

AN EVENING WITH JAMES STEPHENS

By EDWARD ROBERTS

IT was my happy experience to spend an evening with James Stephens, Irish poet, story writer, and collector of Irish folk songs, when I was studying in Paris in 1920. I was with the voice teacher Theodore Bjorksten and was a member of the quartet at the Anglican Pro-Cathedral on the Avenue George V. I was living on the Rive Gauche at the house of one Madame Schultz, 253 Avenue Raspail. Her buxom daughter Estelle was preparing for "repetitions" at the Opera, and her violent soprano filled the house at all hours.

Anxious to escape this distraction, I learned from her accompanist that there was a small apartment close by at 11 rue Campagne Première. Strangely enough, this was leased by our own Robert W. Service, of sourdough fame, who had sub-let it to an "Irish monsieur", who was about to leave for Dublin. In order to find out who this was, I naturally went to the Café Dome on the Avenue Montparnasse, where all artists and writers congregated. I learned it was James Stephens, Irish civil servant, writer and ardent Sinn Feiner. The same day I went to the address, rang the bell, gave the usual "Cordon, s'il vous plait" to the concierge. She directed me to the tenant's door. I knocked and almost simultaneously appeared a man, short, slight and very Irish dark. When I mentioned my business, he courteously invited me to enter and introduced me to his children—a boy and a girl, aged nine and ten, solid, husky, and retiring.

Stephens sat on a rickety chair and chatted, his legs restlessly twining in and out of the rungs. I remember that he was neatly dressed in brown tweeds, immaculate white shirt, and a blue polka dot tie, well askew. He was interested in music, yes, and was I after singing any Irish airs? Did I know this one? And he began crooning softly, and soon seemed totally unaware of me. Dusk was falling, and the daughter quietly lighted some candles that were stuck in bottles. Suddenly he stopped—"But you will have a cup of tea?" Tea and *croissants* appeared. He began humming again; then said, like one coming out of a reverie, "Could you play that tune on the piano?" I went to the instrument, tried to follow him with quiet chords. I was not very successful, so I asked the daughter

for a sheet of paper; then I ruled some lines and wrote the notes I could capture. We tried again. It went better. Stephens would stand still, then walk weavingly. As I glanced over my shoulder, in the flickering candlelight he looked, with his fringed bald head and black eyes, for all the world a veritable leprechaun!

He sat down—rather, seemed to wilt down. The silence was intense. Then in a soft, lilting voice: “You would be wantin’ this place? We leave in the mornin’. A little whiskey?” We drank, and I said my goodbyes to the children and wished them all *bon voyage*. James Stephens sighingly almost tonelessly, wished me goodnight, handed me a newspaper-wrapped parcel, murmured “Memento”, and closed the door.

When I reached the street, I unwrapped the parcel. It was *The Crock of Gold*, inscribed. I still possess it.