

VACHEL LINDSAY
An Account of a Friendship
Recorded from Memory
August, 1957

By FREDERIC G. MELCHER

I FIRST came to know Vachel Lindsay (then signing himself Nicholas Vachel Lindsay) when I was managing the bookstore of W. K. Stewart Company in Indianapolis. The store had been burned out at its old location of 8 West Washington Street, and after four months on the second floor of a nearby bank, we had rebuilt for its purposes a four-story building at 44 East Washington Street.

I had lately come to do more reading and selling of poetry, and from a conversation with a customer, George Bicknell, who edited locally the union magazine for bridge builders, I learned, rather unexpectedly, that he had been printing some poetry by a poet from Springfield, Illinois. He gave me some copies to read and explained that Lindsay had been publishing in pamphlet form and would undoubtedly send me copies if asked. A handful of pamphlets came to me (1913), including two copies of the one called *Rhymes to be Traded for Bread* which he had used in asking for meals and lodging on his tramp-trip along the Santa Fe Trail. (One of these copies I later gave to William Lyon Phelps, who had come to admire Lindsay's poetry.) He had also sent a copy of the broadside, *Proclamation of the Gospel of Beauty*, which did much to explain what Lindsay felt to be his mission.

I thus started a correspondence with Lindsay, and other pieces came to hand. Shortly after, Lawrence Maynard came to Indianapolis selling the Mitchell Kennerley line of new books, and I startled him by placing an order for twenty-five copies of Lindsay's first trade volume, *General William Booth Enters into Heaven and Other Poems*. I can remember sitting in Maynard's room in the old English Hotel while I beat out the measures of that great poem. Not long after this, John Masefield, making his first trip to America, was invited to speak and read in Indianapolis and, noting in the *News* that Lindsay was visiting his mother's sister, Mrs. Lucius O. Hamilton (Mrs. Hamilton's husband was, as I remember it, a wholesale dealer in tobacco), I invited Vachel and his aunt to be my guests at the Propylaeum. It was the first time I had met Lindsay. The evening was a great success. Masefield talked well and read his poems magnificently. Vachel, who had studied the delivery of poems carefully, was pleased and excited. We went up to meet Masefield, I feeling that I had the awkward task of explaining who this local poet was, but Masefield grasped him by the hand saying, "I had certainly hoped to meet you on this trip to America. Your 'General Booth' is the talk of London." A few years later, when Lindsay made a trip to England with his mother (he had felt somewhat underrated in England, as his poems had been published as *Daniel Jazz and Other Poems*), it was Masefield who arranged for his appearance at Oxford. Vachel invited me to visit him in Springfield in the family home near the State House, a house of the same type as Lincoln's, which was nearby. Dr. Lindsay, his father, had been a leading family physician of the city. We drove about the town, visited the Lincoln Monument with its mementos,

and then drove to New Salem, the reconstructed town on the Sangamon River where Lincoln had kept store.

Quite often after that, when Vachel was visiting in Indianapolis, he would drop in at our bookstore. One evening Mr. and Mrs. Hamilton invited friends in to hear him read. He always threw his whole soul into any reading that he was asked to give, though sometimes he puzzled, rather than moved, the hearers. One afternoon his aunt had arranged a reading for him at her women's group at the Central Christian Church. There were some two hundred in the main auditorium of the church with a big curving platform on which he walked up and down as was his usual form. The women were both puzzled and then delighted as he taught them to supply the chorus to his chants. Two of these chants went off well, but I was apprehensive when he swung them headlong into "The Queen of Sheba and King Solomon."

"King Solomon had 400 Oxen," chanted Vachel.

"We were those oxen," replied the women, 200 strong.

Then a few stanzas further on

"King Solomon he had 400 sweethearts," sang Vachel.

"We were those sweethearts," chanted the 200 good women.

Vachel gave me a copy of his *The Art of the Moving Picture*, his second book, as I remember it, with the Macmillan imprint (George Brett, Sr. was then busy bringing poets to his list). Vachel was the first person I know who gave motion pictures a place among the arts in historic perspective. He saw their prototypes in the Egyptian hieroglyphics. He would drop in at my office and get me to go with him round to the motion picture house on the

Circle. He watched pictures closely and commented critically. Some years later in New York he rang me up from his hotel and outlined a plan for us to study Egyptian hieroglyphics together through that winter. I backed away from the plan rapidly, but suggested that we spend that afternoon in the Egyptian Section of the Metropolitan Museum. When I got around to the hotel for this expedition, he put into my hands a little grammar of hieroglyphics for beginners which he had marked up with notes to simplify it for me before I had expressed lack of interest. To the other notes he had added, "With every good wish to my most stubborn and unbelieving recruit and most tender friend in all faithfulness. Any man named Gershom should go into this subject at least an hour." (I kept the book and another similar one which he gave me later. The Gershom of Exodus was the son of Moses.) We spent the afternoon at the Metropolitan, always a favorite place of my own, and he translated and explained many of the inscriptions. He had been at one time, it will be remembered, a docent at the Metropolitan. We saw O'Neill's "Emperor Jones" together. It pleased him greatly.

I had moved my business connections to New York in May, 1918, and my residence to Montclair, New Jersey. I was to see him quite frequently at my office at West 45th Street or at home as he passed through New York between lecture engagements.

One of these engagements was in Montclair in a series at Unity Church, a series that included not only Lindsay but Robert Frost, Carl Sandburg, Amy Lowell, Edna Millay, and others. His fee was \$125 for a lecture, but he sent a little printed folder ahead of him (this copy I have kept) [see number 38 in the Lindsay check list] which

explained that he never came for a lecture alone but to spend the day in the community and really get acquainted.

Accepting this program, I went at nine o'clock to the old Hotel Brevoort in New York where he usually stayed. When I went to the room he was leaning back for a loud laugh. "I have just learned," he said, "that this room has gone up two dollars a day since I was last here, and this because prohibition has closed the profitable bar. I, an Anti-Saloon League campaigner, have been enjoying over these years a subsidy from the liquor interests."

After breakfast, we went across on the Jersey ferry and he spoke at eleven o'clock to the high school students in Glen Ridge, then on to the thousand-pupil high school of Montclair. "At the teen-age level," he said to me, "you either have the whole group at attention or you have none." He had them all.

As he was introduced by the Principal in Montclair, a cheer leader stepped forward and called for the school yell with a "Lindsay! Lindsay! Lindsay!" at the end. "Had you thought," Lindsay began, "that a school cheer is among the most difficult forms of composition? It has to be a combination of words that will swing a whole crowd into common enthusiasm. There was one American who made a special study of this stirring of masses of people, and he built a steam piano to help him move a whole town at once. That was P. T. Barnum. I have written a poem to express the excitement which he could create. I will give you the "Kallyope Yell." He recited with vigor and held that group for nearly an hour, lifting them to wild applause at the end with "General Booth Enters Into Heaven."

In the afternoon we visited the elementary school where my children attended. Here he spoke to fifty or sixty from

the lower grades. "Here," he said to me, "we shall never hold all to attention at once. There will be here a wiggle, there a wiggle." He recited effectively, however, and in the end had them all chanting "The Sea Serpent" with him.

The evening of the main lecture was a sure success. He had spent a full day, as he had said he would, but what a day and what a drain such a day must have been on his emotional power.

At one time he broke his program of lecture engagements to spend a winter at a girls' college in Gulfport, Mississippi. The next I knew he was staying at a famous Davenport Hotel in Spokane where I visited him on two trips that I made to the Coast. On the first occasion, it was just after his marriage to Elizabeth, graduate of Mills College, and daughter of a Universalist minister then located in Spokane. At that time he had not yet given up his room at the hotel, and I was invited to use it. The walls of the room were pinned around with his drawings and printed copies of poems. He had set the town talking by being married in a blue shirt and starting off immediately on a tramp-trip to the mountains.

We visited the old John Graham bookstore, of course. His recent books, *Going-to-the-Sun* and *Going-to-the-Stars*, were not as suited to popular taste as had been his earlier books. Appleton, now his publisher, had been persuaded to use Lindsay's drawings in these books. Perhaps Macmillan had not wished to. Vachel had a good friend in town, Stoddard King, columnist on the local paper and nationally known as the author of the words of "The Long, Long Trail" and other good occasional verse. The marriage seemed a very happy one.

Two or three (?) years later I came through Spokane again and was a guest at the Lindsay home. Susan [Susan Doniphan, the first of the Lindsay's two children] had been born. There were friends in for the evening, and Vachel read two or three of his "dance" poems while a Mills College friend of Elizabeth improvised charming dance steps. This was the only time I had a chance to get his idea of dancing to poetry.

It did not seem to me that Spokane, in spite of its good will, was proving just the place for a home for Vachel, and I urged him to consider returning to the old homestead in Springfield, which I understood he owned with his sister in Cleveland. I had the feeling that his home town, which had once looked on him as the eccentric son of substantial folks, would now understand and welcome him. This proved so, and when later I again visited them, they were in the old homestead with Susan and Nicky [Nicholas Cave, the second child], and loyal friends entertained us at a lawn party. Vachel drove me out to a bridge that had been dedicated to him in a new county park.

It was on this visit that we had a long talk about his drawings. He had great interest in these and, of course, had had considerable art training. At one time he asked to get a publisher for a portfolio of these and I had worked on the project without finding any takers. I think he looked back to what Blake had done in two arts. I felt that the drawings just did not come off and that they were no help to the sale of his writings. The best showing they made was in the early pamphlet, *The Wedding of the Rose and the Lotus*. I argued that he should keep on with them as a food for his spirit but not to try to sell them. (Other earlier commissions he had urged upon me was to get book

publishers, then suffering from a severe printing strike in Eastern centers, to move the center of their activities to Springfield; and again, I think it was on the death or retirement of Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, to persuade the Massachusetts Republicans to run Amy Lowell for the Senate.)

I think now that he was hoping that the drawings could in some way add to his income. His lecturing or readings were everywhere popular, especially on college campuses, but it took many such fees to sustain a family, and the strain of his out-giving technique of readings must have been great. His royalties, as I look back on it, could not have been great. Macmillan had published the *Collected Poems*, but the best of these were in the *Selected Poems*. These had been put in Macmillan's Modern Readers' Series with green leather backs, and the custom was to pay a flat advance for books put into this series, and Vachel had probably received and used this. The same thing held for the children's poems in *Johnny Appleseed* which had been attractively illustrated. Vachel had asked me to make the selection for this latter, and thought that I had, and so wrote in my copy, but Macmillan had decided otherwise.

With little to expect from royalties (the new Appleton titles did not sell well), he had to put increased time on lecturing, thus burning himself out. I think this was what was happening, but none of us realized this as he seemed so busy and so cheerful.

The last time that I saw him was the Febraury before he died. He came to the office on 45th Street, New York, after I had left for home. He explained then that having wired Elizabeth all the money he had collected, he would

have to have help to get out to my house in Montclair. He was worn out, and we got him to bed where he put in good sleep and rest for three days. The fourth day was Sunday, the 12th day of February. Dr. Wiers, of the Unitarian church where Vachel had spoken ten years before, expressed to me the hope that Vachel might come to the morning service and recite "Abraham Lincoln Walks at Midnight." Vachel roused to the idea, and my last and most vivid picture of this poet crusader is as he walked down the aisle of Unity Church, head back, chin out, to declaim on that Lincoln's birthday his powerful plea for peace.

When he died on December 5, 1931, Elizabeth wired me to come on to Springfield for the funeral. To my lasting regret I could not then go. I did not know until later that it was suicide. Elizabeth went to a job which Dr. Aurelia Reinhart made for her at Mills College. Then she later moved with the children to Washington as head of a private school, then to Hartford, then to Cambridge to die in 1955 (?) of cancer.

Vachel Lindsay was a dedicated and exhilarating person. From his Campbellite inheritance he had an emotional power and loved to sway audiences to his rhythms. He is as impossible to classify as is Johnny Appleseed, and like Johnny Appleseed he scattered his message with a free hand. He was an experimenter with chants and dance poems. He had a life-time devotion to his native Springfield. No one who heard him at his best has ever forgotten the experience.

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