

## A BRIDGE IN SPAIN

**Y**OU will, I am certain, understand those of us who continuously hark back to Spain and those ancient—yet so contemporaneous days—of five years ago. After all, Spain was an international Aberdeen proving ground: tactics and strategies, military, ideological, diplomatic, were tested there. Goering's Luftwaffe learned a lot south of the Pyrenees; so did Guderian's panzer divisions. So did Goebbels' foxy propagandists: they offered the world the gargantuan lie that the Spanish war was between Communism and fascism. They sat mealy-mouthed in the Non-Intervention Committee, gambling upon disharmony in the chancellories of the non-fascist world. Their chips were stacked high by 1938 when Madrid fell, prey more to fifth column division than to Franco's might. How much Spain has to teach us! And have we really learned the lesson? Have we, Ambassador Hayes?

I think of Spain today, think of it often when I consider the issue of the second front, for example. Analogies are risky, I know, yet I keep thinking of those days just before the Ebro River was stormed by the republican armies. It couldn't be done, many learned men said. The republic didn't have men enough, didn't have material enough, didn't have generals smart enough. The enemy had overwhelming strength on the other bank. The heights were on the wrong side of the Ebro; the enemy had had plenty of time to build unassailable defenses. And I remember lying on the roof of a building this side of the Ebro one day and looking through a spyglass at the fascists across the river at Asco. I did see cement blockhouses and barricades down every street. Sure, it looked pretty formidable and that Ebro was a wide, wide river to cross. Where would our side get the boats to take thousands of men across; and what did the republicans have, besides rifles and hand grenades and machine guns once they did get over? It looked like a pretty hopeless proposition to the foreign military scholars in Barcelona.

But the men of the Popular Front thought otherwise. Morale was at its apex then, because unity, under Premier Negrin, was at its apex. The two great trade union setups, the UGT and the CNT, had achieved a relatively close working relationship through the *Comites de enlace*—the committees of liaison." These political factors were bound to evidence themselves on the front lines.

**I** REMEMBER one day about the middle of July 1938 encountering a caravan of trucks heading down the Reus road toward the Ebro, bearing rowboats. I learned later that all the fishermen along the Catalan coast had offered up their skiffs to the army. As soon as I saw that, I knew what was up. Anyway I made it my business to get down to the Ebro as fast as I could and happened to be at the waterfront the morning the men went over. I crossed a little while after them, on the footbridge the engineers had strung across. By that time the republicans had stormed the heights, stunning the defenders, and had advanced some miles into enemy territory. They captured a number of towns and some eight, ten thousand hard-boiled Falangists, Moors, and some German

and Italian officers. A roaring success indeed: what couldn't be done was done. Yes, there were some fainthearts and worse—fifth columnists—who had argued against it, but there it was. But the latter didn't surrender so easily. . . .

The republicans swept to the plain about the key town of Gandesa, some dozen miles from the riverside. Gandesa was heavily fortified, and it could well defy men with rifles and hand grenades. The loyalists had to deploy and wait on heavy reinforcements. Republican tanks were waiting on the other side of the river, trucks with heavier stuff. There were cannon. The loyalists had brought up a wealth of material—big amounts in terms of what they customarily used. Runners kept arriving from the front lines with the message, "For God's sake, bring up the heavy stuff." That stuff was waiting, bough-covered, along a camouflaged road. I had returned from the opposite side, had dispatched my account by runner, and was sitting in the third truck of the caravan waiting to cross again. We waited for the completion of a bridge strong enough to bear the freight. It was scheduled for completion shortly after dark. Dark came, and the bridge was not quite finished. The runners kept piling in from the front. "The Italians are bringing up their mountain artillery to Gandesa. . . ." Nine, ten, eleven o'clock—the drivers in the tanks were gritting their teeth, the truck drivers were in and out of their seats. Shortly before midnight the bridge was finished. Suddenly you heard the gears shifting all along the line. All ready. . . .

The first truck inched its way forward: the bridge held. The truck reached land. Then the second truck edged forward. I happened to be in Truck No. 3, at the waterside, and watched the second truck breathlessly. There was damn little space on either side of its wheels. The truck inched on, got to the halfway mark, and then—the front wheels swerved, struck a stanchion, went overboard. The bridge broke in half. I never want to hear a groan again like that which went up from the waiting men.

The bridge couldn't be repaired immediately. Naked men toiled in the water, above it, below it, sweating, straining, but the bridge was broken. Dawn came and with it the Messerschmitts and Capronis roaring down from the horizon. They came every hour on the hour like a commuter's train. They bombed, bombed, bombed, trying to smash the bridge, and searched for the concentrations of men and material. They ceased at nightfall and the bridge was repaired that night. The heavy stuff did get across, but by that time Mussolini's men had brought up enough artillery.

**T**RUE, other bridges had been thrown across the Ebro above and below this spot. Heavy material did get over elsewhere, but evidently not enough. The stuff at this bridgehead might have turned the tide. The enemy had won enough precious time to strengthen Gandesa. Had that mountain city fallen, the invaders could have fanned out, and far more than a foothold across the Ebro would have been won. The breaking of this single bridge proved pretty disastrous.

Later, I learned that the driver of Truck No. 2, which cracked the bridge in two, was a fanatical Falangist, who had bided his time for just such a moment. I always see him when I hear the words "fifth column."

Yes, Spain has many lessons to teach us. It was, after all, the place where the term fifth column was coined. That perhaps, is the most important lesson. That, and the corollary fact, that you can move mountains, cross rivers—and a channel—if you have unity—and if you have the will.



## STEPHEN VINCENT BENET

*A democratic writer, in the tradition of Whitman and Mark Twain, he became a "heroic trumpet of the people's war." His sympathetic interest in younger writers. By Joy Davidman.*

TO A WHOLE generation of young writers, like Norman Rosten, Margaret Walker, and myself, Stephen Vincent Benet's name was literally synonymous with poetry. It was he who, as editor of the Yale Series of Younger Poets, selected our work for its first publication. The critical introductions he wrote seized upon our half-formed meanings and made passionate sense of them; seized our groping emotions, our uncertain technique, and showed us the way toward growth. There never was an editor at once so kind and so brilliant. We knew him first through his illuminating letters; meeting him later, we found a slight, quiet man with an extraordinary warmth of personality and glitter of wit. It was characteristic of him that he put us at our ease at once; he had none of the forbidding bardic affectations that often characterize lesser poets too conscious of their fame. I looked forward to meeting him with the sort of intemperate flutter of the nerves that one keeps for one's private gods; yet in five minutes I found myself rattling along about Hollywood and the musical glasses, as naturally as if he were my brother.

Yet, however personally we may feel his death, it is impossible not to feel it even more deeply as Americans. I do not speak for myself alone in saying that his poetry was exactly that which a young poet dreams of writing, which young poets of this America would sell their souls to write. At a time when too many of our writers were still assuming expatriate attitudes of desiccated contempt, Stephen Benet recognized and inherited Whitman's United States. There are three main traditions in American poetry: the sterile aristocratic tradition of Poe, which had its one great name and then dwindled away into the Deep South; the somewhat pedantic flowering of New England, born of the culture-consciousness of mercantile Boston and withered with Boston's trade; and the people's tradition, which never withers. Mountain ballad-singers, Negro cotton-pickers, sea chanteysmen gave it a voice; Whitman found it a pen. Carl Sandburg and his contemporaries sang it down the Mississippi valley, while the Eastern imagists were matching primrose and lavender petals and fiddling with their vowel-sounds. Eliot dived into the dark

well of his soul, Pound paraded his snobbish and meaningless erudition. But Stephen Benet, writing in the people's tradition, made the *Ballad of American Names*.

His youthful work—he was a great poet as young as Keats—sprang directly from the songs he had listened to. The mountain fiddler and the mountain rhythms were in his poems; their language was the talk you hear in the street, whether they were tales from American mythology, personal love-songs, or the impish flashes of wit which were as characteristic of him as the passion of his serious moments. Youngest of a distinguished family of poets, he grew up with prose and verse literally bubbling out of his fingers' ends. The lyric poems and the vigorous novels of his early years culminated in *John Brown's Body*, which had a popular success unprecedented in the contemporary history of poetry.

It was a young man's book, sensuous and romantic; yet it remains one of the finest and most comprehensive studies of the Civil War in our literature. To many of us it came as our first hint that poetry was real and dealt with the real world far more vitally than our favorite movies. It was read to me when I was a child, convalescing from some illness; I read it

over again till I knew much of it by heart. I could no more criticize it dispassionately then than I could have analyzed the glitter of a shower of August meteors; I could only be silent and look at the wonderful light. So it was all the more heart-warming, fifteen years later, to find that *John Brown's Body*, unlike so many childhood delights, was as fine as I remembered it.

Stephen Benet was not the sort of writer who, having achieved one great success, repeats himself forever after in the vain hope of doing it again. In the years that followed *John Brown's Body* he developed both as prose writer and as poet. In tales like *The Devil and Daniel Webster*, his contributions to American mythology have already become classics of our literature, and the comparison with Mark Twain is not out of place. He shared with Mark Twain not only love of the land's face and the salty American laughter, but also something even more fundamental: the democratic spirit. And in his poetry the many-colored romanticism of his earlier work crystallized into the diamond clarity of *Burning City*. Many poets have recorded the strange and heartbreaking beauty of our world, many have reported its tragedies, many more have prophesied according to their inspiration; but only a great poet like Stephen Benet is able to unite the three as in the tragic, beautiful, and prophetic volume, *Burning City*:



Stephen Vincent Benet

*This is the man they ate at the green table  
Putting their gloves on ere they touched  
the meat.*

*This is the fruit of war, the fruit of peace,  
The ripeness of invention, the new lamb,  
The answer to the wisdom of the wise.  
And still he hangs, and still he will not die,  
And still, on the steel city of our years  
The light fails and the terrible blood  
streams down.*

That is from "Litany for Dictatorship," whose few pages hold as much of the horror of fascism as an acre of verified catalogues of the dead. But there's no use in quoting and discussion, except to make us aware again of how much was lost because Stephen Vincent Benet died at forty-four. It only remains to add that he never pleaded the special privileges and immuni-