violence and passion that had been his when he looted and murdered and raped as a Free Companion. With a wordless roar he lunged for me and dealt a buffet at my head with his right fist. I avoided the blow, and he smote with his left. Again his fist flailed empty air as I dodged, and then with a cry like the yell of a wolf, he caught my loose hair in his fingers, wrapping the tresses around his hand and wrenching my head back until it seemed my neck would break; and he smote me on the chin with his clubbed right fist, so that the sunlight went out in a wave of blackness.

I must have been senseless for some time — long enough for my father to drag me through the forest and into the village by the hair of my head. Regaining consciousness after a beating was no new expe-

rience, but I was sick and weak and dizzy, and my limbs ached from the rough ground over which he had dragged me. I was lying in our wretched hut, and when I staggered up into a sitting position, I found that my plain woolen tunic had been taken from me, and that I was decked in wedding finery. By Saint Denis, the feel of it was more loathsome than the slimy touch of a serpent, and a quick panic assailed me, so I would have torn it from me; but then a giddiness and a sickness overcame me, and I sank back with a groan. And blackness deeper than that of a bruised brain sank over me, in which I saw myself caught in a trap in which I struggled in vain. All strength flowed out of me, and I would have wept if I could. But I never could weep; and now I was too crushed to curse, and I lay staring dumbly at the rat-gnawed beams of the hut.

Then I was aware that some one had entered the room. From without sounded a noise of talking and laughter, as the people gathered. The one who had come into the hut was my sister Ysabel, bearing her youngest child on her hip. She looked down at me, and I noted how bent and stooped she was, and how gnarled from toil her hands, and how lined her features from weariness and pain. The holiday garments she wore seemed to bring these things out; I had not noticed them when she wore her usual peasant woman's attire.

"They make ready for the wedding, Agnes," she said, in her hesitant way. I did not reply. She set down the baby and knelt beside me, looking into my face with a strange wistfulness.

"You are young and strong and fresh, Agnes," she said, yet as though she spake more to herself than to me. "Almost beautiful in your wedding finery. Are you not happy?"

I closed my eyes wearily.

"You should laugh and be gay," she sighed — it seemed she

moaned, rather. “’Tis but once in a girl’s life. You do not love Francois. But I did not love Guillaume. Life is a hard thing for a woman. Your tall supple body will grow bent like mine, and broken with child-bearing; your hands will become twisted — and your mind will grow strange and grey — with the toil and the weariness — and the everlasting face of a man you hate —”

At that I opened my eyes and stared up at her.

“I am but a few years older than you, Agnes,” she murmured. “Yet look at me. Would you become as I?”

“What can a girl do?” I asked helplessly.

Her eyes burned into mine with a shadow of the fierceness I had so often seen smolder in the eyes of our father.

“One thing!” she whispered. “The only thing a woman can do, to free herself. Do not cling by your fingers to life, to become as our mother, and as your sister; do not live to become as me. Go while you are strong and supple and handsome. Here!”

She bent quickly, pressed something into my hand, then snatched up the child and was gone. And I lay staring fixedly at the slim-bladed dagger in my hand.

I stared up at the dingy rafters, and I knew her meaning. But as I lay there with my fingers curled about the slender hilt, strange new thoughts flooded my mind. The touch of that hilt sent a tingling through the veins of my arm; a strange sense of familiarity, as if its feel started a dim train of associations I could not understand but somehow felt. Never had I fingered a weapon before, or any edged thing more than a woodman’s axe or a cabbage knife. This slim lethal thing shimmering in my hand seemed somehow like an old friend come home again.

Outside the door voices rose and feet shuffled, and I quickly

slipped the dagger into my bosom. The door opened and fingers caught at the jamb, and faces leered at me. I saw my mother, stolid, colorless, a work animal with the emotions of a work animal, and over her shoulder, my sister. And I saw sudden disappointment and a haunting sorrow flood her expression as she saw me still alive; and she turned away.

But the others flooded into the hut and dragged me from the bunk, laughing and shouting in their peasant hilarity. Whether they put down my reluctance to virginal shyness, or knew my hatred for Francois, mattered little. My father's iron grasp was on one wrist, and some great mare of a loud-mouthed woman had my other wrist, and so they dragged me forth from the hut into a ring of shouting, laughing folk, who were already more than half drunk, men and women. Their rude jests and obscene comments fell on heedless ears. I was fighting like a wild thing, blind and reasonless, and it took all the strength of my captors to drag me along. I heard my father cursing me under his breath, and he twisted my wrist till it was like to break, but all he got out of me was a panting oath that consigned his soul to the hell it deserved.

I saw the priest coming forward, a wizened, blinking old fool, whom I hated as I hated them all. And Francois was coming to meet me — Francois, in new jerkin and breeches, with a chain of flowers about his fat red neck, and the smirk on his thick distended lips that made my flesh crawl. There he stood, grinning like a mindless ape, yet with vindictive triumph and lustful meaning in his little pig eyes.

At the sight of him I ceased my struggles like one struck motionless, and my captors released me and drew back; and so I stood facing him for an instant, almost crouching, glaring unspeaking. "Kiss her, lad!" bellowed some drunken lout; and then as a taut spring snaps,

I jerked the dagger from my bosom and sprang at Francois. My act was too quick for those slow-witted clowns even to comprehend, much less prevent. My dagger was sheathed in his pig's heart before he realized I had struck, and I yelped with mad glee to see the stupid expression of incredulous surprise and pain flood his red countenance, as I tore the dagger free and he fell, gurgling like a stuck pig, and spouting blood between his clawing fingers — to which clung petals from his bridal chain.

What has taken long to tell needed but an instant to transpire. I leapt, struck, tore away and fled, all in an instant. My father, the soldier, quicker in wit and action than the others, yelled and sprang to catch me, but his groping hands closed on empty air. I shot through the startled crowd and into the forest, and as I gained the trees, my father caught up a bow and let fly at me. I shrank aside and the arrow thudded venomously into a tree.

“Drunken fool!” I cried, with a shriek of wild laughter. “You are in your dotage, to miss such a mark!”

“Come back, you slut!” he roared, mad with passion.

“To the fires of hell with you,” I retorted; “and may the devil feast upon your black heart!” And that was my farewell to my father, as I turned and fled through the forest.

How far I fled I do not know. Behind me I heard the howls of the villagers, and their stumbling and blundering pursuit. Then only the yells, and those distant and far away, and then even they faded out. For few of my brave villagers had stomach to follow me into the deep woods, where the shadows were already stealing. I ran until my breath was jerked out of me in racking gasps, and my knees buckled, hurling me headlong in the soft leaf-carpeted loam, where I lay in a half-faint, until the moon climbed up, sheathing the higher branches in frosty

silver, and cutting out the shadows yet more blackly. About me I heard rustlings and movements that betokened beasts, and perchance worse — werewolves and goblins and vampires, for all I knew. Yet I was not afraid. I had slept in the forest ere now, when night caught me far from the village with a load of fagots, or my father in his drink had driven me forth from the hut.

I rose and went on through the moonlight and the darkness, taking scant heed of the direction, so I put as much distance as possible between me and the village. In the darkness before dawn sleep overcame me, and throwing myself on the loam, I fell into deep slumber, careless of whether beast or ghoulish creature devoured me before day broke.

But when dawn rose over the forest, it found me alive and whole, and possessed of a ravenous hunger. I sat up, wondering for an instant at the strangeness of it all, then sight of my torn wedding robes and the blood-crusted dagger in my girdle brought it all back. And I laughed again as I remembered Francois' expression as he fell, and a wild surge of freedom flooded me, so I felt like dancing and singing like a mad woman. But instead I cleansed the dagger on some fresh leaves, and putting it again in my girdle, I went toward the rising sun.

Presently I came upon a road which wound through the forest and was glad of it, because my wedding shoes, being shoddy things, were mostly worn out. I was accustomed to going barefoot, but even so, the briars and twigs of the forest hurt my feet.

The sun was not well up, when, coming to a curve in the road, which indeed was little more than a forest trail, I heard the sound of horse's hoofs. Instinct told me to hide in the bushes. But another instinct checked me. I searched my soul for fear and found it not. So I was standing in the middle of the path, unmoving, my dagger in my

hand, when the horseman came around the bend, and pulled up short with a startled oath.

He stared at me and I gave back his glance, unspeaking. He was handsome in a dark way, somewhat above medium height, and rather slender. His horse was a fine black stallion, with trappings of red leather and bright metal, and he himself was clad in silk hosen and velvet doublet, somewhat shabby, with a scarlet cloak flung about him, and a feather in his cap. He wore no baldric, but a sword hung at his girdle in a worn leather sheath.

“By Saint Denis!” he exclaimed; “what sprite of the forest, or goddess of dawn are you, girl?”

“Who are you to ask?” I demanded, finding myself neither fearful nor overly timid.

“Why, I am Etienne Villiers, once of Aquitaine,” he answered, and an instant later bit his lip and shook his head as if in irritation that he had so spoken. He looked at me, then, from crown to slippers and back, and laughed.

“Out of what mad tale did you step?” he asked. “A red-haired girl in tattered wedding finery, dagger in hand, in the green woodlands just at sunrise! ’Tis better than a romaunt! Come, good wench, tell me the jest.”

“Here is no jest,” I muttered sullenly.

“But who are you?” he persisted.

“My name is Agnes de Chastillon,” I answered.

He laughed and slapped his thigh.

“A noble lady in disguise!” he mocked. “Saint Ives, the tale grows more spicy! From what shaded bower in what giant-guarded castle have you escaped, in these trappings of a peasant, my lady?” And he doffed his chaperon in a sweeping bow.

**End of
sample**

...>

... to read on, get the full book from the Dunyazad Digital Library!

THE DUNYAZAD DIGITAL LIBRARY gives you classical books (and the occasional modern one) of history, fantasy and adventure. Carefully and professionally proofread, edited and typeset, the Library's editions offer a far better quality than the free-for-download fare usually found on the web.

Intended for reading devices with sufficient screen sizes (8 inches or more) the PDF format allows for a careful design of lines and pages, resulting in a more pleasant reading experience than the necessarily random line and page breaks of other e-book formats.

All books in the Dunyazad Digital Library are also available in ePub, Mobi (Kindle) and plain text format.

All e-book files in the Library are free from any DRM restrictions.

To download any of the books in PDF, ePub or Mobi format you need a "Library Card." It is free, without even the need to register.

Get your free Library Card:

www.dunyazad-library.net/librarycard.htm

For more information, see

www.dunyazad-library.net/about.htm

The Reading Room (list of available books):

www.dunyazad-library.net/readingroom.htm