

William Lyon Phelps

IFIRST became acquainted with Stephen when he entered Yale. He was seventeen and had already published a volume of poems. He was one of the best students I ever had; and his membership in the Pundits and in the Elizabethan Club gave me the privilege of his company very often. Philip Barry, Yale '18, Stephen, '19, and Thornton Wilder, '20, were a fine trio; and although children and youths do not always fulfill their promise, I felt sure of these three. Stephen was so original—witty as well as imaginative—that he needed no teacher; and all I can say is that it was a delight for me to have him in my classroom.

Not long after his graduation Stephen's writings began to attract considerable attention, and in less than ten years his full power was revealed in "John Brown's Body." Apart from a number of short stories that he was obliged to write in order to live, his attitude to his art showed both wisdom and nobility. He never took himself too seriously, but he always took his real work seriously; and there was about him an unassuming integrity of mind. He was full of humor and full of sincerity; but I mean something more than that. In his own creative writing and in his own serious conversational talk, it was impossible for him to write or say anything that he did not mean. His poems and stories were effective because he never tried for effect.

Only six years after Stephen's graduation from college he wrote out his plans for the immediate future in a way that shows he always knew his latitude and longitude. He made application for a Guggenheim Fellowship.

Mr. Moe has given permission to reprint a paragraph from his letter to the Foundation, saying that they gave him a "blank check" to write what he pleased.

I cannot promise accomplishment—no writer with a degree of honesty can. I can promise work, and I think I can promise, with some definiteness, better work and a greater amount of it, under such conditions, than it seems likely I shall be able to produce without them. I should intend to finish at least one book of narrative poems at the end of the year—with, possibly, other work mapped out or in train—that is all that I can say. I realize that to do that, in the way I should wish to do it, would take more energy and harder labor than I have yet expended on any single object—but I should be more than grateful for the opportunity. My ultimate purpose in study, or, for that matter, in existence, is to attempt to write good poetry, and, given the opportunity, I shall do the best I can to further that purpose.

As a result of this fellowship the world acquired "John Brown's Body."



—Acme Photo

Stephen Vincent Benét was an expert Double-Crostickier. He is shown here with his wife, Rosemary.

Thornton Wilder

WE are grateful to Stephen Vincent Benét for many things, but principally because he was the first of our poets who knew the whole country and used the poet's means for opening our eyes to all of it. He loved the United States, singly and collectively, and his rich evocation of any portion of it differed from that of the regional writers' through the fact that the entire continent was always present to his mind. He had a thorough knowledge of its history as well—a learning which he was constantly able to transmute into poetry. The brilliance of his treatment of the national scene and its history, however, should not overshadow the excellence of his reflective poetry which has been gaining an ever-widening circle of readers.

From those who knew him, in person or through correspondence, an equal measure of gratitude goes forward to Stephen Vincent Benét, the man. Scores of young poets throughout the country submitted verses to him and received his generous encouragement and counsel. The sense of loss felt by his friends has one added measure of regret in that he did not live to see the outcome of the war. He had studied his country's wars with a historian's thoroughness and a patriot's ardor. In spite of precarious health, he found many ways of bringing before the public his eloquent interpretation of the deepest issues of this, his country's greatest war.

John Berdan

WHILE Steve Benét was an undergraduate at Yale, a lecturer unhappily dwelt upon the personal idiosyncrasies of one of our great English poets. Flaming with youthful anger, Steve wrote a poem excoriating the said lecturer for confusing the man and the artist. Remembering that poem, I am sure that he would resent my writing a column of gossipy reminiscences; he would wish me briefly to tell the truth as I see it.

But to tell the truth, to make you the reader see Steve as I knew him is a difficult task. He had none of the physical attributes of the undergraduate hero. For the undergraduate after all is only a boy with a boy's growing body and an admiration for the strong bodies of his classmates. The football player, the crewman, and track star, these he can understand and appreciate. Steve was slight, near-sighted, and diffident; he had none of the appeals to undergraduate valuations. Not in the externals, but in the internals lay his strength. But that little world is not so stupid as we sometimes cynically think, and long before Steve had finished his college course, he was one of the most admired men of his class.

This eminence was accomplished by merely being himself. I do not think that it ever occurred to him that he ought to conform, to follow the crowd, to worship fashionable idols. Quite simply he went his own way. And this was true also in life. The country entered World War I in an orgy of hysterical sentimentality. In 1917, when the recruits marched out of New Haven, each embryo soldier was presented with a carnation bought with civic funds. How sweet! But it was not sweet when those men came back looking for jobs—and found none; when at night the Green looked like a battlefield with men sleeping on the grass beneath the stars. Of course there was disillusionment with the accompanying cynicism. And this is the mood of much of our modern writing. Here, in the old dualism of the body and the soul, it is the body that receives the emphasis. But not in the work of Stephen Benét. In his poem, "Complaint of Body, the Ass, Against His Rider, the Soul," it is the soul that dominates and makes the poor complaining body do its will. It is the spirit that quickeneth. Thus with Steve there is a curious kinship with another New England writer, Hawthorne. Both are looking beyond the present and the actual to determine what is their significance. Peering through his thick-lensed glasses, Steve first tries himself to see, and then tries to make us see, what are the real values in American society and in American life.

John Farrar

STEVE BENÉT was the sort of man of whom much will probably be written in the years ahead. His was the kind of variegated and energetic personality which encourages legend. And he was deeply loved by hundreds who knew him and by millions, actually, all over the world who had never seen him. It is difficult to write of a friend so recently and so suddenly gone, but I should like briefly to do three things—to acknowledge his untiring work and brilliant gifts as a publisher, to mention a quality of his which escaped many who saw in him only the gentle, the quiet, the self-effacing, and to tell one anecdote which he told me of himself.

In book publishing Steve played an active part since his coming to New York after taking his M.A. at New Haven, where he returned after the first World War. He advised young writers constantly and untiringly, and read and reported on manuscripts for

many firms. Ever since my partners and I went into business in 1929, he has, I suppose, read and reported on practically every book of merit we have published, and many of little merit. He considered himself a member of our firm, and if we were puzzled, someone would say, "Phone Steve!" He was always there. His notes and reports, several of which we received in the days immediately following his death, would read, "We must publish this, although we'll never make a cent on it," or "This isn't art, but why not sell a lot of copies?" or "We'd better watch this one—he's real." Authors who have received his criticisms either through the mails or sitting in his study know that here was a man whose critical standards were firm, in whose reactions to manuscripts or books was no hint of personal prejudice. It is unthinkable that he was ever envious or jealous. He read with lightning speed and yet his often very full reports were not only accurate in detail but always in fine prose.

During the years just preceding the war and since Pearl Harbor his advice and assistance to us have been constant. Quick conferences were often arranged in which his great friend, Walter Millis, often sat—and others, Carl Carmer, Rex Stout, Henry Canby, Henry Pringle, Stan or Ted Rinehart, others of our own editorial staff.

It would be foolish to say that he was always right, but there was never any question about where he stood, and this leads me to the point I wish to make about his anger, his blazing indignation. I have seen Steve leave a room in a towering rage when he felt an absent friend had been unfairly criticized. At a point, when the things he believed were attacked, his eyes could blaze and the quiet voice became loud with scorn and invective.

Not long ago he told me one of the few stories about himself that he ever told me. After he bought a house in Stonington, Connecticut, he came to love the town and the people in it. He was proud that the country folk liked him. He said, with that apologetic, sudden chuckle,

"They see me going down the street, and they say: 'There goes Benny, the poet. He's thinkin'.'"

I like that story, too. He's done a lot of thinking for a lot of us, and he's going right on.

The Plow (A New England Tragedy)

STEPHEN VINCENT BENÉT

HABBERTON'S plow!
John made it,
William stayed it,
Sharp the blade it bears till now!

Wind shadowed billows of rippling grass,
Under a sky as clear as glass.

And a road that bent like a crooked arm
Over the hill to Habberton's Farm!

Two stone posts and a gate between,
A well sweep, dripping and cool and green.

And a girl who strained in the August sun
For the stud of hoofs where the path lay dun;

For a cloud that grew in a moment's course
To the sweat and speed of a flying horse.

Though the dust lay white upon spur and shoe,
On the steaming flanks, and the trooper's blue,

When the ride was done and the reins hung slack,
And he swung her up to the bay's wet back
And kissed her brows in an arch of black!

Clung together, she heard him say,
"Three months more till our wedding day!"

"Three months more and this purse'll buy
The next two farms by the Mill Brook dry.

And then long years of the kindly sun,
Children and work and the wild times done;
—And an end in peace that our hands have won.

Here I'll bide till the morning comes,
Then go back to the beat of the drums."

The foregoing poem appeared in the Yale Literary Magazine in November, 1917, during Stephen Vincent Benét's undergraduate days.

Philip Barry

IT is too soon to write about him. The sense of indignation, of actual anger, at this deprivation is still present. Later, one may be wiser, may see that his schedule was different, that this sourceless and endless traveling spirit stopped over here of necessity briefly, because the universe of such is big. Nevertheless, he deeply loved it and those in it and would have stayed on longer, if he had had his way. Certainly he left his blessings and many gifts for which, God knows, gratitude is indicated and is given.

Last autumn he took a Sunday off, and came down to East Hampton. It was a fine day and we sat looking out over water and talking, of all things, of epitaphs. "I know one for you," I said, and he said "What?" and I said "Even Stephen." "I like that," he said. Then, of course, I had to develop it:

"Even Stephen? *He* must go?
Even Stephen. Even so."

He looked around and grinned. "I like that too," he said. "But it's sort of scary."

Now I am counting my words, as in a telegram. All right, that's what it is. Please forward. Best remembrances. best thanks for many years of benefit in friendship.