

Pen-Drift

(Opus 568—by LF)

A Weird Writer is in Our Midst.

Dear Pendrifter:

(GUILFORD, June 15.)

I note with more than common interest your suggestion for the inauguration of a Society for the Detection of Literary People Settling in Our Midst. You were especially generous to me in your column and I am very grateful for the kind welcome you extended. I think you have done nobly (with the paucity of data) on the first detection for the Society. Perhaps it may interest you and your readers to know that another subject exists about which research ought to be begun. I refer to Howard Phillips Lovecraft, at present stopping with us in Guilford. There is so much that one can say about Lovecraft that one hardly knows where to begin. First of all, he is a writer and an extraordinarily good one and the subject on which he writes is uncommonly interesting, because so few people know much about it. Lovecraft is an investigator, a scholar, an antiquarian and a writer chiefly concerned with the weird. He has been writing for a good many years but it was only a few years ago that a magazine was started which gave him a chance to publish much of his material. This periodical was *Weird Tales*, and while for many years stories from Lovecraft's pen went without achieving the dignity of print, all because the regular magazines would have nothing to do with the weird, *Weird Tales* has printed a story of his in about every issue and would like to print more. But Lovecraft sees to that by not writing any more often than he feels like writing. The readers of this magazine, who number into many thousands, are kept in a state of unquashed hunger for his stuff. Hundreds of them have written letters, and published opinions stating that, in their estimation, H. P. Lovecraft is a writer of weird tales as great if not greater than Edgar Allen Poe.

right. Lovecraft is a very great writer, perhaps so great that he will never be appreciated. If he would only turn his pen to tales of romance and profane love, or to fictionalized biography and psychology in the guise of detective-story thrillers (of which there is such a flood) he would become famous over night. But he won't do this. Though writing is his chief source of income, he won't write unless he feels like it and he doesn't give a damn for money. In many ways he is an alien soul and as strange as the grotesque tales which come from his pen.

Lovecraft was born in Providence, R. I. 1892, I believe, though to hear him speak of himself as "the old gentleman" one would fancy that he was at least as far back as 1870. His favorite complex is one of assuming an advanced age and if any man in these modern times lives and continues, by choice, to live in the 18th century, it is he. There is little in modern life that holds him, while on the other hand, he believes that existence during the 18th century was the most perfect form of civilization ever devised by man. This notion accounts for his antiquarian enthusiasm. If there is a man in this country today who knows more about the customs and habits of the Americans of the period from 1700 to 1800, I haven't heard of him. Lovecraft's chief interest is in the architecture of that time and he is

especially interested in the early American buildings of New England. In Guilford and vicinity he has been having the time of his life and has really been in ecstasy over the most delightful examples of early houses he has discovered there.

He is madly in love...with New England and won't live anywhere else. Life outside of its borders is misery for him. Two years ago he tried to exist in New York for the sake of his literary labors, but gave it up as a bad job after a few months, though his many friends and acquaintances there exerted the heaviest pressure to make him stop longer. Many of his short stories and poems deal with the sacred soil of New England and he derives ever increasing inspiration from this part of the world.

I confess that I don't understand the depths to which Lovecraft probes into the weird, uncanny phases of the unknown. I have never been a reader of weird tales myself...and probably never shall be. But I have read several of his in manuscript, and was struck with such unmitigated horror that I shall undoubtedly never read any more. He is concerned not with the ordinary weird tale which treats of ghosts and "spirits" in lonely graveyards, or the one which has to do with social effects, having the horror explained away by natural means. The weird tale to him must be motivated and shot full of cosmic fear and it must produce in the reader a profound sense of dread and of contact with unknown powers, never to be explained away or understood. The oldest and strongest of all our emotions is that of fear, but by fear Lovecraft means a cosmic fear, not the simple physical kind. His stories have more in them than the mere mundanely gruesome, secret murders, the bloody bones and the clanking of chains in the dark. These are the obvious paraphernalia of lesser writers with other ideas. Lovecraft investigates more deeply. What interests him, so he

the human brain which can amount to a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of nature which laws are the only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the demons of unplumbed space. With this almost inconceivable and unthinkable philosophy, he probes into things far beyond the ken of the average writer. And from these eerie journeyings come stories that are at once so charged with pure horror and so productive of that tragic cosmic fear itself, that a person with anything less than a strong determined mind had better not read them... especially at night.

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Like Poe, Lovecraft's fame was first acclaimed abroad rather than in his own country and there publishers are getting out books of his stories where the demand for tales of this kind is keener and wider. And like Poe, he will, I haven't the slightest doubt, set a mark for writers to shoot at for a long time. Some say he is greater than Poe as a writer of the weird... I don't know, but I do know that his stories strike me as having been written by a man far more profoundly interested in the subject of the weird than was Poe. Poe's output was not wholly in that field... indeed many of his tales were tales of ratiocination, a phase that Lovecraft leaves to the writers of the prosaic mystery story. If the devilish fear of the cosmic, unknown affected Poe, it is not so apparent as it is in the stories that Lovecraft writes. I do not say he is a greater writer than Poe, for in some experiments he is not. But I do say

that as a scholar and research worker in the one subject of the weird from his point of view, and a writer on the subject exclusively, H. P. Lovecraft is the greatest this country has ever seen or maybe will ever see.

VREST ORTON.