

Stephen Crane: The Wanderer

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I

CONSIDERATION OF THE unlikely career of Stephen Crane usually sets off fireworks: he is described as exploding in the literary sky like a star burst, a flashing, unique phenomenon, coming out of nowhere, blazing brightly, then abruptly gone. Trailing after this meteoric genius, however, are traces of disrepute, rumors of drug addiction, drunkenness, and depravity. Largely responsible for these disparate judgments are the circumstances of his brief and sensational—some would say lurid—life. Born in 1871 into a modest parsonage, the fourteenth and last child of a Methodist minister, he grew up in small New Jersey towns, a short, thin, frail boy. Not much of a student but an avid baseball player, he was unsuccessful in and out of college. Scratching out a bohemian existence in New York by selling occasional sketches to newspapers, he became of a sudden at twenty-five the acclaimed, best-selling author of the Civil War classic, *The Red Badge of Courage*. Thereafter he was a famous—some said notorious—novelist, poet, short story writer and war correspondent, falling into a liaison with a former night club hostess (to give her the benefit of the doubt), living lavishly in a ramshackle manor house in England, working desperately against the threat of insolvency, hob-nobbing with the likes of Henry James, Joseph Conrad, and H.G.

Wells, only to die of tuberculosis in a Black Forest sanitarium still in his twenty-eighth year.

His legacy, it must be conceded, was as remarkable as his brief history; despite less than ten years as a published writer his works filled twelve volumes in a collected edition. His achievements were deemed truly singular, hailed as preceding the realist revolution that was to rock American literature a quarter century later. His startling verse followed after Emily Dickinson but was also long before the imagist movement matured. He was judged a daring experimenter, a radical pioneer, a master word impressionist, given to the barest, boldest language and to “lightning images,” his symbolism reflecting simple primary colors, but with subtle, often ironic, shadings.

But, contrary to accepted opinion, Crane was not entirely the maverick, the loner, that he seemed. Already, toward the end of the nineteenth century, there were signs of a realist reaction to the romantic Victorian era, the “Gay Nineties.” Ambrose Bierce in his *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians* wrote bluntly about the Civil War, Hamlin Garland was bitter about the hard frontier farm life in *Main-Travelled Roads*, while Henry Blake Fuller’s *The Cliff-Dwellers* took a harsh look at city life in sprawling, brawling Chicago. Moreover, Crane’s career was

much advanced by fellow realists, Garland being the first to spot his talent, calling him to the attention of the influential William Dean Howells, who was also stalwart in supporting him. Harold Frederic, whose *The Damnation of Theron Ware* was an expose of an unworthy preacher, also befriended Crane and introduced him to the London literary scene, showing him off, as someone said, "as though he had invented the boy."

Among the reasons Crane seemed to stand alone was that he died so soon, that Garland turned to more conventional and commercial writing, Fuller stopped writing novels, and only Dreiser was left to author realistic books until the outburst that followed later: Sherwood Anderson, Carl Sandburg, Ernest Hemingway, John Dos Passos, James T. Farrell and all the rest. Further, Crane was seen to be singular because he reacted so violently against his times, fitting every cliché of the artist as a young rebel—the disbelieving son of a clergyman, from a long line of preachers; the bohemian youth puffing away on his pipe, defying all tradition, all moral standards; the hard-bitten young reporter, exposing the seamy underside of society; the daring correspondent covering wars in Cuba and Greece, cited for bravery under fire; the disdainful lover living with a woman outside "respectable" society; and, finally, after gaining considerable measures of fame and leading a scandalous, spendthrift existence, the early, unexpected death adding to his legend.

If his life and work are considered together—and they often were intertwined, as in the superb recreation of his shipwreck in *The Open Boat*—then he must be judged as much a romantic figure and, deliberately, so, as a realist writer. And, for all his success, he endured one failure after another. Indeed, any account of his life must be read like an old-fashioned morality play, a cau-

tionary tale, his years eaten away by his misdeeds, his persistent seeking after attention recalling the fire-and-brimstone preacher of an earlier day who explained his popularity by saying, "I set myself on fire and people came to watch me burn." As a matter of fact, upon close inspection, there are echoes in Crane's untitled, enigmatic verse of the intonations of the King James version of the Bible, which is hardly surprising given the young man's background and upbringing.

Also, there is suspect moral significance in many of his stories. *The Blue Hotel*, said to be his best by H. L. Mencken, tells the bizarre story of the tenderfoot Swede who insists on getting himself killed, a circumstance that mirrors the Crane poem of the one man who feared he was to be slain, while another dreaded that he might be the slayer. In the short story that Willa Cather said really captures the rough humanity of the West, *The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky*, there is the surprising turnabout of the drunken, rampaging badman, Scratchy Wilson, overcome by an attack of apparent, unexpected chivalry when confronted by his sworn enemy, the town marshal, in his new role as a married man, a wife on his arm. Finally, there is the undisguised morality underlying *The Monster*, the story of a town's vicious gossip and endless persecution of the heroic, fire-scarred and addled black handyman and the doctor, whose child was saved from the conflagration, brought to ruin through his determination, out of gratitude and compassion, to shelter and protect his disfigured, helpless former servant. Crane made it clear that he considered loyalty the first and finest human virtue.

For all of his rebellion, his adoption of a cool disdain, the arty pretense, the determined neutrality, above the common fray, a philosophy best demonstrated in his cryptic verse—

*A man said to the universe,
"Sir, I exist."*

*"However," replied the universe,
"That fact has not created in me
A sense of obligation."*

—Crane can still be read as a deeply caring writer, even if at some remove, operating it is true with his own rules as to right and wrong. While it is always "fashionable" for an avant-garde author to be seen as "unfashionable," his work showed a reverence for honesty, candor, loyalty and comradeship, a personal set of values in contrast to his pose of aloofness and indifference. In many ways, then, Crane is not really the man or the writer that he pretended, but someone quite different as a reading of his major efforts will show.

II

After dropping out of college, Crane struggled to establish himself in New York as a writer, now and then selling sketches of city life to newspapers. But the time between 1892 and 1895 were hardship years for him. Not having proper clothes or an overcoat, toes sticking out of his worn shoes, going hungry, he came to know what it meant to be poor, living in rundown neighborhoods, walking the mean streets. He became fascinated by the Bowery, then the worst slum in any American city, not only bone-poor but riddled with crime and corruption. Appalled by what he saw, Crane was also indignant that by and large nobody really seemed to care, "nice" people and "nice" writers ignoring the human misery. Out of his indignation Crane determined to write of the life there as he saw it. *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* was the result, a crying out for attention, an expression of outrage, composed with an underlying sense of compassion.

The story Crane told was stark and unadorned, crude and shocking, not merely in the language of the street, but laying bare gutter life without condescension or a show of pity. The girl, Maggie, who "blossomed in a mud

puddle," was thrown out of her home by a drunken mother, befriended by a callous bartender, betrayed and deserted by him, and after living the life on the street, despairing, she drowned herself in the river. A terrifying revelation of Bowery brutality and deprivation, *Maggie* came in time to be regarded as the first completely naturalistic American novel, a landmark in modern impressionist writing.

But in 1893 when Crane finished it, rewritten in its final form in two days, according to legend, no magazine editor or book publisher would consider it. With money raised by selling shares that were his inheritance from his parents' estate, Crane had 1,100 copies privately printed for \$869 by a religious and medical publishing house that refused to let their name be used. Crane did not put his name on it either, hiding behind the authorship of one "Johnston Smith." Paperbound and priced at 50 cents, copies of *Maggie* piled up in Crane's room, no bookseller willing to handle the book. He gave some copies away, others were lost over the years, and later when relatives found in an attic a few copies remaining, they were sold at auction for thousands of dollars and are rare today, commanding even more thousands, an irony that Crane, recalling the threadbare time when he wrote it, would surely have appreciated.

As it was, taking advantage of his position as the best-selling author of the wildly popular *Red Badge of Courage*, Crane had *Maggie* republished in proper book form in 1896, this time under his own name. Still it was not very well received, called shocking and immoral, and he was to declare, defiantly, "I had no other purpose in writing *Maggie* than to show people to people as they seemed to me. If that is evil, make the most of it." That, of course, is not entirely true: Crane wrote the book to call attention to the sad and deplorable conditions of the Bowery—a

most commendable, if unsuccessful, effort. He also wrote it to call attention to himself, which was ultimately the only successful part of the venture, although most of the attention he got was either derisive or disapproving.

However there were several who saw merit in his work and they happened to be figures of importance. In the course of writing *Maggie* and composing his poems, Crane had met and impressed Hamlin Garland who, in turn, introduced his efforts to William Dean Howells, not only a successful novelist but also an important editor. That force in American letters was so taken by the very young man that he announced, "Here is a writer who has sprung full armed into life." These encouragements helped Crane to overcome the disappointment of his first major effort, *Maggie*, and he began to research the Civil War, although it had been much written about over the years and was, of course, an event of which he had no first-hand experience. But here he began to show the true signs of his talent as a writer. He relied in his research on the tales, the recollections, of ordinary soldiers, those talkative veterans of the everyday conduct of warfare, not the glory-stories of famous heroes and generals. Secondly, he studied the stark and unforgiving battlefield photographs of Matthew Brady, another source of unvarnished and unrelenting reality. Finally, Crane chose to tell his story through a recruit of his own age, confining that young man's impressions within the compass of Crane's own emotional experience.

The result was a vindication of Stephen Crane's genius. In contrast to the glorified and romanticized stories of the great struggle between the American states, *The Red Badge of Courage* simply followed the young soldier, Henry Fleming, into his first battle (the Battle of Chancellorsville, as it happened) and described what that raw recruit saw and

felt, a plain account of the horrors of war, in which the young man fears how he will react to the first challenge of combat, sees an old friend die, and comes out with his own "red badge of courage," a wound he has received accidentally and without any sense of honor or glory.

To this day, Crane's classic survives, one of the best, most highly-regarded, realistic treatments of wartime experience. With it, Crane was to achieve success beyond his wildest expectations. By March 1893 he had completed a first draft and, still penniless, he had to borrow money from Garland to have the typescript finished. Finding a publisher proved difficult and, in desperation, he took a revised and shortened version to a newspaper syndicate. There he met with an acceptance and, during 1894, it began to appear as a serial in the *Philadelphia Press*. It was surprisingly well received, readers welcoming a story told without heroics, in a style that echoed the sound of battle clear and true, and where the reactions of the soldiers seemed honest and human. Despite his lack of personal experience of war, Crane's intuitions had proven sound, his judgments acute, and his writing, as always, most graphic. Who else would describe a battle as he did once, "as a tremendous scuffle as if two animals the size of islands were fighting."

The public reaction to the newspaper serialization was so enthusiastic that a publisher was soon found and the original, longer version of the novel was brought out in book form in 1895, going through fourteen printings in its first year. Following a significant and most favorable review in the English press, American critics also acclaimed the book and, overnight it seemed, Stephen Crane was a famous, best-selling author, seeming as Howells had earlier said prophetically, to have sprung fully armed into life. Thereafter he was much in demand, the newspaper syndicate sending him out

West in search of story material and other correspondent work taking him to cover the hostilities over Cuba and into the Graeco-Turkish war. It also led him ultimately to the life of a world-renowned novelist residing abroad in England and sharing the lively literary scene there.

When his newspaper syndicate dispatched him to explore the Far West, Crane went first to Nebraska, when he met Willa Cather, then a girl reporter in Lincoln (who was to remember him as a shy, morose, thin, and pale young man) and where in some dismal prairie junction town he saw that fateful blue-painted hotel. Then he wandered through Nevada and Arizona, to Texas, where he took the train ride that was to open his yarn, *The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky*, and finally into Mexico. All of these random travels provided him with a rich lode of characters, situations, and impressions, both of places and of people, that were subsequently to serve him well in a distinguished series of stories.

Then, toward the end of 1896, the syndicate sent him to Florida to investigate the gun-running activities there in support of the Cuban insurgents. Crane, armed only with a money belt holding \$700 in gold for his expenses, eventually sailed from Jacksonville aboard the *Commodore*, a small steamer loaded with guns and cartridges, with a motley crew and a number of other adventurers. It was to prove a doomed voyage, the ship taking water in heavy seas and, despite heroic efforts to save her, sinking with considerable loss of life, Crane escaping in the last boat, a ten-foot dingy, containing the injured captain, the cook, an oiler, and himself, "the correspondent." The high seas were a continuing menace, threatening to swamp the tiny craft. Only after fifty hours of constant struggle, the three men taking turns at the oars, did the dingy finally come within sight of the coast. Heavy surf made them hold off during a long night, but at morning light,

they chanced a landing, Crane abandoning his heavy money belt. The dingy capsized in the surf, all were tossed ashore at a place called Mosquito Inlet and rescued, except for the oiler who was killed when his back was broken by a wave.

Crane had lost his gold but he had survived and was to write his most powerful story, *The Open Boat*, recounting the ordeal, gripping from the famous opening line, "None of them knew the colour of the sky," all eyes, of course, being riveted on the waves crashing down on them. The book was unrelenting in suspense, unsparing in its detail, and written with exquisite skill—in describing the peril at sea in a small boat: "It is easier to steal eggs from under a hen than it was to change seats in that dingy"; in telling of the closeness of the men: "this comradeship that the correspondent, for instance, who had been taught to be cynical of men, knew even at the time was the best experience of his life"; and in reporting on the flickering lights along the shore as the dingy waited for daybreak before risking a landing: "Those two lights were the furniture of the world."

The famous young author, first reported lost at sea, widely mourned, then almost miraculously reappearing to tell his stunning story of survival, made headlines around the world. Unfortunately, it was neither the first nor the last time that Stephen Crane was to cause a sensation, make headlines, and find himself cloaked in notoriety.

III

Crane's life could be said to be ill-starred from beginning to end, marked with misadventure, tainted by rumor, spotted with scandal, all of which he accepted with a nonchalant reserve, not often conceding guilt nor protesting innocence, relying at the last it would seem on letting his work speak for itself and for him.

The first great fuss was kicked up by Crane in the summer of 1892 when he had been persuaded by his family to take

a break from his seedy life in New York and serve as an apprentice reporter for his brother Townley who ran a news agency covering the Jersey shore, then a fashionable resort area. The day came when Crane was to observe a parade by a host of working men, the Order of the United American Mechanics, marching in behalf of the Republican national ticket, Benjamin Harrison for President, Whitelaw Reid for Vice President. Not content merely to contrast the sweating laboring men, shambling along, with the amused vacationing onlookers, cool in their summer gowns and parasols, their tennis clothes and straw hats, Crane felt further it was most ironic that what he saw as poor wage slaves should demonstrate, however sloppily, on behalf of their rich capitalist bosses. He wrote a sharp, satiric sketch, which, his brother being out of town, he sent directly to the newspaper, the *New York Tribune*. Entitled "On the New Jersey Coast—Parades and Entertainments," it led off the Sunday feature page.

"The Parade Sketch," as it came to be infamously described, created a mighty uproar. The owner and editor of the *Tribune* was, of course, Whitelaw Reid, and his political opponents, Democrats across the country, purported to be outraged, claiming a slander on American labor. The mechanics demanded, and received, a printed apology from the newspaper. Reid was furious, fearing irreparable political damage. Crane was fired on the spot and his brother was relieved of his agency responsibilities at the end of the year.

Crane appeared to find all the upset vastly amusing. He insisted he had reported only what he had truly seen and honestly felt. He claimed youth, innocence, and ignorance as his excuses, pretending it never occurred to him that his casual little sketch would cause such trouble for Reid, insisting he had forgotten for the moment the editor's political

connection. This was arrant nonsense. He had known exactly what he was doing and could have guessed the repercussions that would follow. But as one member of his family explained, he had the kind of adolescent mentality that would have considered it thrilling to be shot at sunrise.

This devil-may-care attitude was tolerated by family and friends, who put his follies and indiscretions down to his youthful exuberance. It was a character trait that Crane was never to outgrow and it was to make him enemies, put off by his nerve and arrogance. With the success of his Civil War novel and his sudden fame, Crane found the life he led in New York becoming the source of much talk spread by the envious and those he had antagonized. Someone recalled seeing all the paraphernalia for smoking opium in his room, which Crane explained away, rather lamely, as being for research only and then kept as part of the decor. He also shrugged away accusations of drunkenness, saying that all of his crowd drank when they could afford it, but they could hardly support chronic alcoholism. He was also accused of paying blackmail to a prostitute and he was sued over a sum of money a woman friend said he had embezzled, a case that was never pursued. All of this was not surprising, considering the rakehell life he lived in New York, but it was judged mostly just gossip and petty scandal. But what came to be known as the Dora Clark affair caused a major sensation.

In the autumn of 1896, riding the crest of his fame as the author of *The Red Badge of Courage*, Crane was offered, and accepted, an assignment from Hearst's *New York Journal* to write a series of sketches on real life incidents in the city. Doing research, he began in the police courts, observing and listening to the crowd of unfortunates arraigned there. Wanting to investigate their repeated claims that they were victims of injus-

tice, police brutality, corruption, and persecution, Crane was drawn to the notorious Tenderloin, the district of dance halls, saloons, theaters, gambling dens, cheap hotels, and brothels. He arranged to meet and interview two "chorus girls" in the Turkish Smoking Parlors and later they walked together to the Broadway Garden, a resort of ill repute, where they were joined by a third "chorus girl," one Dora Clark, who also used the name Ruby Young, a known streetwalker with a record of arrests for soliciting and in constant trouble with the police, facts not known to Crane. It was two in the morning when the small group broke up and, while Crane escorted one girl to her uptown cable car, plainclothes policemen arrested the other two for soliciting, they said, a couple of men who had walked past them. The women protested they had not even spoken to the men and Crane hurried to support their story, only to be threatened with arrest himself. Taken to the station house, one girl, hysterically insisting on her innocence, was freed, Crane was also not charged, but Dora Clark, on the word of the arresting officer, one Becker, that she was a known prostitute, was detained. The desk sergeant warned Crane to keep out of the affair or "You'll end up covered with mud," and a police reporter urged him to "Go home. You don't look too responsible in all this."

Crane was aware that he was putting his reputation in question and pondered in the story he wrote, "Should I take this risk for the benefit of a girl of the streets?" To anyone who knew him, this was a rhetorical question, although in the stories he wrote about the trial, where his testimony cleared Dora Clark, and in reporting her law suit for false arrest against Officer Becker, he always referred to himself as "the reluctant witness." While he was steadfast in his support of Dora Clark's innocence on this charge, he knew the police were powerful, corrupt, and

unscrupulous in trying to destroy his credibility as a witness. He was proven right: the police reported finding the opium gear in his rooms, brought witnesses who claimed Crane had lived with various prostitutes, even accusing him of living off their earnings. The press had a field day with both trials and Crane himself contributed to the hurrah with the sensational sketches he wrote: "Notes on Prostitutes," "Adventures of a Novelist," and "A Blackguard as a Policeman."

The outcome of all this furor was unsatisfactory on all counts: Dora Clark continued to be in trouble with the authorities; Becker, years later, was to murder a man and become the first New York policeman to die in the electric chair; and, while the *Journal* ran an editorial commending Crane for his courage and sense of honor, his reputation was in tatters. He was a marked man to the New York police and it was not until he was shipwrecked, reported dead, only to return with his successful account of survival, *The Open Boat*, that Crane was to recover his standing with the public.

To the question why Crane ended his years an expatriate, a number of answers present themselves: one, not the least, was his rightful concern about being able to live in New York unmolested by the police; another, following from the first, was his real fear that something might happen that would finish off his reputation forever; still another reason was the outstanding critical reception to his work by the approving English press and English authors; and, finally, probably most importantly, he must have understood that his "marriage" to Cora Taylor could not stand too close a scrutiny in America, while the more cosmopolitan British did not seem all that interested in his private life.

To say that Cora Crane, as she came to be known, was a woman with a past could be considered a polite understatement. Cora Howorth was born in Boston,

her grandfather having an art gallery there, her father a painter. Half a dozen years or so older than Crane, she was married at a young age to a Thomas Murphy in New York, the marriage collapsing in a matter of months. A few years later in London she was wed to Captain Donald William Stewart, the son of an English baronet. This union did not last either but Stewart, for whatever his reasons, refused to give his wife a divorce. Back in the States, Cora Stewart in 1895 bought a nightclub business in Jacksonville, Florida, from one Ethel de Dreme, naming the place the Hotel de Dream and, for business purposes, wanted to be known as Cora Taylor, both owner and hostess, usually called "Miss Cora."

A year later Crane was in Jacksonville waiting to take passage on a Cuban gun-running ship. The night clerk at his hotel had a list of the town's "houses of joy," the Hotel de Dream highly recommended. Crane was to make himself at home there, attracted to the "golden-haired hostess," who was equally smitten with the famous young author, immediately fastening on him and beginning to see a future for herself as a writer as well. It must certainly have seemed a move up from whorehouse madam, for although no girls boarded at the Hotel de Dream, a number of very attractive young women were always in attendance and it was a common sight for couples to disappear from time to time to the rooms upstairs.

After his recovery from the shipwreck of the *Commodore*, but still in frail health, Crane was in England in March 1897, renting a house in Oxted, Surrey, on his way to Greece to cover the war there with Turkey. Soon Cora was hurrying to Athens to nurse Crane, who had come down with an attack of dysentery. While there she tried her hand at reporting, sending off dispatches under the byline of "Imogene Carter," although they were obviously composed by Crane. Returning to the rented house in England, Crane

was said to have written *The Monster* in the evenings of a single week.

With the outbreak in 1898 of the Spanish-American War, Crane returned to New York, was rejected by the Navy, but went instead as a war correspondent to Key West and Cuba, where his reporting was much admired and his courage under fire won an official citation for bravery at Guantanamo. By the autumn of that year he was back in New York and by January 1899 he had returned to England, the Cranes then renting Brede Place, a vast but not exactly luxurious manor house. But their life-style turned out to be terribly expensive, the place cost a great deal to maintain and they entertained frequently, a steady round of house guests, banquets, and parties. Friendly with Joseph Conrad and his family, with Ford Maddox Hueffer, H. G. Wells, Henry James, Rudyard Kipling—the Cranes cut quite a social swath. Of their conjugal arrangement, Crane offered several explanations: he once said he had married Cora in Greece, another time he described the ceremony as having taken place in England, with English friends, including Wells, in attendance. If her legal husband was still denying a divorce, the two probably decided to live together, say they were married, and simply let the matter go at that.

Expenses being what they were, the Cranes were soon critically short of funds, pressing his publishers and his agent for advances, borrowing wherever they could, seeking any kind of assignment, waiting eagerly for each payment to reach them, fighting off overdue creditors and overdrawn banks. The local tradespeople suffered the most as their unpaid bills piled up. Crane was writing frantically to avert financial disaster, soon overworked, overtired, more and more confined to his bed, ill. He began to take on potboilers, like *The Great Battles of the World* and a farcical historical romance, *The O'Ruddy*, hoping one would become

a best-seller and solve all their problems.

The end came with shocking suddenness: in March 1890 Crane was diagnosed as having an advanced case of tuberculosis; in May, Cora Crane, borrowing money from every possible source, took him to a sanitarium in the Black Forest; within a month, he had died at Badenweiler, still short of his twenty-ninth birthday. The last pathetic glimpse of the once-great writer was that of Crane on his deathbed dictating notes for his last book, *The O'Ruddy*, a novel of no consequence, finished by Robert Barr and published posthumously. A tragic closing to a singular career, Crane's final days seem ironic to the extreme. The young rebel who had jeered at everything conventional was brought down to writing anything to please the public, anything to make money to meet his debts. He found himself, at the last, in a position that he had already described in one of his enigmatic verses:

*The wayfarer,
Perceiving the pathway to truth,*

Was struck with astonishment.

It was thickly overgrown with weeds.

"Ha," he said,

"I see that none has passed here

In a long time."

Later he saw that each weed

Was a singular knife.

"Well," he mumbled at last,

"Doubtless there are other roads."

Like many another before him, and since, artists more posture than substance, with audacity but lacking character, leading lives as sensational as their works, Crane did indeed burst like a skyrocket into American letters, only finally to fizzle out. But, it must be admitted, he was an unmatched stylist, a daring experimenter, and he will survive not because he was a boy wonder, a rebel, and a scandal, but because, as the critic Carl Van Doren has pointed out, while ground-breakers come and go, "It is excellence that is timeless." At his best, Crane was superb, and he will be long remembered, however much the wanderer.