

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF WILD BILL CLANTON

by Rick Lai

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During his brief lifetime, Robert E. Howard (1906-36) created heroes for various markets. Most renowned of Howard's heroes are those that appeared in weird fantasy stories (Conan of Cimmeria, King Kull, Solomon Kane etc.). Somewhat lesser known are Howard's heroes in the exotic adventure genre, Francis X. Gordon and Kirby O'Donnell. There were also heroes created for the prize fighting pulps, Sailor Steve Costigan and Dennis Dorgan. In the field of mystery and detective stories, Howard invented Steve Harrison. For the "spicy" market, Howard recorded the sexual escapades of Wild Bill Clanton under the byline of Sam Walsler.

Of the six stories about Clanton, five were published in *Spicy Adventure Stories*: "She Devil" (April 1936), "Desert Blood" (June 1936), "The Dragon of Kao Tsu" (September 1936), "The Purple Heart of Erlik" (November 1936) and "Murderer's Grog" (January 1937). A sixth story, "Ship in Mutiny," was discovered decades later among Howard's papers. All of Clanton's exploits were collected in a paperback, *The She Devil* (Ace Fantasy Books, 1983). The same volume also included two other "spicy" tales by Howard, "Guns of Khartum" and "Daughters of Feud."

Clanton, an American seaman, was arguably the least admirable of Howard's heroes. His romantic relationships with women came extremely close to rape. He was also a gun-runner who sold arms to the highest bidder. Perhaps Clanton's most deplorable business venture was "black-birding," the practice of kidnapping Kanaka tribesmen from South Seas islands and bringing them to Queensland, Australia, as laborers.

The practice of "black-birding" was tantamount to slavery. It was outlawed in Queensland during 1904. In "She Devil," Clanton took over a ship, the *Saucy Wench*, and used it for "black-birding." In "Ship in Mutiny," Clanton was still in command of the vessel but shifted its business activity to the more respectable enterprise of pearl-poaching. This change of direction was most likely caused by the banning of "black-birding" in Queensland. Probably the events of "She Devil" transpired in 1903, the year before "black-birding" became illegal, and those of "Ship in Mutiny" in 1905, the year following the banning of the barbaric trade.

Clanton was most likely in his early twenties in "She Devil." He was a tall muscular man with black hair and blue eyes. By the time of "She Devil," Clanton was known throughout the South Seas as "a wild adventurer roaring on a turbulent career that included everything from pearl-diving to piracy." To have gained such a formidable reputation in his twenties, Clanton must have started his exploits in his late teens. Most likely, he was born around 1880.

At the start of "She Devil," Clanton had been first mate aboard the *Damnation*, a British ship of dubious endeavors. Playing draw poker, the captain of the *Damnation* lost his share of the cargo (the exact nature of which was never revealed) to Clanton. Welshing on his bet, the captain casted Clanton adrift in an open boat in the Pacific.

Clanton was picked up by the *Saucy Wench*, ship commanded by Bully Harrigan. The *Saucy Wench* was looking for an island called Aragoa. Hidden on the island was a barrel full of ambergris, a valuable whale secretion used in the perfume

industry. Harrigan's map showing Aragoa's location had been thrown overboard by his mistress, Raquel O'Shane, during a domestic quarrel.

The title of this story refers to Raquel. Of Spanish-Irish descent, Raquel was a beautiful woman with foamy black hair, ivory skin and a fiery disposition. In the United States, Raquel had worked in a saloon on Water Street, the dangerous district of a Barbary Coast town. Raquel that she only danced there, but it is suggested that she entertained the customers in other ways. After knifing a drunk in the saloon one night, Raquel boarded the *Saucy Wench* and begged Harrigan to take her away from certain arrest.

Harrigan's initial reaction to the chart's loss was to jettison Raquel as well, but Clanton prevented this by pretending to know Aragoa's location. After finding an island that was certainly not Aragoa, Clanton tricked Harrigan by leading him into an ambush provided by the local natives. Abandoning Harrigan to be slain, Clanton took command of the ship. With Raquel now as his lover, Clanton proceeded to engage in the abominable "black-bird" trade. His plan was to sail to Solomon Islands and abduct natives. Needless to say, the conclusion of this story is not morally uplifting.

As noted earlier, Clanton's career as a "black-birder" was cut short when the hellish trade was outlawed. Clanton must have decided that pearl-poaching was the most profitable enterprise open to him. Around 1905, "Ship in Mutiny" unfolded. A British warship was chasing the *Saucy Wench*, but Clanton eluded it. The British authorities were the least of Clanton's worries. A mutiny by his crew forced Clanton and Raquel to take refuge on a South Seas island. A brutal tribal chieftain lusted after Raquel. Breaking the king's neck, Clanton restored the island's former ruler, a beautiful queen, to the throne. The ringleaders of the mutiny killed each other in a quarrel. The resulting leadership vacuum permitted Clanton to resume command. The island's queen wanted Clanton to become her consort, but he declined because Raquel was "the girl." The story concluded with Clanton and Raquel returning to the *Saucy Wench*.

Raquel and Clanton did not live happily ever after. There is a tremendous gap in Clanton's career during which Raquel disappeared. It is not clear what role Clanton played in World War I (1914-18), but the internal evidence suggested that he was in Libya during that global conflict. During 1911-12, Italy went to war with the Ottoman Empire over Libya. Although the Turks signed a treaty recognizing Italian control of Libya, the indigenous population continues to resist the Italian occupation. By 1915, Italy and Turkey were on opposite sides of World War I. Turkish agents went to Libya to assist the rebels. One of these agents was probably Muhammad Pasha, a Turk who claimed to have undergone imprisonment by the Italian colonial authorities due to Clanton's intervention.

By the time of "Desert Blood," Muhammad was no longer in prison. Set in the 1920's, the story described a visit by Clanton to Tebessa, Algeria. Clanton was now known as formidable fighter from San Francisco to Singapore. He was running guns to Berbers rebelling against the French in neighboring Morocco. There was an actual Berber uprising during 1921-26.

Installed in Tripoli, Libya, Muhammad Pasha also wanted guns. Apparently he wanted to give them to Libyan rebels whose armed struggle against Italian imperialism was not suppressed until 1932. The rebellion was in full force in Tripolitana, the province in which Tripoli is located, until the Italians gained firm control over the area in

1923. Since the Berbers began their rebellion in 1921 and the area was pacified in 1923, the most likely year for the events of “Desert Blood” is 1922.

Clanton was captured by Zulaykha, Muhammad’s sister. Aicha, the concubine of one of Zulaykha’s accomplices, became enamored with Clanton. Aicha helped Clanton escape. Clanton promised to install Aicha on his ship as his mistress. Aicha assumed the role which Raquel O’Shane held two decades earlier.

Later in the 1920’s, Clanton shifted his gun-running activities from northern Africa to southwest Asia. Clanton went to the Soviet Union where he purchased a large quantity of rifles from the Communists. Hauling his cargo on a train of camels, Clanton made a perilous trek through Afghanistan bribing officials at every turn. Passing through the Khyber Pass, he arrived at Peshawur in British India. Two tribes in the virtually independent territory between India and Afghanistan were about to go to war with each other. Clanton intended to sell his weapons to one of these tribes. In order to cross into the dangerous territory, Clanton needed the protection of Baber Ali Khan, a powerful Afghan chieftain. It is possible that Baber Ali Khan is the same person as Baber Khan, an Afghan friend of Francis X. Gordon in *Three-Bladed Doom* (1977).

Sonya Ormanoff, a Soviet spy in Peshawur, intended to hijack the rifles from Clanton. The Soviets had plotted to double-cross Clanton from the beginning. Clanton’s passage into the border area had been approved by Baber Ali Khan. Sonya had persuaded Mizra Pasha, a Persian acting as Baber’s agent, not to give the American the necessary credentials.

Local gun-runners in Peshawur also viewed the American as unnecessary competition. One gun-runner arranged to have Clanton slipped bang (hashish) in a bar. The intent of the subterfuge was to madden Clanton into attacking the British deputy commissioner with whom he has recently quarreled. The effect of the drug was quite different because Clanton had just left a heated argument with Sonya. Arriving at her quarters in an insane rage, Clanton overheard her and Mizra plotting to withhold Baber Ali Khan’s pass from him. Seizing the pass, Clanton threw Mizra out of Sonya’s house. Clanton then proceeded to rape Sonya.

At this point, Howard’s narrative becomes deliberately vague. The text is not clear whether Clanton desisted from any further brutal behavior or carried his actions to their conclusion. When Sonya is last described, Clanton was looking down at “where she lay weeping in rage, shame and humiliation.” In possession of Baber Ali Khan’s safe-conduct, Clanton exited Sonya’s room.

“Murderer’s Grog” most likely took place in the late 1920’s. The Soviet Union began to seek influence in Afghanistan during 1924. Afghanistan was largely at peace during Clanton’s passage from the Soviet Union to India. It is highly unlikely that Clanton crossed either during 1924-25 and 1928-29 when Afghanistan was experiencing rebellions against the Emir. Considering that the Berber rebellion was crushed in 1926, it is extremely probable that Clanton made his decision to seek a new market for gun-running in that year. He likely came to Russia in the same year. Allowing Clanton time to purchase rifles from the Soviets and organize a journey through Afghanistan, it can be conjectured that the American didn’t arrive in Peshawur until 1927.

The name of Howard’s villainess, Sonya Ormanoff, was derived from the works of Talbot Mundy. Several of Mundy stories involve a half-Indian half-Russian spy, Yasmini. In *Guns of the Gods* (1921), Mundy identified Yasmini’s mother as Princess

Sonia Omanoff of Tsarist Russia. All Russian names are translated into the Latin alphabet from the Cyrillic. Therefore, Sonia Omanoff and Sonya Ormanoff could be different Western spellings of the same name.

It is chronologically impossible for Mundy's Sonia to be Howard's Sonya. Yasmini, however, could be the mother of the spy of "Murderer's Grog." Both Yasmini and Sonya Ormanoff had blonde hair. Yasmini's eyes were either blue or brown or hazel depending on which of Talbot Mundy's stories you read. Sonya's eyes were gray like those of Vladimir Jakrovitch, an enemy of Francis X. Gordon. Jakrovitch appeared in "The Country of the Knife" (*Complete Stories*, August 1936), which was reprinted in *Son of the White Wolf* (1977). Both Jakrovitch and Yasmini were active in plots along the Afghan-Indian border at the start of the twentieth century. Perhaps the two had an affair that resulted in the birth of the future Soviet spy known as Sonya Ormanoff.

Leaving Afghanistan and India behind him, Clanton went to the Far East. At about a dozen ports, he came into contact with the attractive Arline Ellis. Clanton indicated his romantic feelings towards Arline, but she always gave him the cold shoulder.

Arline was embroiled in deep trouble at the start of "The Purple Heart of Erlik" In Clanton, she had been visiting the apartment of Baron Takayami, a Japanese diplomat. The Baron's servant, a Russian spy, murdered him and stole important documents. Fleeing the scene of the crime after witnessing the murder, Arline was observed by Duke Tremayne, an American crook. In Shanghai, Tremayne blackmailed Arline into becoming his accomplice in a robbery scheme.

The Takayami incident was increasing the possibility of war between Japan and China. The two countries did go to war during 1931-33 over Manchuria. It is probable that "The Purple Heart of Erlik" took place in 1930.

Tremayne wanted Arline to purloin the Heart of Erlik, a ruby belonging to Woon Yuen, a sinister Chinese merchant. Erlik Khan is a monstrous Mongolian god whose cult appears in various incarnations throughout Robert E. Howard's works. Other manifestations of the Erlik cult were fought by Francis X. Gordon and Steve Harrison. Woon Yuen practiced the demonic ritual of pouring blood on Erlik's sacred ruby.

Clanton became entangled in the affair because he still wanted to seduce Arline. His pursuit of Arline made him an enemy of both Woon Yuen and Tremayne. By the story's end, both villains were dead, the ruby had not been stolen from the Erlik cult, and Clanton realized his ambitions concerning Arline.

"The Dragon of Kao Tsu" brought Clanton to Singapore. He had been hired by Marianne Allison, a spoiled heiress to steal the ivory statue of a dragon. Inside the statue was hidden an agreement between Marianne's father, a San Francisco tycoon known as Old Man Allison, and General Kai, a Chinese warlord. The document granted Old Man Allison an oil concession inside China. Having lost a large portion of his fortune in the stock market crash of 1929, Allison was desperate to retrieve this agreement. He dispatched his daughter to Singapore for this purpose. The reference to the stock market crash implies that "The Dragon of Kao Tsu" was set in 1930.

In the end, Marianne got the document, but tried to cheat Clanton out of his promised fee. Clanton took his revenge by stealing Marianne's virtue. Although Clanton's sexual encounter with Marianne could be viewed as rape, Robert E. Howard

unconvincingly attempted to mitigate his protagonist's action by having Marianne indicate a sense of enjoyment in her eyes.

It could be theorized that General Kai was meant to be General Chiang Kai-Shek, the then ruler of China. Speculation could also be done about the identity of Old Man Allison. The name Allison appeared in many different contexts throughout Howard's works. James Allison was the hero of a fantasy series involving reincarnation. Howard also fashioned two versions of a character named Steve Allison, the Sonora Kid. The original Sonora Kid was conceived as a gunslinger of the early 1900's who roamed both the American West and Asia. This Sonora Kid appeared in a series of fragments written by Howard as a teenager. These fragments were collected into two chapbooks by Cryptic publications, *North of Khyber* (1987) and *The Sonora Kid* (1988). Later as a mature writer, Howard reincarnated the Sonora Kid as western hero of the 1870's and 1880's.

Perhaps the two Sonora Kids were father and son. Could the Steve Allison of the 1900's be Old Man Allison? It's doubtful because the fragments indicate that this Sonora Kid was still unmarried after World War I. This Steve Allison did have an older brother, Frank, who could be Old Man Allison. One of the three sisters of the Allison brothers was named Marion. Maybe Marianne Allison was christened after her.

In 1930, the time of his last exploit, Wild Bill Clanton was about fifty. He may have continued to haunt the bedrooms of Africa and Asia, or he may have perished at the hands of his enemies, or he may have died in bed. If the latter was the case, he probably was doing more than just sleeping at the time. Of course, he could have been arrested for rape and died in a prison bunk.

Chronology

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| 1880 | Birth of Wild Bill Clanton. |
| 1903 | Clanton becomes master of the <i>Saucy Wench</i> ("She Devil"). He engages the ship in "black-birding." |
| 1904 | "Black-birding" is outlawed in Queensland, Australia. |
| 1905 | Clanton briefly loses control of the <i>Saucy Wench</i> ("Ship in Mutiny"). |
| 1914-18 | World War I rages. Clanton was probably in Libya sometime during the conflict. |
| 1921 | A Berber uprising erupts in Morocco. |
| 1922 | In Tebessa, Algeria, a plot unfolds to steal a cargo of guns that Clanton is selling to the Berbers. |
| 1926 | The Berber rebellion is suppressed. Clanton travels to the Soviet Union. |

- 1927 In Peshawur, India, Sonya Ormanoff tries to hijack an arms shipment from Clanton (“Murderer’s Grog”).
- 1930 In Shanghai, Clanton battles the Erlik cult (“The Purple Heart of Erlik”).
In Singapore, Clanton is hired to steal an ivory statue (“The Dragon of Kao Tsu”)