

Bookman's Galley

I HAVE a note from the Chicago writer Vincent Starrett on Sonia H. Davis' "fine article," "Howard Phillips Lovecraft As His Wife Remembers Him," which was published here on Aug. 22. Mr. Starrett says "I am much pleased—it is a notable news beat in a way, and I congratulate you." . . . Albert E. Lowmes of Providence writes "The story was a corker. I don't recall its equal since Sarah Helen Whitman decided to 'tell all' about Poe—and Sarah Whitman was tied down by Victorian reserve." . . . And the eminent Poe scholar Thomas Ollive Mabbott is thankful for "that very important article. I do not think her statements controversial; her story fits in with the general picture. And the one thing disputed that is at all important—just how he left New York—she is more likely to be right about than anyone else. As to his statement that the principal trouble was his lack of money—her interpretation is I think correct. He must have felt embarrassed at his position, men whose wives finance them do, and he probably was too polite ever to tell her that he felt this deeply."

Oddly enough, the very first people to write me are associates in these groups where H. P. Lovecraft first made his literary contacts, including Sonia H. Greene who became his wife. Mrs. Nita Gerner Smith of Point Pleasant, N.J., and Michael Phelan of Plainfield, Conn. Mr. Phelan wants me to say something about amateur journalism. He writes: "There are, in fact, three major amateur press associations in the U.S. today: the National, the United, and the American Amateur Press Association. All are non-profit and organized for the greater personal enjoyment of amateur journalism. The members vary widely in age, in financial standing, in ability . . . Chief means of operation is for writers to send their stuff to those who print and/or publish. Once a journal is published, the printers send them to an elected mailer who, monthly mails a bundle of all submitted journals to each member."

In more critical veins there are comments from Bill Powers and Elliot Paul. . . . Bill Powers is a composing room friend of mine who really puts this page together in its zinc and lead state. Said he: "She's a fine-looking woman. And here where it says she asked him to kiss her goodnight, and he wouldn't—why, the s.o.b., 'I wish I'd been standing right behind him!'" . . . Let me say parenthetically that Mr. Paul reports (from Cranston, where he is living at present) that he is now completing the autobiographical volume which will follow his recently published "The Ghost Town on the Yellowstone," and that "it is made up of my recollections of the Louisville of 1909 and 1910." But he was modestly enough writing me primarily about the Lovecraft piece. He says: "I want to thank you for the service rendered to life and letters in publishing Mrs. Lovecraft's piece about her late husband. His work was not of the kind I enjoy very much because it always seemed strained and artificial. Nature contains enough horror and any attempt to drag it in from outside the boundaries is sure to fail. Lovecraft's prose reminded me of a cart overloaded with bananas but his personality as revealed by his wife, thanks to you, has grown in significance. The author out-horors his own lugubrious creations. Wasn't he a bit like Harry Lehr but ingrown instead of an exhibitionist?"

I've received some personal reminiscences about Lovecraft which I shall print next Sunday. But today let me wind up with excerpts from a long letter from Lovecraft's editor and publisher, August Derleth:

"On the whole," he says, Mrs.

Davis' memoir "would appear to be innocuous enough, but I am afraid that in various places the impression it gives is distorted and not in accordance with facts. I am most disagreeably impressed by Mrs. Davis' writing that 'Howard would become livid with rage. He seemed almost to lose his mind.' " (That is, upon confronting foreign-born Americans en masse in New York.) "Now," Derleth continues, "it is the considered opinion of all others who have known HPL that, though he resented the infiltration of foreign elements into old areas of the cities he loved, and the often consequent despoiling of those places particularly of their antiquities and charm, he was not in fact guilty of any actual anti-Semitism. As for his being ever in a state of 'livid rage,' that, I feel, is a gross exaggeration of the worst kind; his letters testify that whatever he did, he was a gentleman."

"It is therefore absolutely incredible either that HPL ever was 'livid with rage,' that he 'seemed almost to lose his mind,' or that he ever said to anyone the statement Mrs. Davis attributes to him: 'It is more important to know what to hate than it is to know what to love.' I can positively refute these statements by drawing upon the Lovecraft letters to show in his own written words thoughts and concepts directly contrary to any such idea. Lovecraft was absolutely incapable of hate. . . ."

"We have evidence to show in the Lovecraft letters that he was often in the habit of making disparaging remarks about Jews, Orientals, Portuguese, etc., etc., but these remarks cannot be construed as racial prejudice in the vicious sense in which it exists today. Furthermore, these views were tempered and vanished in his later letters; during his last 20 years he is seldom found to make any such remarks. . . ."

"Mrs. Davis writes of how much money she gave HPL. The impression she makes is that she contributed very largely to his support, and that Howard earned nothing, and that his aunts sent him nothing. His aunts unfortunately are dead, and cannot answer for themselves. BUT—Howard had no less than 22 stories, several reprints, and anthology representations published in the period of his marriage, 1924-1929. Mrs. Davis mentions only one rewrite story. At the same time, he revised (for others) voluminously. . . . AND ALSO—there are in our possession the Lovecraft letters to his aunts, in which he thanks them for things they have done for him; these do not quite jibe with the statement that he was sent only \$5."

"We had hoped to keep out of the 'Selected Letters' some of the references to HPL's married life; but publication of Mrs. Davis' article now makes it necessary for us to refute some of the aspects of what is otherwise an interesting document."

"Despite these differences, I think it is good that Mrs. Davis' article saw the light of day. . . . It carries with it, too, the feeling that HPL did not know Mrs. Davis was a Jewess until she told him. But one of the things about HPL's married life that distressed him from the beginning was the way in which his wife often talked in longer conversations on the telephone in Jewish, so that he never knew what she talked about, whether of him, their life together, or what, and the incidence of these long talks often persuaded him that he was the subject of the conversation."

The letters Mr. Derleth refers to are, of course, still unpublished and he has not quoted from them in his own letter; in other words, my excerpts have dropped only further explication of Derleth's main points; and that I've had to do because of that old devil space.

W. T. S.