

*Rinehart Editions*

STEPHEN CRANE

THE RED BADGE OF COURAGE  
AND SELECTED PROSE AND POETRY

INTRODUCTION BY WILLIAM M. GIBSON

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The Red Badge of Courage

AND

Selected Prose and Poetry

STEPHEN CRANE

*Edited with an Introduction by William M. Gibson*

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## INTRODUCTION

In 1937 Thomas Wolfe wrote to F. Scott Fitzgerald an essentially friendly but explosive letter in reply to one from Fitzgerald. He said in part:

Now you have your way of doing something and I have mine, there are a lot of ways, but you are honestly mistaken in thinking that there is a "way." I suppose I would agree with you in what you say about "the novel of selected incident" so far as it means anything. I say so far as it means anything because every novel, of course, is a novel of selected incident. . . . You say that the great writer like Flaubert has consciously left out the stuff that Bill or Joe will come along presently and put in. Well, don't forget, Scott, that the great writer is not only a leaver-outer but also a putter-inner, and that Shakespeare and Cervantes and Dostoevsky were great putter-inners—greater putter-inners, in fact, than taker-outers and will be remembered for what they put in—remembered, I venture to say, as long as Monsieur Flaubert will be remembered for what he left out.\*

The private battle over principles between Wolfe and Fitzgerald is illuminating because it illustrates opposing or divergent theories of fiction which have been developing especially in the United States since the Civil War. Should fiction put in or take

\* From a letter written by Thomas Wolfe in 1937 to F. Scott Fitzgerald. Copyright 1950 by Edward C. Aswell, Administrator, C.T.A., of the Estate of Thomas Wolfe; used by permission of Mr. Aswell.

out? Should it explore social issues and mass behavior, or individual consciousness and conscience? Should it be representative or idiosyncratic? Will chronological time or manipulated time best serve the writer's purpose? Is style more or less important? Should fiction be naturalistic or symbolic? Should it amuse or instruct? Should it "mean" or "be"? This controversy, whether it is accurately described by these questions or not, was and is important because discussion of this sort, as Henry James argued so convincingly, constitutes growing weather and fertile ground for good fiction.

Stephen Crane's stories, which were written in the last decade of the nineteenth century on one of the upward slopes of the controversy, evince both a strong individual talent and a sensitivity to many of the critical issues of his time. Dying of tuberculosis before he was twenty-nine, Crane had seen three wars and written of four, lived in poverty in the Bowery and in relative affluence at Brede Place in England, traveled from Mexico to Greece, and done justice to his talent as the best writing in the twelve volumes of his collected edition shows. His experience, rather wide and often violent and not unlike that of the expatriate writers of the twenties, served his imagination well. The ideas of his writing friends also influenced him. Howells felt that Crane had "sprung into life fully armed," and Crane's writing *Maggie* at twenty-one would seem to justify such a judgment. But Crane's taste for what would aid him in his own writing was keen and he learned fast; a young writer popularly successful and often accused of borrowing from French sources, he was also manifestly reluctant to talk about his *mystery* or to admit anyone not a "man of sense" into his workshop. Crane's early newspaper experience in a group of unusually able, ambitious men led him to value accurate observation and to scorn the falsified or sensational. His brothers respected his independence and believed in his genius. Garland and Howells helped him by personal kindnesses, sound reviews, and realistic precepts. Later on, for a writer of great natural ability who had read Mark Twain, Tolstoi,

and Zola, what better friends or tutors could one have than Ford Madox Ford, Henry James, Edward Garnett, and Joseph Conrad, the last of whom Crane idolized?

Stephen Crane, then, was both an able reporter and a master of highly wrought short fiction. He was on a number of occasions, and notably in his poetry, partisan, reformer, and satirist, yet he was a master of style and of fiction coldly told. He was one of the first naturalists in American literature and at the same time a poet and impressionist and symbolist. It is remarkable that such diverse writers as Mencken, Hemingway, Dos Passos, Sandburg, Amy Lowell, Dreiser, and Willa Cather have either praised or profited from his writing.

## 1

Crane had nearly as much difficulty getting his first novel into print as Dreiser was to encounter later with his first and similar book, *Sister Carrie*. After R. W. Gilder had refused *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* for the *Century Magazine*, Crane borrowed money from his brother William and paid a firm of medical and religious printers an exorbitant price for the manufacture of 1,100 copies of his book in yellow paper covers, with the pseudonym "Johnston Smith" on the title page. According to one report, Crane hired four men to sit all day, one in front of the other, on the elevated train reading his novel, so that the passengers would think New York City was "Maggie-mad." Howells, it is certain, tried to persuade Harper's to publish the novel. Failing in his effort, he entertained Crane at dinner, and passed on to the young man his enthusiasm for Emily Dickinson's poems. Yet *Maggie* was still-born. Not until the great success of *The Red Badge of Courage* would Crane's ironic *nouvelle* reach a reading public. In 1896 he revised it, cutting the monotonous simple profanity to make it count and stringently cutting the chapter which describes Maggie's descent to the black river.\*

The Bowery world of *Maggie*, in which only the fit survive,

\* See Textual and Bibliographical Note, p. xvi.

is clearly the jungle, a naturalist's world. Tommie, the baby, dies. Johnson succumbs to hard work and drink. The magnificent bartender, Pete, is as helpless in the hands of Nellie, "the woman of brilliance and audacity," as Maggie has been in his. Jimmie, who knows his exact place in the peck-order of Bowery traffic, between pedestrians and fire engines, is defeated in his muddled attempts to avenge his sister's disgrace and to bring her home. Only Mary Johnson, heartless and terrifying, survives to bring her daughter home from the morgue for the wake demanded by convention and to "forgive her." The primitive savagery of the fighting, Pete's anthropoid behavior at the zoo, the use of repeated epithets for characterization, and the strictly limited choice for Maggie of sweatshop or prostitution are all plainly naturalistic. Perhaps less obvious and less typically naturalistic is Crane's almost metaphysical imagery and style dominated by animal metaphors, or the shadowy parallels of the Johnsons and of Jimmie and Hattie to Pete and Maggie. Crane builds his novel with paired and contrasting chapters and manages his three beer-hall scenes with something like James's sense of the value of setting to dramatize Pete's increasing boredom with Maggie. In the most moving chapter of the book Crane forsakes literal narration entirely, impressionistically foreshortening several years of Maggie's experience into one evening. She moves from the brilliantly lit theater district to the "blackness of the final block," and from the young man in evening dress, down through half a dozen economic levels, past a blotched face and a "ragged being with shifting bloodshot eyes and grimy hands" to the river Acheron.

Crane developed no clearly formulated social or aesthetic theory. His artistic creed must largely be inferred from an occasional letter or from such a document as his interview with William Dean Howells in 1894, where Howells's assertions about intention, proportion, and the business of the novel accord with Crane's critical ideas and have even taken color from Crane's style and mind. In November, 1896, Crane might assert that a kind of

individual cowardice lay at the bottom of poverty and Bowery life. The sense, however, of several inscriptions in first edition copies of *Maggie* would indicate that his temper in writing the book was a mixture of revulsion, pity, and indignation. In one such inscription Crane said:

It is inevitable that you be greatly shocked by this book, but continue, please, with all possible courage to the end. For it tries to show that environment is a tremendous thing in the world and frequently shapes lives regardless. If one proves that theory, one makes room in heaven for all sorts of souls, notably an occasional street girl, who are not confidently expected to be there by many excellent people.

Crane's quixotic, admirable defense of a streetwalker from police persecution in 1896 and the anticlerical passages in the novel would also indicate defense of a "theory," however implicit, in his first novel. Like Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles: A Pure Woman*, *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* is a novel with a large purpose as well as a record, an impression of life.

Elements not strictly or historically naturalistic become much more apparent in *The Red Badge of Courage*. First published by the Bachelier syndicate in a number of newspapers, the novel sold slowly through the last months of 1895, but swept the country at the beginning of the new year, and made Crane famous at twenty-four.

*The Red Badge of Courage* centers on Henry Fleming's slowly discarding "the brass and bombast of his earlier gospels," his preconceptions about the nature of war and the behavior of men at war. After intense misgivings and flight, he learns something of his weaknesses and his capabilities. He thus manages to come to terms with his small segment of a world at war, and achieves a measure of maturity.

The method of *The Red Badge* represents a change from that



of *Maggie*. In his second novel Crane restricts himself largely to Henry Fleming's point of view and gains in consequence both sympathy and intensity. This gain is especially apparent in the forest scene, where Henry rationalizes his malingering in terms of a squirrel's chattering flight from danger, and in the sequence of Henry's changing impressions of the sun in the sky. The dominant metaphors of the novel are again animal, but to this group Crane adds a series of machine metaphors, much like the cog-in-the-machine and juggernaut-steam-roller figures of *Three Soldiers*. Structurally the novel tends to be loose and episodic, but its action is strengthened by the contrasting experiences of Jim Conklin, "the tall soldier," and of Wilson, "the loud soldier." Conklin's death terrifies and enrages Henry: Wilson's losing his fearful self-centeredness early in the action anticipates and helps to motivate Henry's change.

The naturalism of *The Red Badge of Courage* is thus qualified by Fleming's growth toward manhood and his return to the human condition of the lover. The ending of the novel, however, falls one degree short of complete verisimilitude, because the preceding episodes of greatest intensity have been too purely naturalistic: that is, they show men struggling to no effect in the grip of circumstance and instinct. So Jim Conklin, the best of the three soldiers, like a dying animal goes off compulsively to find a solitary rendezvous, his side looking as though it had been chewed by wolves. And so Fleming finds in the beautiful and solemn forest chapel the decaying corpse of a soldier over whose face ants are crawling toward the sightless open eyes. Not Bierce or Edmund Wilson or Hemingway has evoked more strongly the horror of physical decay than Crane does in this incident. One must return to Hawthorne's tableau of the dead Judge Pyncheon and the fly to find its equal.

Much has been made of the fact that Crane wrote *The Red Badge of Courage* before he had ever seen war, and a good deal of ink has been spilled over sources, from incidents in Crane's life, to Zola's *Débâcle* (which he denied as an influence), to

similar incidents in the battle of Chancellorsville. The most convincing argument for a source has been made by comparison with Wilbur F. Hinman's *Corporal Si Klegg and His Pard* (1888), a diffuse, detailed, most interesting record of the transformation of a recruit into a veteran in the Civil War.\* Crane may also very well have been influenced by Tolstoi's *Sebastapol*—an American translation introduced by Howells was published in 1887—when writing *The Red Badge*. Volodia's fear of cowardice and his recovery from it, the discoveries of what war is and is not, and the variation in method between external picturization and internal debate all find counterparts in Crane's story. Whatever his reservations, he admired Tolstoi greatly, and might have said with him, "The hero of my tale . . . is truth." Yet it is equally to the point that when he wrote his novel Crane was in full revolt from traditional attitudes toward religion and war; that courage, which masters fear or remains stoic before death, was even then his preoccupation; and that even then he was the kind of intensely imaginative person on whom no experience is lost.

"The Veteran," who is Henry Fleming in his green old age, is no more than a sketch, in which Crane himself occasionally short-circuits the dramatic current of his story. It is nonetheless a model of storytelling economy, and a pendant to the *Red Badge of Courage* which derives interest from the novel and casts retroactive light upon its action and meaning. "The Price of the Harness," which is printed here with the newspaper letter about Nolan which preceded it, "Regulars Get No Glory," is justly one of Crane's best-known stories. Like all but the very best of his fiction, it shows marks of writing under pressure—the pressure of young ambition or the battlefield or financial need—and in it the emotions which permeate the dispatch from Siboney are still hot. Crane's intense feeling about unconscious heroism in the ranks appears most clearly in the descriptive passages, yet it is transformed, controlled, universalized in the episodes and in the dia-

\* H. T. Webster, ". . . 'Corporal Si Klegg' and . . . 'Red Badge of Courage,'" *American Literature*, II (November, 1939), 285-293.

logue—that kind of dialogue which Crane wrote with a master hand. He believed, of course, in truth to his own impressions, feelings, and imagination, and wrote that kind of truth in *The Red Badge*; he believed equally in the truth of observed facts, and “The Price of the Harness” is the moving result of his decision to put onto paper more lasting than newsprint a picture of Private Michael Nolan.

Fleming, Crane would have us believe, lived through the Civil War to die a soldier's death in a barn fire long after Chancellorsville. Nolan died in Cuba. The anonymous lieutenant of “An Episode of War” is invalidated out, his right arm amputated. If there is a great difference between the sick and the well, as Fitzgerald thought, Crane demonstrates in this story how profound the gulf is between the wounded and the whole, from both inside and outside and without a single false touch. His details are sharp and evocative, as when an officer trying to help the lieutenant clumsily “cut the sleeve and laid bare the arm, every nerve of which softly fluttered under his touch.” His story as a whole is perfectly consummated, as in the implications for the lieutenant's future life of the home-coming scene and discovery.

## 2

Crane wrote three novels other than *The Red Badge of Courage*, only one of them, *George's Mother*, at all good. He planned a play with Clyde Fitch and another with Joseph Conrad. He was a journalist with considerable experience as leg-man, special feature writer, interviewer, and war correspondent, and he would even try his hand as a popularizer of battle histories. Fortunately, with the rise of the popular magazine and the literary agent, Crane could afford to write what he wrote best—the short story.

The difference between the illusion of life in *The Red Badge of Courage* and in “The Open Boat” is small. Yet the novel was projected from tenuous materials and an extraordinary act of the imagination, while the short story was based directly on Crane's own experience of shipwreck off the west coast of Florida in

January, 1897. Ralph D. Paine in *Roads of Adventure* described how Crane read a portion of the manuscript of the story to Captain Edward Murphy, one of Crane's four companions in the open boat, in a Jacksonville café not long after the event. Crane wanted Captain Murphy to check his memory. But it was the reflection of the men's feeling at the time that Crane was anxious to have right rather than the material detail of their struggle with the sea. "Stephen Crane's Own Story," a news report, is printed in this volume to suggest some of the differences between Crane's hasty dispatch and the formulated fiction, between his choice of materials for a news story and for a "tale intended to be after the fact."

"The Open Boat" is thus a representation of reality, and its effect and meaning emerge in a number of measured ways. The tension fluctuates in the story and is created in good part by the strictly limited point of view in varying circumstances. The correspondent discovers that nature is not cruel, beneficent, treacherous, or wise, but "indifferent, flatly indifferent." Yet even in the midst of this indifference the men feel a warm sense of human solidarity, which the correspondent, "who had been taught to be cynical of men, knew even at the time was the best experience of his life." The flat indifference of nature, it must be noted, is not fully apparent until the oiler dies just as he reaches safety; he is the best man of the four, and one of "the very good, the very gentle, the very brave."

Crane's cabled dispatch has some interest in itself, for it reveals elements of his skill as a writer. He describes the feeling of the engine room in one sharp paragraph. By implication only, he draws a contrast between Billy Higgins, the oiler, and the "human hog" with the valises. He presents the fear-crazed action of the stoker and the death of the men forced to return to the sinking *Commodore* with candor and a sense of the survivors' horror and their compassion.

"The Monster" reveals another facet of Crane's virtuosity: his satirical power and the ability to draw a fine moral issue to very high tension without breaking. Some of the action, as in "The

Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg," seems contrived, and the story trails off after the climactic episode of the fire. Contrivance and inconsequentiality, nonetheless, are not primary attributes of this tale. Crane has drawn his major characters and defined their relationships fully and unsentimentally, as he does in the other Whilomville stories. He has raised an ineradicable impression of Johnson's courage and claustrophobic terror in the fire-filled study before the burning chemicals eat away the flesh of his upturned face. And he has underlined the whole action with evidences of the timidity, hysteria, prejudice, and cruelty of Whilomville. Howells once said, "Mr. Crane can do things that Clemens can't." Crane did things in "The Monster," at least, that Mark Twain could not match in his story of Hadleyburg.

Massive and rich ironies are, of course, a hallmark of Crane's stories. An effective element in "The Open Boat," they are basic to "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky," Willa Cather's favorite among Crane's stories, and his own. The tale builds to violence like the genie emerging from the bottle, only to end in anticlimax and intense relief. Crane juxtaposes the patronizing pullman passengers and the respectful, prone townspeople; the beatitude of the marshal's newly married state and the sense of a hair-trigger line separating him from momentary death. So ferocity and humor are linked by a young writer's gusto in a comedy of manners.

Crane once inscribed a book "To Hamlin Garland of the great honest West from Stephen Crane of the false East." He was half-serious. Mrs. Trescott's fifteen empty teacups do suggest an effete hypocritical East in Whilomville, whereas the New York kid's brush with death in Mexico, like the sheriff's of Yellow Sky, suggests a violent, opener, essentially different place and people. But the myth of the frontier West governs "The Five White Mice" rather less strongly than the concept of indifferent nature as Crane had discovered it in the dinghy from the *Commodore* and constructed it in "The Open Boat." The New York kid first learns that a gun is a great leveler and that a hostile foreigner may be as subject to fear as any other man, such as the New York kid.

His second discovery, of deeper import, is simply that the "five white mice of chance," the five poker dice of the tale, are never loaded; that the indifference of nature-as-fate will not prevent an accidentally sober man from drawing a gun, with decisive and tremendous nervous force, and thereby saving his own life with the lives of his accidentally drunken friends. As John Berryman says, "The five white mice are blind." In "The Open Boat" the indifference of nature threatens death terrifyingly; that very indifference in "The Five White Mice" becomes a condition of continued and enlightened life.

The relation of Crane's poems to his fiction is often close, both in style and subject. Certain metaphorical passages in the stories may easily be printed as poems, and, similarly, the themes of Crane's poems often reappear in his tales. Thus the plot of "The Blue Hotel" is suggested by one of the briefest of the poems in *The Black Riders*:\*

A man feared that he might find an assassin;  
Another that he might find a victim.  
One was more wise than the other.

For it is the fearful Swede, trembling for his own life in what he thinks of as the Wild West, who is not wise. After he has been fortified with whiskey and has beaten up Johnnie Scully, the proprietor's son, he is no longer afraid, nor is he concerned about the danger of finding a victim: he is ripe with arrogance for his own death. He threatens the quiet and respectable professional gambler of the Nebraska town in the local saloon. He is stabbed. And "a human body, this citadel of virtue, wisdom, power, was pierced as easily as if it had been a melon." Except for Crane's afterword, the story ends with a sardonic tableau: "The corpse of the Swede, alone in the saloon, had its eyes fixed upon a dreadful legend that dwelt atop of the cash machine: 'This registers the amount of your purchase.'"

\* From *Collected Poems of Stephen Crane* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1930).

The story is a study in the effects of craven fear on the one hand and of brutal self-assertiveness induced by alcohol and *hubris*. The other men of the story fear the force of the blizzard which rages across the Nebraska prairie and are benumbed by it. They restrain themselves and with the minor exception of Johnnie at cards believe in fair play. But the Swede, after his victory over his opponents, believes himself invincible and gloats insufferably. He replies to the bartender: "Yes, I like this weather. I like it. It suits me." He will not recognize that he is no more than one of many "lice which were caused to cling to a whirling, fire-smitten, ice-locked, disease-stricken, space-lost bulb." Men are inevitably involved in mankind, Crane seems to suggest, whether for evil as in "The Blue Hotel" or, as in "The Open Boat," for the sources of courage and virtue.

## 3

Crane's poetry, which apparently owes its compressed and free form to Emily Dickinson, is nearer in spirit to Moody, Robinson, Eliot, and the French symbolists than to the imitative and conventional verse of his day. Whatever the degree of his influence on the Imagists, he prefigures imagist poetry in his feeling for the precise word, the clear image, new rhythms, and concentration. In poetic themes Crane is more openly the satirist and critic of his times than he is in his fiction. Thus the counting-house journalism of the nineties Crane scores as a symbol of "feckless life's chronicle," concentrating "eternal stupidities." The youth who dies in medieval fashion, happy, is an earlier Miniver Cheevy. The millionaire hat-merchant who buys European art for conspicuous consumption is a "silly rich peasant," a "cryptic slave," and a representative figure of the late Gilded Age. The parable of the tutor, the children gathering flowers, and the father is Crane's ironic comment on *laissez-faire* capitalism, and "Do not weep, maiden, for war is kind," one of his few articulated long poems, still remains a moving indictment of war.

In another of his themes, perhaps his major theme, Crane may be linked again with Emily Dickinson, since many of his best

poems dramatize his revolt against the God of New England Calvinism and conservative evangelical Christianity. He is of course more violent and less subtle than his predecessor of Amherst in such poems, for example, as "God fashioned the ship of the world carefully" or "Well, then, I hate Thee, unrighteous picture." But he too is preoccupied with the manner in which men die and his poetry is filled with the imagery of the Day of Doom. The difference, it is apparent, is that for the younger poet "God is cold" and nature either indifferent or grimly hostile. The essential similarity lies in their stoic attitude. "A man adrift on a slim spar" and "To the maiden the sea was blue meadow" were both written after Crane's surviving thirty hours in an open boat, the horizon around him "smaller than a doomed assassin's cap." These are among his finest variations on the stoic theme.

## 4

Crane was a poet who wrote freshly and seriously after the death of Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson, in a low ebb of American poetry. As a writer of fiction, his ties are not with the historical romance of the nineties or the sentimentality of Bret Harte, say, or the art-for-art's-sake people, or even the additive formlessness and confusion of lesser naturalists and realists. He was rather a naturalist whose sense of form and proportion and of intense human loyalties allies him with the best of his contemporaries and their successors in the twentieth century. He recognized the limitations of human frailty and of a universe flatly indifferent to men, but his essential concern was still, as Conrad phrased it, "the moral problem of conduct." In conversation with a friend, Crane once said, "You can never do anything good aesthetically—and you can never do anything with anything that's any good except aesthetically—unless it has meant something important to you." The fiction and poetry represented here may serve to indicate how successful Crane was in achieving both his moral and aesthetic aims.

William M. Gibson

*New York, December, 1955*



## TEXTUAL AND BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

The text of *Maggie* is that of the first revised edition (New York: Appleton, 1896) and deserves some comment. Collation and comparison of the first edition text of 1893 with that of the "first published" edition of 1896 reveal interesting differences. Crane wrote Ripley Hitchcock in March, 1896, that he had "carefully plugged at the words which hurt" and had made "very slight omissions." With about three hundred omissions or changes and only half a dozen additions, the novel does indeed, as Crane thought, wear "quite a new aspect."

The most obvious kind of change is Crane's omitting a series of "Gawds," "damns," and "hells," since he was probably persuaded to make *Maggie* more acceptable to contemporary readers, but it is also probable that he saw how much more effective he might make the cursing by careful, sparing use. So, in the revised text, when Pete tells Maggie to go to hell, he now is clearly echoing her father's earlier speech to her mother, and her brother's snarling "Oh, go teh blazes!" at Hattie. A second change is the elimination of verbal excess and "smartness." "Great crimson oaths" become "oaths." "He was afraid of neither the devil nor the leader of society" becomes "He was afraid of nothing." Nell's inappropriate "You gibber like an ape, dear" becomes "You talk like a clock." And when Crane paraphrases Isaiah in "the little hills sing together in the morning," he omits "as God says." Of the very few additions to the text, Crane allowed himself an epigram concerning the mission-church preacher who composed his sermons to Boweryites of "you's," by adding: "Once a philosopher asked this man why he did not say 'we' instead of 'you.' The man replied, 'what?'"

Crane made his most significant change at the end of Chapter XVII, the foreshortened chapter which dramatizes Maggie's fail-