

Howard Phillips Lovecraft as His Wife Remembers Him

Her Memoirs of the Providence Writer of Horror Stories Now First Published

BY SONIA H. DAVIS
(the former Mrs. H. P. Lovecraft)
HOWARD PHILLIPS LOVECRAFT and I met in 1921 and we were married at New York in March 1924. What follows here may be the most interesting and worthy eulogy of a truly great person. But it contains—as do other accounts—several misconceptions about Howard's life, and especially of events in the years 1921-1932 of which no one but myself knows.

Bookman's Galley

IN THE accompanying article the woman who was once Howard Lovecraft's wife emerges from silence, even from considerable mystery as to her whereabouts, and for the first time speaks out. In the field of Lovecraftiana, it is an article of the very first importance. Nevertheless it is not designed to stand quite self-sufficiently, and so I want to make Bookman's Galley today a brief foreword.

Lovecraft was born here in Providence 58 years ago this August 29 just past. He died here in March, 1937. Boy and man he was an over-mothered, over-protected, somewhat neurotic, shy and brilliant eccentric. His weird tales of the supernatural brought him little notice in his lifetime, but in recent years Lovecraft's fame has become international.

There has been due to three developments. First, of course, the publication of Lovecraft's stories in two huge collections by August Derleth's Arkham House: "The Outsider" and "Beyond the Wall of Sleep." Second, a simultaneous spurt of writing about Lovecraft, hitherto scarce and of varying quality. And third, a general increase of reader interest in the weird, or horror, story.

Paper-book selections of his work, reprints of stories in many anthologies, residual publication of Lovecraft material, promise of his "Letters" yet to come from Arkham House; these have filled out the posthumous reputation. Collectors have paid between \$50 and \$100 for a copy of "The Outsider"—that highest price being, as Angelielle H. P. L. would delight to know, in England.

For general Lovecraft biography, any unfamiliar reader may refer to Derleth's little book, "H. P. L. A Memoir," published by Ben Abramson, and my article, "His Own and My Own," in the most recent issue of "The Outsider" in the Lovecraft addenda-volume called "Marginalia" (Arkham House). At the John Hay Library, Brown University, is a constantly extended H. P. L. collection.

Now, as to Sonia Davis' personal memoir. It is precisely that. It is her version. Perhaps I do not know—it will not prove unassailable in every point. Certainly it corrects much that has been written about Lovecraft. It further and consistently enriches what we already know of his personality. It offers new material on his family and financial affairs. Above all, it tells us of the marriage of which, until now little has been known beyond the astonishing fact that so different a person did marry.

Long ago I said in print that if the one-time Mrs. Lovecraft could be discovered and persuaded to tell her story it would be of inestimable value. Now at last this has happened. And we have here, I think, not only the best account of the marriage to Lovecraft biography but a story which is in itself unexpectedly moving. W. T. S.

His very plain face he attributed, he said, to two reasons. At 15 or 16 he fell and broke his nose when he and another boy were racing their bicycles. The other reason, he said wryly, was that when he would look at the stars through his telescope. Actually, he resembled his mother very much. Though less pronounced in the womanfolk, the entire Phillips family had the prognathous jaw and the extremely short upper lip. Howard was fond of making caricatures of himself as he would appear when he became old.

Well—to return to Howard with the Persian cat—I felt that if he could be made to feel more confident of his genius as a writer and to forget his "awful looks," as he put it, he would become less diffident and more happy. So whenever an opportunity presented itself I would not avoid giving him compliments.

When Howard, still in New York, went out with "the boys" for several evenings I realized how poignantly I missed him. I suggested that instead of his going home to Providence, we bring "Frodo" to Parkside Avenue. Each of us wrote an urgent invitation to the aunts with whom he lived, Mrs. Lillian Clark and Mrs. Annie Gamwell, and Mrs. Gamwell came for a few weeks.

Return to Providence After their return to Providence I was not ashamed to write him how very much I missed him. His appreciation of this led us both to more serious ground.

I knew Howard was not in a position to marry. Of his Grandfather Phillips' estate there was only about \$20,000 left, and this was supposed to last the rest of the lives of his two aunts and himself. Had he been less proud to write for money he need not have starved himself. He would say "I write to please myself only; and if a few of my friends enjoy my 'effusions' I feel well repaid."

He spent much of his time revising the atrocious work of others, for which he was paid a pittance. He would wear himself out over some of the stupid trash he was asked to revise, some of it for authors who later became well known and prosperous.

Meanwhile his letters indicated his desire to leave Providence and settle in New York. Each of us meditated the possibilities of a life together. Some of our friends suspected. I admitted to friends that I cared very much for Howard and that if he would have me I would gladly be his wife. But nothing definite was decided.

I came to America when I was nine years old, a White Russian of the old Czarist regime. In 1899, when I was 16, I married a fellow-countryman who had adopted the name of a Boston friend, Greene. My husband died in 1916. By him I have one daughter who was for several years Paris correspondent for various American newspapers. After my divorce from Howard Lovecraft I married Nathaniel A. Davis, a former professor at the University of California at Berkeley, and we were very happy during the 10 years before his death.

At the time of my meeting Howard Lovecraft I held an executive position with a fashionable women's wear establishment on Fifth Avenue. My salary was close to \$10,000 a year.

More Meetings On my business trips to Boston I would stop off at Providence and the aunts and Howard would dine with me at the Billmore. They all enjoyed these occasions, but they thought me extravagant. The aunts would not join me in Boston but they condescended to trust Howard with me there. I would attend to business during the daytime, while Howard explored museums, graveyards, old houses and whatnot. At least once on each visit we would have our dinner at a Greek restaurant which H. P. favored for its tiled walls depicting scenes from Greek classics. He loved to talk to me of ancient Greece and Rome while I, in turn, considered it a great privilege to attend to business during the daytime. Later he would show me the historical places in Boston and we would walk the old, narrow streets.

Once we visited Magnolia, Mass. As we walked along the esplanade there one evening we heard a peculiar snoring, grunting noise, loud in the distance. The moon made a path on the water. Emergent tops of piles in the water were connected with rope, like a huge spider web.

"Oh, Howard," I said, "here you have the setting for a really strange and mysterious story."

"Go ahead, and write it," he said. "Oh, no, I couldn't do it just yet. Try it. Tell me what the scene pictures to your imagination."

After we parted for the night I sat up and wrote the general outline which he later revised and edited. His enthusiasm next day was so genuine that I surprised and shocked him right then and there by kissing him.

He was so flustered that he blushed and then he turned pale when I chaffed him about it. He said he had not been kissed since he was a very small child. I know he had loved his mother and he loved his aunts in a positive way, but he was not demonstrative in his affections. He said he would probably never be kissed again. But I fooled him.



Sonia H. Davis (A recent photograph)

that we be married by a Christian minister and that the marriage take place in St. Paul's Church—"where Washington and Lord Howe and many other great men had worshipped!" In this, as later in so many other things, I let him have his way. In nearly everything he was the "victor" and I the "vanquished." I would gainsay him nothing if I thought it would eradicate his thoughts.

Houdini Manuscript The night before our marriage Howard absent-mindedly left in the Providence station the Houdini manuscript—that is, an article which he had ghost-written for the famed magician. It was not, as someone has said, "a public stenographer" who copied the handwritten notes which H. P. still had. I alone was able to read those crossed out notes.

I read them slowly to him while he pounded at a typewriter borrowed from the hotel in Philadelphia where we were spending our first day and night. So we spent there, and when the manuscript was finished we were too tired and exhausted for honeymooning or anything else. But I wouldn't let Howard down, and the manuscript reached the publisher in time.

The only money Howard ever spent on me which he had earned was what he had received for that article. When I insisted only half the amount be used for a wedding ring, he insisted the future Mrs. Howard Phillips Lovecraft must have the finest, with diamonds all around it, even if it took all the proceeds of that first well-paid story.

I called him a dear, generous spendthrift. He said there would be more where that came from—which, alas, did not materialize except in snippets when he sold a story (not too often) to Weird Tales magazine.

When we were married he was gaunt and hungry-looking, too much so even for my taste. I used to cook a well-balanced meal every evening, make a substantial breakfast, and I'd leave a few sandwiches, cake and fruit for his lunch.

Sometimes he would meet me after my day's work; we would dine out and go to a theater. He had no conception of time. Even in bitter wintry weather I often had to wait in some lobby or at some street corner from three-quarters of an hour to an hour and a half. He was always late for an appointment, whether it was with me or anyone else.

H. P. L. and Mummies Here I must record an extraordinary story about this master of weird stories. Howard was allergic to the spices of the mummified corpses at the Metropolitan Museum. Near them, his hands and wrists became swollen. Sometime after we had left the Museum the swelling went down and we thought no more of it. But about a week later we returned to see and study as much as we could of Tut-ahm-kah-meh's tomb, and again Howard's wrists and hands began to swell. I urged him to consult a doctor, but Howard laughed it off and refused. He never wanted to have a doctor, no matter how ill he was.

But, anyway, during our life at Parkside Avenue he became quite stout, and he looked and felt marvelous. He really became a more interesting human being. I think he half-starved himself before he knew me, and probably starved once more after we separated permanently.

I criticized his ten-year-old overcoat and insisted on buying him a new coat, suit, hat, gloves, and even a billfold. (I didn't like the tiny, old-fashioned pocketbook he would use to carry his keys.) Looking at himself in the mirror he protested: "But, my dear, this is entirely too stylish for 'Grandpa Theobald.' It doesn't look like me. I look like some fashionable fool!" And I really think he was glad when the new suit and coat were later stolen; he had the old ones to resume.

And Money Before our marriage I tried to contribute to his ease and comfort by sending him the stamps for his voluminous correspondence, and by gifts of money at birthday and



H. P. Lovecraft

holiday times. If at any time he lacked money I did not know it, and while he was my husband I saw to it that he was supplied out of my earnings. His aunts, out of his own share of the Phillips estate, were supposed to send him \$15 a week; but while I provided for him they sent only \$5 and that not always regularly.

I told Howard they need not send him anything if they found it difficult, that some day he would earn more than I. In just I used to say "You'll pay it all back with interest, I'm sure." And we'd both laugh about it. Often he would spend much of the money on books, for me or for some of his friends; and he sometimes gave them money. Two of the amateur brotherhood wrote him the letters of gentle reproaches and he would go without things himself in order to aid them. No one knew of this save myself and his beneficiaries.

I deflected my own interests and deferred to him upon all matters and domestic problems regardless of what they were. Even to the spending of money I not only consulted him but tried to make him feel that he was the head of the house.

In Brooklyn Alone I soon found it necessary to accept an exceedingly well-paid job out of town. I wanted Howard to make his home with me there, but he said he would hate to live in a midwestern city, he would prefer to remain in New York where at least he had some friends. I suggested he have one of them come to live with him in our apartment, but his aunts thought it wiser for me to store and sell my furniture and find a studio room large enough for Howard to have the old (and several delapidated) pieces he had brought from Providence. It was then the Clinton Street, Brooklyn, address was decided upon.

I could be in New York only a few days at a time, every three or four weeks. I gave him money each time I came to town and I sent him weekly checks.

Racial Prejudices He admired the quaintness of that part of Brooklyn, and at first he seemed to love his Clinton Street setup. But the crowds in the subway, streets and parks he hated, and he suffered through that hate. He referred chiefly to Semitic peoples; "beady-eyed, rat-faced Asiatics," he called them. In general, all foreigners were "mongrels."

Long before we were married, Howard wrote me in a letter praising Samuel Loveman that the only "discrepancy" he could find in Loveman was that he was a Jew. I replied in amazement at such discrimination and reminded him—as I did constantly—that I, too, come of Hebrew people. It was his prejudice against minorities, especially Jews, which prompted me to that simultaneous invitation of Howard and Loveman to New York of which I have spoken.

Later H. P. assured me he was quite "cured," and eventually, (and here I must speak of something I never intended to have publicly known), whenever we found ourselves in the racially-

worshipping captors and takes with him a girl to whom he has taught individual, responsible, romantic love. In these latter pages quotations from Shelley are set in soaring marvelous counterpoint to the anti-creative, literally damned atmosphere of the main narrative.

It is a frightening book, the more so because it is so consistently in action and symbol, whips to logical conclusion the worst possibilities of present-day society. Its actualities, as Huxley projects them in movie-script form, are chilling. And of course as with all Huxley's work there is an incisive brilliance of intellect—here wedded to macabre imagination. It requires reading; if you can stand it, or if you haven't already left for New Zealand. W. T. S.

LAST OF THE CONQUERORS, by William Gardner Smith, 262 pages, Farrar, Straus, \$2.75.

OUR disinclination in World War II to treat the Negro soldier as anything but a "limited service" navy and the polite tolerances vouch for this year by Generals Eisenhower and Bradley show how much our government has refused to learn since Negroes took San Juan Hill, or since the heroic Colonel Shaw was buried with his niggers." Mr. W. G. Smith, a Negro newspaperman, ex-governor and University student, has written a thesis novel about the days when Negro service troops were being shunted out of the ETO—because they had conquerors' privileges, because "cracker" officers resented commanding them, and because some people didn't want their Negro labor supply to become accustomed to even a soldier's pay.

Any enlisted man has learned something of what it means to occupy a Negro's place in society, and some of the injustices visited on Mr. Smith's hero are merely military, not necessarily matters of color. But the hero of "Last of the Conquerors" acquires a permanent German woman and treatment over from ex-Nazis which makes his return to the United States a

Woman Who Knew Him Best Tells of Their Strange Marriage and Difficult Years

further, to lift him out of his abyssal depths of loneliness and psychic complexes by a true, wedded love. I am afraid my optimism and excessive self-assurance misled us both. (His love of the world and mystery, I believe, was born of sheer loneliness.) I had hoped, in other words, that my embrace would make of him not only a great genius but also a loving and husband. While the genius developed and broke through the chrysalis, the lover and husband receded into the background until they were apparitions that finally vanished.

It has been said—quoting letters of Howard's—that our separation was mainly caused by his lack of money. That is not true. The real reasons my own story makes evident. Marvellous person though he was, it was probably to "save face" that Howard, having to give a reason, offered one that might be most easily believed.

When Howard fell he could no longer tolerate Brooklyn, it was I suggested he return to Providence. He'd say "If I could... live in Providence, the blessed city where I was born and reared. I am sure, there, I could be happy." I agreed. I said "I'd love nothing better than to live in Providence if I could do my work there."

Providence Again Well, he returned, and I followed him much later. Again it is not true that his aunts "dispatched a truck which brought Howard back to Providence lock, stock and barrel." I made a special trip from out of town to help him pack his things, to see to it all was well before he left, and to pay—his railroad fare and all—out of my own funds.

Eventually we held a conference with the aunts. I suggested I take a large house in Providence, hire a maid, pay the expenses, and we all live together; or, alternatively, I use the other for a business venture of my own. The aunts gently but firmly informed me that neither they nor Howard could afford to have Howard's wife work for a living in Providence. That was that. I knew then where we all stood.

To be not too far from Providence where I could spend some weekends, I took a new and less well-paying job in New York. (The time was now 1927.) But there was a Chicago job too good to refuse, and I knew I could have Howard meet me in New York every few weeks on my buying trips. I hated Chicago, though, and after six months—at Christmas—I decided to try Providence for a short vacation while waiting for something to happen. I didn't know what.

Visits and Letters I spent several weeks there. But I soon needed money, so I returned to New York, rented an apartment, retrieved from storage what was left of my furniture and set up housekeeping by myself. I opened a small millinery shop in the neighborhood.

Our marital life for the next few months was spent on reams of paper in rivers of ink. That spring I invited Howard to visit me, and he gladly accepted, as a visitor only. To me, even his nearness was better than nothing. The visit lasted throughout the summer but I saw him only during the early morning hours when he would return from jaunts with Morton, Loveman, Long, Kleiner, some or all of them. Then he visited West Orton at Yonkers and returned to Providence in the fall.

Then we lived in letters again. I never saw Howard again.

H. P. L.'s Death Off and on we still corresponded, after I moved to California. Here I soon met and married Dr. Davis. It was here, too, I met Mr. Wheeler Dryden who told me of Howard Lovecraft's death.

I do not believe it an exaggeration to say that Howard had the mind, taste and personality of a much greater artist and genius than that with which he was accredited in his lifetime. He will be I am quite sure a legendary, mysterious figure. The irony is that he died before the rewards and celebrity of his labors occurred. I like to believe that time mellowed him, that he found other men of all sorts that he would have liked. And even though I am not his widow, I mourn in sorrow and reverence his untimely passing.

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Huxley's Post-Atomic World

APE AND ESSENCE, by Aldous Huxley. 205 pages, Harper, \$2.50.

THE year is 2108—A. D. if you insist, but only in a consistency of time measurement. Now it is Satan who is the god of the half-savage tribes who live in and around the ruins of who was once Los Angeles, the city of a fanciful past. It is long after the Third World War and the almost complete atomic-bomb destruction of civilization.

One of the gelded priests of the new cult sees the path of history clearly: "Well, what are the facts? The first is the fact of experience and observation—namely that nobody wants to suffer, wants to be degraded, wants to be murdered or killed. The second is a fact of history—that fact that at a certain epoch, the overwhelming majority of human beings accepted beliefs and adopted courses of action that could not possibly result in anything but universal suffering, general degradation and wholesale destruction. The only plausible explanation is that they were inspired or possessed of an alien consciousness, a consciousness that willed their undoing and willed it more strongly than they were able to will their own happiness and survival."

Huxley has projected from our beginning of an atomic age yet another "Brave New World." He has done this with a weirdness of imagination that makes "Ape and Essence" a Gothic novel of the future. Wellsian-wise, he has shown scientific possibilities to be the supreme source of the horror tale. Or, it is as though "The Waste Land" were given a newer date and translated into actual drama; as though the bitter Jeffers of "The Double Angel" had written a novel to express his disgust with humanity and his conviction of its ruin.

Or almost Jeffersonian. Actually, Huxley clings still to a belief in the possible regeneration of man. In his story the exploring scientist from New Zealand (which was not atom-damaged) escapes his Belial-

personal tragedy. The author indicates how much this view is forced on him by American mores about his color—what other opinions about the Germans might be, for anyone who had ever enjoyed being an American. The style of this tract is straightforward, and Smith has picked among his experiences well to make his record representative and convincing.

F. M.

THE CITY BOY, by Herman Wouk. 306 pages, Simon & Schuster, \$2.95.

THE quality of "The City Boy" merits my reminding you that Mr. Wouk's first novel, "Aurora Dawn," was the most cried-up Book-of-the-Month selection since "Cradle of the Deep." What the publishers are trying to jam down your throat this time is a worthy attempt at jolking about boyhood, summer camps and pre-adolescent love. There is, over and above this, a preposterous plot in which the 11-year-old hero's burglary saves his father's artificial ice business. Mr. Wouk's artificial writing business is saved by nothing, especially not by his nudging us to attention for every antic of his stock "comic kids' stories, or by a pretentious and undistinguished dictionary example "Jacob Bookbinder was not, in the popular phrase, a man to be trifled with."

F. M.

R. I. BEST SELLERS FICTION: Shannon's Way, The Naked and the Dead, NON-FICTION: How to Stop Worrying and Start Living, Sexual Behavior in the Human Male, Westward Ho, Peace of Mind.

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At Magnolia (Snapshot of H. P. L. taken by Mrs. Davis in the early 1920s)