

# A SHELF OF RECENT BOOKS

## THE LIFE AND ART OF STEPHEN CRANE

By Ralph D. Paine

"**Y**ET here came a boy whose visual sense was unique in American writing and whose mind by some inner process had stripped itself of all respect for the prevalent theories which have cursed the national fiction. He was already an ironist, already able to implant his impressions with force and reckless of the consequent shocks to a public softened by long nursing at the hands of timid men."

In this manner Thomas Beer pays tribute to the art of Stephen Crane and excoriates the literary spirit of the generation in which he lived and wrote. This is a study in American letters of singular interest and importance. It is the first biography of Stephen Crane, although he richly deserved the honor long ago. To find adequate material was a difficult task, but a congenial one for Mr. Beer. He is of the modern school of brilliant young writers who have no patience with shams and timidities and whose self appointed duty it is to smash most of the idols of the Victorian Age.

Crane lived too soon. The fictionists are just beginning to catch up with him. He owed nothing to French or Russian influences. This rebellious youth, son of a Methodist minister in Newark, who spent his summers in Asbury Park, did indeed create his mordant, vivid phrases by some inner process that is the peculiar property of genius. His life was brief and careless. He left the scantiest mate-

rial for a biographer, and yet this book portrays the man with candor and fidelity. Through its pages he moves as a wistful figure in shadows often sombre. His vision was too clear to find contentment anywhere. He knew poverty and made many enemies who told wicked falsehoods about him. They were jealous of such distinction as he won after bitter struggle and disappointment. His fame is much brighter than when he died a quarter of a century ago. It is recognized that he was destined to endure.

Mr. Beer tells you how he wrote "The Red Badge of Courage" and what the world thought of it then. An illuminating glimpse, this:

Crane had letters of praise from Bliss Perry, William Graham Sumner, and Brander Matthews, but recognition of living art had no place in the universities of the decade and Barrett Wendell, pausing in the consideration of Restoration comedy at Harvard, told one of his students that the book was sensational trash and then resumed his sour brilliance.

William Dean Howells, the gentle realist whose aura has so soon faded, was Crane's foremost champion and overlooked his savagely outspoken condemnations of most of the great and good of that literary age. Hamlin Garland was another staunch friend who perceived that this shy, shabby youth had the gift the gods vouchsafe to few. The biographer freely expresses his own contempt for the celebrities we once looked up to. Young Mr. Beer and Stephen Crane could have passed many a rare evening together. But Richard Harding Davis, although his literary talent is called trumpery, receives credit as a knightly

gentleman who stood by poor Crane through thick and thin, even to the extent of thrashing a man about town who repeated some vile slander concerning drink, drugs, or women.

We older men who knew Crane as a war correspondent have heard fragmentary gossip of his residence in England where he was received with higher respect than had been accorded him at home. It remained for Mr. Beer, with painstaking effort, to piece together this chapter of the story. The most memorable friendship formed was that described by Joseph Conrad in the introduction which he has contributed to this volume. He loved Crane and greatly admired his work. They first met in London as guests at luncheon of the late Sydney Pawling, the publisher. It impresses one to learn that Conrad, then a beginner in literature, regarded Crane as a master.

I had of course read his "Red Badge of Courage" of which people were writing and talking at the time. I certainly did not know that he had the slightest notion of my existence or that he had seen a single line (there were not many of them) of my writing. I can safely say that I earned this precious friendship by something like ten months of strenuous work with my pen. It took me just that time to write "The Nigger of the Narcissus" working at what I always considered a very high pressure. It was on the ground of the authorship of that book that Crane wanted to meet me. Nothing could have been more flattering than to discover that the author of "The Red Badge of Courage" appreciated my efforts to present a group of men held together by a common loyalty and a common perplexity in a struggle not with human enemies but with the hostile conditions testing their faithfulness to the conditions of their own calling. . . . It is a fact that I considered Crane, by virtue of his creative experience with "The Red Badge of Courage", as eminently fit to pronounce judgment on my first consciously planned attempt to render the truth of a phase of life in the terms of my own temperament with all the sincerity of which I was capable.

Many other friends well known to

English letters visited the half ruined manor house in Sussex where Stephen Crane passed the last year or so of his life with a devoted wife to care for him. Harold Frederic and Robert Barr were particularly close to him. Henry James lived not far away at Rye. Never was there an odder association than that between the vagabondish young Crane, lawless of convention, startling of speech, despising all else than naked truth, and the elderly novelist who had become a colored and complicated ritual that demanded of spectators a reverence unflinchingly accorded. People who swooned under the burden of his final method sat and sat in pleasure while that astonishing egotism bared its slow phrases in detached and charming appreciation of its own singular skill.

And yet Henry James could send the weary young impressionist five manuscripts unasked and request an opinion of them. And Crane could write to a friend: "I agree with you that Mr. James has ridiculous traits and lately I have seen him make a holy show of himself in a situation that — on my honor — would have been simple to an ordinary man. But it seems impossible to dislike him. He is so kind to everybody. . . ."

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Stephen Crane: A Study in American Letters. By Thomas Beer. Alfred A. Knopf.