

THE LETTERS OF HENRY S WHITEHEAD

A NOTE OF EXPLANATION

Nearly a decade has passed since the death of Rev. Henry S. Whitehead, but to those of us who read his stories he remains one of the unforgettable great figures of weird fiction. Unhappily time has swept its blurring brush across his memory, and to the younger fan he has become but a dimly remembered name, if even that.

I wish that I were able to paint a word-portrait of the Episcopal rector whose strong sense of fantasy and knowledge of native beliefs of the West Indies enabled him to write such powerful weird stories. Unfortunately I was very young when he was still alive, little interested in the authors whose stories I read, and my only knowledge of him comes from half-forgotten articles and conversations. But I do know he was a creative artist who should not be forgotten by the followers of fantasy.

His fiction lies buried in the files of Weird Tales, Strange Tales, and Adventure; 35 stories were written by him during the ten years or so in which he contributed to these magazines. There is still some hope that the best of this output may be preserved in permanent bound form, for August W. Derleth has promised that one of the next volumes in the Arkham House series would be a collection of Whitehead's tales. Unfortunately the war seems to have delayed this project, but it is to be hoped that it can be carried through at some later time.

However another portion of Whitehead's writings should not be forgotten. Whitehead, like Lovecraft, was a fascinating correspondent, even though less prolific than his more famed colleague, and the letters shed a great deal of light on a very interesting personality. When this material reaches the public one person will deserve most or all of the credit -- R. H. Barlow.

Barlow gathered together the Whitehead correspondence a number of years ago and started to print it, but circumstances forced him to abandon the task. Later he started to prepare the material in mimeographed form, but after cutting eight stencils was again forced to quit. Recently he turned these stencils over to me, and I am mimeographing them for distribution through the Fantasy Amateur Press Association. I think that these letters will be of interest to the fans -- but even more important, I hope that they will lead someone to the task of issuing the entire collection of Whitehead correspondence.

Paul Freehafer

(To the Editor of Adventure, March 5, 1923. Chattanooga, Tenn.)

...I must say that I rather shrink from speaking directly about myself in such a fashion, although I recognize and can only approve the custom in the magazine. It is wholly desirable, and a very friendly thing. Perhaps you will allow me to indicate a few facts, along with preferences and dislikes, which commonly gauge a man better than any attempt of his own to set out things about himself.

Today, March fifth, is my forty-first birthday. I saw the light in the prosaic but useful state of New Jersey, in Elizabeth (of which, with the Amboys, and Newark, members of my family have been settlers). I was educated in Connecticut and New York City, at the Berkeley School in the latter. I later went to Columbia University and then to Harvard, and finally took a graduate course in Columbia again.

I wrote and sold my first story to Outdoors in 1905. Just after selling that story within three days to the first magazine I sent it to, I got into the newspaper game, starting in as a reporter on the old Port Chester Daily Record. We were strongly Democratic, and a local reform sheet operating in that field in Westchester County, N.Y. I rose to be editor and held various political offices. I had to resign from no less than fourteen different organizations when I made up my mind in the summer of 1909 that I had had enough of that side of things and that I'd better make a radical change.

I entered the Berkeley Divinity School, Middletown, Conn., in the autumn of 1909, graduated three years later, and was ordained a deacon in the Episcopal Church June 5, 1912. I served my deacon's year in a Connecticut mill-town parish, and was called as rector "to take place after his (my) ordination to the priesthood," several months before I was eligible to take a parish of my own, in Christ Church, Middletown, Conn., the same city where my academic preparation for the ministry had taken place. I was rector there for four years. I then came to N.Y. City where I was in charge of a department of one of the great metropolitan parishes for more than two years. Then I went to Boston where I was for several years senior member of the staff of the Church of the Advent, under the famous Dr. van Allen, rector. Dr. van Allen devours Adventure regularly and is one of its most enthusiastic admirers. I started in to write short stories seriously two years ago.

I left there to do special work in the Virgin Islands of the U.S.A., and returned to the U.S. only last November, the occasion being that my father, who is seventy-five, was in St. Luke's Hospital and not expected to live. I have been here in Chattanooga, carrying on for a very good friend of mine, rector of Christ Church, since the end of December, while my friend the rector takes a much-needed vacation. My father, contrary to all expectation, recovered, and is now in good condition again, bless him!

Recently I have been elected rector of Trinity Church, Bridgeport, Conn., and should enter upon the duties September 1.

I am in no way a remarkable person except perhaps that I have a capacity for acquiring a really extraordinarily diversified lot of friends. I take the keenest enjoyment in my friends, for I am naturally a gregarious person--- a friendly soul. These range through all manners and conditions of men,

women, and children. They include ships' surgeons in the passenger trade, some social lights, any number of nice little girls, college fellers, professors, artists, writing men, colored people, Jewish highbrows and lowbrows, Danes, Kalmucks, Finns, old Doc Parry who used to be Buffalo Bill's vet, Caruso's father-in-law, Robert Henri, Dick Culter, Wallace Godrich, Dean of the Boston Conservatory of Music, the Archbishop of the British West Indies, a considerable group of broken-down old ladies, an enormous number of the insane (for I was, along with my Middletown rectorship, chaplain of the Connecticut State Insane Hospital) "working-girls", a few yeggs, a bunch of actors and actresses of all kinds including a bunch of the girls who used to be in the Hippodrome chorus and who used to come to me when I was a parson in N.Y. for advice, etc.--- all kinds of people. I love 'em all, and delight in their society.

My chief interests--- the things I like to do--- include certainly the following: being at sea; hunting small game with a good setter-dog; all kinds of athletic exercises. The good Lord gave me a lot of health and I've always thought it worth while to keep hold of it and use it. Amusing a lot of kids (as at a boy's camp, for instance) with stories and faking on a guitar while I sing a lot of junk to them. Having a couple of nice little girls cuddle up to me on each side of a big sofa and carrying on a conversation with them, letting them do most of the talking.

Of course I like to write. I've written with a certain ideal in mind, I think, always. That is to turn out stuff that is not hackneyed, and that is worked out in good form. I am, at least partly, indebted to certain expressed ideals of Gouverneur Morris for that last. I like to write stories than are not only somewhat different from the usual types, but also to preserve a certain difference among those I manage to produce. I have written successfully in the essay form for a number of years. I find the carrying on of my professional duties comparatively easy, and I enjoy them very much.

I dislike cats, both kinds--- real cats and people who are cats rather than dogs. I am intensely disliked by both kinds of cats myself. I hate anything like false formality, although I like the European manners, customs, and the usual courtousness and precision which characterize Continental social relationships. Many of my friends are foreigners whom I have met abroad or here in the United States. I am a "Good American". But I feel that I love my land so much, deep down, that I ought to do my small bit to help in eradicating the national faults which constantly intrigue the attention of foreigners, even well-disposed foreigners. I dislike our crudities where these occur, though I invariably champion our cause with all the dialectic skill which I have tried to acquire in my two professional careers of political writer and clergyman.

As an example of something--- I'm not sure what--- perhaps the strange disparity between what we necessarily think of ourselves and "as others see us," I am appending extracts from a letter written by a Santa Cruz (Virgin Islands) official to a friend of his in the United States about me. This friend was a mutual friend, and handed me on the letter. He thought it would please me. It did, but I must admit, chiefly as a kind of curiosity. It is rarely, I suppose, that one has the experience of reading a letter like this about himself. If he gets such a chance, it is commonly a lock-in into some adverse opinion!

"He is the strongest man, physically, I ever saw. Soon after he came here to Santa Cruz, it was discovered he took a great deal of exercise. One evening he was asked to do a 'stunt' for a large group of people who were having an old-fashioned Crucian jollification, and he called for a pack of cards. He tore them squarely in half, and then quartered them. I had heard of cards being torn in two, but never quartered. Incredulity was expressed. The people present thought it was a trick, and said so, though pleasantly and in a bantering way. Father Whitehead asked for another pack to destroy, and for two wire nails. He nailed the pack through at both ends, so that the cards could not be 'beveled', and then quartered that pack. He had to do this everywhere he went after that. Everybody wanted to see it done. One night Mrs. Scholten, the wife of our Danish Bank manager, gave him a small pack of brand-new Danish cards. They were made of linen! He tore those in two.

"...He has put old St. Paul's back the way it was in its palmy days, when Alexander Hamilton and the great gentry of the Island drove to service in their coaches. Everybody comes now to hear him preach. He likes form, like all High Churchmen, and he applies this to his household. He drives out on his parish visits in the car with his chauffeur in a white livery and a chauffeur's hat which he sent for to New York. One of his house boys has the same kind of a hat and the same white suit, and the parson coming along the road certainly looks like the old parish had got something to run her that's prosperous. The car is a Ford, too.

"...The Danes are strong for him, for he knows all their little manners and customs. He goes to all the 'big doin's' on the Island, and shows them how.

"...I don't see how he does the things he does. His physical strength is incredible. I was in his house one day when they were moving one of his big mahogany bedsteads. That wood is as hard as iron, and almost as heavy. This was a four-poster, square, and must have weighed a ton by the looks of it. He picked up the heavy end, the head, with one hand and carried it across the room and set it down, like me lifting a waste basket. It took four able-bodied men to lug the other end along, two lifting under the headboard and the other two at the sides down at the foot end.

"...He keeps the police court calendar clear because when any of the negroes at St. Paul's get into a mess he makes them bring it to him and he tries the case. He sits there and runs it like clockwork, and he picked up the Crucian Creole that the black people speak in about two weeks."

This letter interested me very much. As usual the people of Santa Cruz were most interested in what I didn't go there to do—strong-man stunts. The card thing I have practised since I was about seventeen, and the bed-lifting wasn't what it sounds, because the "four able-bodied men" were a negro joiner and his three young men assistants, and they are fungus-eaters (hard-boiled corn meal), which doesn't give them the stamina to lift mahogany beds very easily. A couple of husky Micks could have done it easily—the whole bed.

Maybe you can get something out of this mess; maybe not. But I know I'd hash it if I tried to write anything like a biographical introduction.

Henry S. Whitehead

Fredericksted, St. Croix, Virgin Islands
November 18, 1925

Dear Mr. Wright:—

It occurs to me that you might care to have some information about Hayti and Santo Domingo, since these countries appear from time to time in the magazine. Such (not easily available from the usual sources of such information) might be of value when you have to examine manuscripts, which are very likely to be faulty, even if they come from ex-Marines, etc., who have served there.

I. There are NOT one Papaloi and one Mamaloi in Hayti. There are many— a pair in each community. They are held in UNIVERSAL dread by native Haytiens, irrespective of class, education, etc. This is usually got wrong by writers.

II. The present-day sentiment of Hayti is not against Whites, as such; only against ANYONE (individual, group, or nation) whom they may suspect of some desire for future subjugation of the republic. This is because Haytiens have the spectre of slavery constantly before their mind's-eye.

III. White people are safe in every part of Hayti. They were as safe as any other kind of people, even before the American Occupation.

IV. Guillaume Sam was NOT destroyed in "The Palace". (A very common error of fiction-writers.) He was in a temporary "palace", a wooden house, at the time he ordered the summary execution of a number of his political opponents whom he had arrested. This was because the palace itself was out of repair because recently blown up! Sam took refuge in the French Consulate, for which he had ample precedent. He had been wounded, and his wounds dressed with iodoform. The people, in search of him, discovered him in a room against the door of which a heavy bed had been pushed. They violated the sanctuary of a foreign consular building for the first time in the history of the republic, and, breaking in after removing the bed, threw Sam out of the window of the consulate (not the palace, as usually recounted) to the rest of the mob below. These cut and tore his body into indistinguishable fragments. It is believed that sixty-six persons had been shot by his orders in the holocaust which provoked the people to his destruction.

V. Obeah and Voodoo should be carefully distinguished. Obeah is "White" magic; Voodoo "Black". "Obi" (or some similar, local rendition of the first word,) is the current term for BOTH throughout the Islands. This has deluded many writers into supposing that the term PROPERLY covers all kinds of West Indian and even African magic. Such is, emphatically, not the case. Obeah is concerned with safeguarding people from natural and supernatural bad influences. Voodoo invokes such influences. To the former belong: A. Herbal medicaments. B. Fortune-telling. C. "Song-Making". To the latter belong the Worship of the Snake; "Le Chevre sans Cornes" (The Goat Without Horns) i.e. child-sacrifice; and "Long-Pig", i.e., cannibalism. To Obeah belong such interesting manifestations in practice, as the "Snake-Cut" of the Guiana hinterlands, with which an article in the September HARPER'S dealt very well. This illustrates well the protective character of true Obeah.

VI. Haytien law does not discriminate against Whites, except in the matter of ownership of real property.

VII. In Hayti it is a matter of pride to be a negro. On Santo Domingo, on the same island, the reverse is the case. This is of

primary importance in securing any proper understanding of the vital differences between the two republics which are anything but "sister-republics". In all other Islands and parts of the Caribbean world (to the best of my knowledge universally so) the lineup is: Whites and "Colored" against Blacks, i.e., the opposite of our alignment in the Continental U.S. of A., where Black and "Colored" are joined "against" Whites, so to speak. This, again, is a vital point in understanding the entire social structure of the Caribbean civilization. It is almost always bungled or misstated by writers, especially half-informed Americans.

VIII. "Cacos" (Haytien bandits, rabble, followers of new revolutionists, opportunists of the lower orders of society) is simply the Greek word "kakos" i.e., "bad", applied some years ago by a visiting wag to the class indicated. The word has no connection with "coconuts", "cacao" etc., all of which is the fanciful result of crass ignorance on the part of many writers.

IX. Marines, in general, should be held blameless for alleged "atrocities". Such, when committed, were almost invariably at the hands of the native Gendarmerie, under non-commissioned Marines, promoted to the TEMPORARY rank of Lieutenants, for the purpose of organizing the Island police which had to deal with the cacos. In many instances-- most, in fact-- detachments of these native troops perpetrated the "outrages" which have been wrongly attributed to Marines themselves.

X. A word of caution may not be amiss when one deals with an "ex-Lieutenant" etc. of Haytien Occupational service. Such are, in a preponderating number of cases (this is for your private ear, please; I must not be quoted) honest (or otherwise) rough-necks who held a purely temporary rank under the conditions I have outlined above. I have, of course, no reference to any particular person. But the idea of a commission usually carries with it some idea of trustworthiness, and this, in the type of case alluded to, cannot be relied upon. Wild tales have come out of both Hayti and Santo Domingo, and almost always "from an Officer in the Marine Corps." Real officers would be very chary of giving out many of these.

If an illustration be not amiss (and if you will pardon me, since I have only your interest in mind,) I might point to a story in the issue for December. The tale is about the eruption of Mt. Peleé. In it it is stated that the crew of the cruiser, when sailing from Cape St. Nicholas Mole (which is the right name for the place) cogitated whether or not they were going to Vera Cruz. To get from Cape St. N. Mole to Vera Cruz, a vessel would sail almost due West, to the South'ard of Guantanamo and Cape Cruz, i.e., a long the Southern coast of Cuba. To get to Martinique, the vessel would have to double Navassa (as stated) but there could be no doubt in the mind of anybody aboard about the general destination, for Martinique is due EAST from Hayti! It is, furthermore, many years since a rowboat or cutter has been used as Captain's gig aboard a U.S. Navy Cruiser. It would have been a power boat. "Fort de France" (noted as something weird and to be concealed even from the petty officer's comrades when found on the consul's napkins) is merely the name of the other large town on Martinique. Etc., etc., etc.

With every good wish, I am

Most sincerely yours,

Henry S. Whitehead.

27, West 44th St., N.Y.
October 22, 1926

Dear Mr. Price:-----

Thanks you very much for your letter of the tenth. Mrs. Black had given me no particularized information about the magazine, and I supposed it might be of the "adventure" type, which, somehow, I associated with you. I am really grateful to you for pointing out to Wright— and so to the Eyrice fans— that I've been getting a kind of a hollow deal there. Not that anyone above Menken's Moron-level cares a damn about the fans, but it is a kind of loss just the same to get omitted so constantly.

My close friends know that my "Hard Luck", however, is utterly proverbial. I am one of the few living persons who NEVER gets a break. Everything I've touched as far back as my memory carries me, has resulted in my getting it in the neck, however it may have worked to the advantage of other people, so I'm used to that. If old J.K. Bangs hadn't preempted that field, I'd turn to and turn out a volume or two on the subject and never once have to go outside the old Experience-stuff. With J.K.B. on deck, I'm even gypped out of that satisfaction and a possible opportunity to cash in on same.

However, I've never, so far, had to go hungry, so that's pretty good, considering. And it's given me a mighty fine line on the outlaw-mind that busts loose and says: "I won't stand it!"

E.g., a few weeks ago a Chicago magazine was returning to me a set of six stories in sequence for minor revisions— I had the front cover copped out for the leader, and all set to go— and they never arrived— the first and practically the only bunch of stuff I've sent out in twenty-one years WITHOUT CARBONS. There's a dead loss of five or six weeks' intensive work, and some seven hundred of the best. That is entirely typical, utterly. I expect that kind of break, and almost always provide all the necessary alibis, but that time the heeby-jeebies got me. I omitted those carbons because the thing was an order and I figured I could sell the stuff in England from the magazine copies WITH that front cover, etc., to better advantage. It's queer how a person can be a pleasant kind of a guy even over this hard-luck stuff, isn't it? I can euchre it sometimes, though, but it's a nuisance. It involves registering letters and insuring things, etc., which the general run doesn't have to bother with. I suppose it's a kind of distinction, too, so I ought to be satisfied. Things like my worst enemy in a place like N.Y. with several million telephones, getting crossed on a wire where I'm putting through a deal by sheer adverse chance, have even happened to me. It's great!

Well, I'm sorry the Illustrated Features went the way of Padre Iom. Glad, though, you didn't get pinched in that debacle, and hopes for a better break next time. It's interesting to get the line on Wright. I never saw him, but he's an industrious lad on writing letters. He's had some of my stuff embalmed for nearly two years, but recently promised to bring some of it to the attention of the Eyrice gang, so there'll be eats at some remote future time therefrom, I'm hoping. He's accepted (or uses from inheritance) a dreadful lot of muck in W.T., but some of it is o.k.— yours, and well, I'm in agreement with what you put in The Eyrice.

Best, sincerely,

Henry S. Whitehead

The Harvard Club, 27 West 44th St.
New York City, December 9, 1926.

Dear Licutenant Price,

Yeah! You have the dope. I published my first story back in 1905, so I know the dope when I see it-- both ways. I.e., you can write and you have the proper slant on selling 'em. It's just as P.C.Cody told me one day when I was feeding him here at the H.C. Says Cody, "H.S., you can write anything! You could get into any magazine there is (or words to that effect, designed to swell the bean to complete megacephalitis) if you'd write what the editors want."

I told him I made my living that way but that most of the old output was hardly worth-while offering because there weren't enough catching magazines to hold that kind of pitching. E.g., did you see the shot of guff Galsworthy has in the current Forum? God assoil us, if I turned out a mess of bunk like that I'd--- probably sell it!! Heh!

Wright has three of my stories bought, one of them for a year and a half. He's looking over another right now. The three boughten are CARIB GOLD, THE LEFT EYE, and THE SHADOWS. The one he's looking over is called "A DOOR INTO THE UNKNOWN" and is an (acknowledged in text) swipe from Wells's story about the guy who went flooie in the lamps-- was in London and "saw" the Antipodes. Remember it? Wells has pretty well covered all that ground it seems to me.

Mrs. Black gave me your rug-letter to read. Boy, you CAN write. It was a corncracker-- a honeycooler. My comment on it was that although I'm a two hundred pound-er, if I used up my creative energy in correspondence like that I'd be flat for a month. Maybe (softly, Henry!) that's what gave you the ninety-day stretch of unproductivity.

Grenville Vernon referred to Carl Van Vechten November 17 in a review in The Commonweal, thus "...the pretentious vulgarity and emptiness of that preposterous product of half-educated aestheticism." Thar!! That was a compensation for 150,000 morons all yapping at once about Interstellar Space. Last week I got one cheque from a Roman Catholic and one from a Methodist weekly. How's that for spreading 'em? One a highbrow stunt on "The Seven Sins of 'The Churches'" the other for a boy's story in The Target.

Well, that's quite a lot of gall and snakewood off my soul so far. No one knows when I'll break out again, but will try to keep the rest of this letter decent and respectable. Any time you want me to write Wright right, shoot the works and I'll paterize a letter to him. You betcha, old kindred spirit, even if I did go the parson's way.

Well, maseltoff, sincerely,
Henry S. Whitehead

* * *

The Harvard Club, N. Y. City,
27 W. 44, December 23, 1926

Dear Bre'r Price,

That was some good olf letter, as Penrod might have said. Penrod came to mind because Van Buren and I (Boy's Camp partner, and a real egg) have been giving our camp kids a Christmas party in town and it "sure was" a lot of fun.

No, de-ah sir-- the Revolt is rescinded; the Bolshevism balled-up, the Grouch ground-under-heel, and the Outburst over!

Heh, heh! In yesterday's mail came \$ 150 from another editor for one of the little tales friend Wright turned down--- twice, so how could anybody be miffed at him I enquire?

I wonder if it has occurred to you that Harold Hersey the editor of the Clayton adventure-magazines would probably lap up the stuff you do. He never bought anything of me, but it seems to me if I could write the sort of thing you pour so freely into those splendid letters of yours, I'd be selling similarly-written material of adventure to H.H. You might try it, if you'll pardon a suggestion. I wrote to Wright this morning, by the way, and handed you a pretty solid swat--- on the back.

I never read Mardrus, but years ago I pretty nearly knew John Payne, Sir Richard Burton, and Lane on those Arabian Nights by heart. I have a set of Payne, and Lane was in the Harvard Library, and George Bladen Fox the painter (he did the wall-panels in the saloon of The Hendrik Hudson--- ever see 'em?) had a set of Burton. Then I had a friend who was professor of Semitic Languages from whom I derived a certain amount of dope, a man named Vanderbogart, since gone West. I'll say you're equipped, and I don't see why you don't mop up the jack from the other markets. Adventure--- all kinds--- was never at such a peak as it is today. Please GET me. I'm not trying to do the superior-stuff and TELL anybody anything, only it is just possible you hadn't thought of trying it on Hersey and several others of that kidney.

You needn't mind, ever, about this clerical car. It's a pretty fair old car and a lot has gone through it. There are some regular ones who are parsons--- Hudson Stuck was one, and so was de Foucauld who opened up The Hoggar so that de Prorok could get in later (as de P. acknowledges.) So, I imagine, was Alcuin of York who regulated Charlemagne. Huh. There's a quiet little clergyman in a perpetual curacy here in Grace Church, N.Y. named Eliot White, middle-aged and as gray as a badger. Eliot and I made the world's record for coming down the thirteen miles from the "giffel" of Pilatus twenty-six years ago when I was eighteen and could lick my weight in polar bears. I even know a bishop or two, here and there, who are eggs. But they're rare, I'll admit. Anyhow, don't bother any about this clerical car. It's hardboiled. I could give you references, I tutored the late Lt. Col. Aleck Williams who was Chef de la Gendarmerie, when McKinley was waiting to appoint him as a 2nd Lt., in virtue of his old man's pull. The old man was the late Police Inspector Aleck Williams Sr., who named the Tenderloin. That was "Ass Williams" if you knew him in the service. One of my turn-outs! I've always been kinda proud of that boy, even though, curiously, he was two years older than I. Schoolmates. I never trained with the longhairs or the near-pious gang, etc., and what are known as "church people" to the majority of the public give me severe, shooting pains all over.

And then--- I'll say you're a technician all right. I am in a state of perennial revolt (if you like) against the KIND of thing the best editors are always giving their public. Emasculated, gutless stuff. And the worst of it is, to me, that the revolters who have got their public are turgid, like Hect, or inconsequential like Van Vechten, or muddled like that damn fool Sherwood Anderson who thinks he thinks and relies on repeated near-thoughts instead of the more sentence. O--- what's the use. I dunno!

Best---

Whitehead