

DREAMS and GHOSTS and SMOKE

**The stories of Kull,
Bran Mak Morn
and Turlogh Dubh O'Brien
by Robert E. Howard**



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The stories of Kull, Bran Mak Morn
and Turlogh Dubh O'Brien
by Robert E. Howard

First published 1929–1932
(The majority of the stories in this collection
have not been published during the author's lifetime)

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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. Fantasy was only one of many genres in which he wrote, and even within the fantasy genre the Conan stories make up only a fraction of his immense literary output. 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horror, boxing, western, detective and comedy stories, and also at several hundred poems — though these, he knew, would not be published by the magazines he was writing for.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, despite his father being a doctor, it was he who for many years attended to her. 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. When he was told that his mother would not awake from the coma she had fallen into, on June 11th, 1936, 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

This collection contains the stories about Kull, Bran Mak Morn and Turlogh Dubh O'Brien — fantasy heroes who precede Conan in Howard's oeuvre. Not included are stories that Howard has left unfinished, and of the two versions of the tale in which Turlogh Dubh O'Brien plays a rather minor role, *Spears of Clontarf* / *The Twilight of the Grey Gods*, only the latter is part of this book.

The stories are set against very different backgrounds — Kull lives in a mythical age even eons before the time of Conan, Bran in the times of the Roman Empire, and Turlogh, explicitly anchored in history, takes part in the Battle of Clontarf in the year 1014. There are connections, though: Kull appears in the Bran Mak Morn story *Kings of the Night*, and Bran Mak Morn features in the Turlogh Dubh O'Brien story *The Dark Man*. And, by the way, the story in which Conan first saw the light of literature, *The Phoenix on the Sword*, was a re-written Kull story, *By This Axe I Rule!* Still, each one of Howard's heroes is an individual character in his or her own right, and knows how to fascinate us in his or her own way.

The title of this collection, *Dreams and Ghosts and Smoke*, was taken from the last words of the last story, *The Gods of Bal-Sagoth*.

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KULL

EXILE OF ATLANTIS

The sun was setting. A last crimson glory filled the land and lay like a crown of blood on the snow-sprinkled peaks. The three men who watched the death of the day breathed deep the fragrance of the early wind which stole up out of the distant forests, and then turned to a task more material. One of the men was cooking venison over a small fire and this man, touching a finger to the smoking viand, tasted with the air of a connoisseur.

“All ready, Kull — Gor-na — let us eat.”

The speaker was young — little more than a boy. A tall, slim-waisted, broad-shouldered lad who moved with the easy grace of a leopard. Of his companions, one was an older man, a powerful, massively built hairy man, with an aggressive face. The other was a counterpart of the speaker, except for the fact that he was slightly larger — taller, a thought deeper of chest and broader of shoulder. He gave the impression, even more than the first youth, of dynamic speed concealed in long, smooth muscles.

“Good,” said he, “I am hungry.”

“When were you ever otherwise?” jeered the first speaker.

“When I am fighting,” Kull answered seriously.

The other shot a quick glance at his friend as to fathom his inmost mind; he was not always sure of his friend.

“And then you are blood hungry,” broke in the older man. “Am-ra, have done with your bantering and cut us food.”

Night began to fall; the stars blinked out. Over the shadowy hill-country swept the dusk wind. Far off a tiger roared suddenly. Gor-na

made an instinctive motion toward the flint-pointed spear which lay beside him. Kull turned his head and a queer light flickered in his cold grey eyes.

“The striped brothers hunt tonight,” said he.

“They worship the rising moon.” Am-ra indicated the east where a red radiance was becoming evident.

“Why?” asked Kull. “The moon discovers them to their prey and their enemies.”

“Once, many hundreds of years ago,” said Gor-na, “a king tiger, pursued by hunters, called on the woman in the moon and she flung him down a vine whereby he climbed to safety and abode for many years in the moon. Since then, all the striped people worship the moon.”

“I don’t believe it,” said Kull bluntly. “Why should the striped people worship the moon for aiding one of their race who died so long ago? Many a tiger has scrambled up Death Cliff and escaped the hunters, but they do not worship that cliff. How should they know what took place so long ago?”

Gor-na’s brow clouded. “It little becomes you, Kull, to jeer at your elders or to mock the legends of your adopted people. This tale must be true because it has been handed down from generation unto generation longer than men remember. What always was, must always be.”

“I don’t believe it,” said Kull. “These mountains always were but some day they will crumble and vanish. Some day the sea will flow over these hills —”

“Enough of this blasphemy!” cried Gor-na with a passion that was almost anger. “Kull, we are close friends and I bear with you because of your youth — but one thing you must learn — respect for tradition.

You mock at the customs and ways of our people — you whom that people rescued from the wilderness and gave a home and a tribe.”

“I was a hairless ape roaming in the woods,” admitted Kull frankly and without shame. “I could not speak the language of men and my only friends were the tigers and the wolves. I know not whom my people were, or what blood am I —”

“That matters not,” broke in Gor-na. “For all you have the aspect of one of that outlaw tribe who lived in Tiger Valley, and who perished in the Great Flood, it matters little. You have proven yourself a valiant warrior and a mighty hunter —”

“Where will you find a youth to equal him in throwing the spear or in wrestling?” broke in Am-ra, his eyes alight.

“Very true,” said Gor-na. “He is a credit to the Sea-mountain tribe, but for all that he must control his mouth, and learn to reverence the holy things of the past and of the present.”

“I mock not,” said Kull without malice, “but many things the priests say I know to be lies for I have run with the tigers and I know wild beasts better than the priests. Animals are neither gods nor fiends, but men in their way without the lust and greed of man —”

“More blasphemy!” cried Gor-na angrily. “Man is Valka’s mightiest creation.”

Am-ra broke in to change the subject. “I heard the coast drums beating early in the morning. There is war on the sea. Valusia fights the Lemurian pirates.”

“Evil luck to both,” grunted Gor-na.

Kull’s eyes flickered again. “Valusia! Land of Enchantment! Some day I will see the great City of Wonder.”

“Evil the day that you do,” snarled Gor-na. “You will be loaded

with chains with the doom of torture and death hanging over you. No man of our race sees the Great City save as a slave.”

“Evil luck attend her,” muttered Am-ra.

“Black luck and a red doom!” exclaimed Gor-na, shaking his fist toward the east. “For each drop of spilt Atlantean blood, for each slave toiling in their cursed galleys, may a black blight rest on Valusia and all the Seven Empires!”

Am-ra, fired, leapt lithely to his feet and repeated part of the curse; Kull cut himself another slice of cooked meat.

“I have fought the Valusians,” said he, “and they were bravely arrayed but not hard to kill. Nor were they evil-featured.”

“You fought the feeble guard of her northern coast,” grunted Gor-na, “or the crew of stranded merchant ships. Wait until you have faced the charge of the Black Squadrons, or the Great Army as have I. Hai! Then there is blood to drink! With Gandaro of the Spear, I harried the Valusian coasts when I was younger than you, Kull. Aye, we carried the torch and the sword deep into the empire. Five hundred men we were, of all the coast tribes of Atlantis. Four of us returned! Outside the village of Hawks, which we burned and sacked, the van of the Black Squadron smote us! Hai, there the spears drank and the swords were eased of thirst! We slew and they slew, but when the thunder of battle was stilled, four of us escaped from the field, and all of us sore wounded.”

“Ascalante tells me,” pursued Kull, “that the walls about the Crystal City are ten times the height of a tall man; that the gleam of gold and silver would dazzle the eyes and the women who throng the streets or lean from their windows are robed in strange, smooth robes that rustle and sheen.”

“Ascalante should know,” grimly said Gor-na, “since he was slave

among them so long that he forgot his good Atlantean name and must forsooth abide by the Valusian name they gave him.”

“He escaped,” commented Am-ra.

“Aye, but for every slave that escapes the clutches of the Seven Empires, seven are rotting in dungeons and dying each day — for it was not meant for an Atlantean to bide as a slave.”

“We have been enemies to the Seven Empires since the dawn of time,” mused Am-ra.

“And will be until the world crashes,” said Gor-na with a savage satisfaction. “For Atlantis, thank Valka, is the foe of all men.”

Am-ra rose, taking his spear and prepared to stand watch. The other two lay down on the sward and dropped to sleep. Of what did Gor-na dream? Battle perhaps, or the thunder of buffalo — or a girl of the caves. Kull —

Through the mists of his sleep echoed faintly and far away the golden melody of the trumpets. Clouds of radiant glory floated over him; then a mighty vista opened before his dream self. A great concourse of people stretched away into the distance and a thunderous roar in a strange language went up from them. There was a minor note of steel clashing and great shadowy armies reined to the right and the left; the mist faded and a face stood out boldly, a face above which hovered a regal crown — a hawk-like face, dispassionate, immobile, with eyes like the grey of the cold sea. Now the people thundered again. “Hail the king! Hail the king! *Kull the King!*”

Kull awoke with a start — the moon glimmered on the distant mountain, the wind sighed through the tall grass. Gor-na slept beside him and Am-ra stood, a naked bronze statue against the stars. Kull’s eyes wandered to his scanty garment — a leopard’s hide twisted about

his pantherish loins. A naked barbarian — Kull's cold eyes glimmered. Kull the king! Again he slept.

They arose in the morning and set out for the caves of the tribe. The sun was not yet high when the broad blue river met their gaze and the caverns of the tribe rose to view.

“Look!” Am-ra cried out sharply. “They burn someone!”

A heavy stake stood before the caves; thereon was a young girl bound. The people who stood about, hard-eyed, showed no sign of pity.

“Ala,” said Gor-na, his face setting into unbending lines. “She married a Lemurian pirate — the wanton.”

“Aye,” broke in a stony-eyed old woman, “my own daughter — thus she brought shame on Atlantis — my daughter no longer! Her mate died — she was washed ashore when their ship was broken by the craft of Atlantis.”

Kull eyed the girl compassionately. He couldn't understand — why did these people, her own kin and blood, frown on her so, merely because she chose an enemy of her race? In all the eyes that were centered on her, Kull saw only one trace of sympathy. Am-ra's strange blue eyes were sad and compassionate.

What Kull's own immobile face mirrored there is no knowing. But the eyes of the doomed girl rested on his. There was no fear in her fine eyes, but a deep and vibrant appeal. Kull's gaze wandered to the fagots at her feet.

Soon the priest, who now chanted a curse beside her, would stoop and light these with the torch which he now held in his left hand. Kull saw that she was bound to the stake with a heavy wooden chain — a peculiar thing which was typically Atlantean in its manufacture. He could not sever that chain, even if he reached her through the throng

that barred his way. Her eyes implored him. He glanced at the fagots; touched the long flint dagger at his girdle. She understood. Nodded, relief flooding her eyes.

Kull struck as suddenly and unexpectedly as a cobra. He snatched the dagger from his girdle and threw it. Fairly under the heart it struck, killing her instantly. While the people stood spell-bound, Kull wheeled, bounded away and ran up the sheer side of the cliff for twenty feet, like a cat. The people stood struck dumb, then a man whipped up bow and arrow and sighted along the smooth shaft. Kull was heaving himself over the lip of the cliff: the Bowman's eyes narrowed — Am-ra, as if by accident, lurched headlong into him and the arrow sang wide and aside. Then Kull was gone.

He heard them screaming on his track; his own tribesmen, fired with the blood-lust, wild to run him down and slay him for violating their strange and bloody code of morals. But no man in Atlantis, and that means no man in the world, could foot it with Kull of the Sea-mountain tribe.

**End of
sample**

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