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JOHN GEORGE STEPHENSON, III — COLLEAGUE,
EDUCATOR, SCHOLAR

A visitor of a dozen years ago approaching the main entrance of the recently completed Villanova Law School building might have been somewhat intrigued with the sight, in the faculty parking area in front of the building, of a stately station wagon bearing the patina of age and the bold letters on the side "Tusculum." Even more intrigued would he have been were he to know that the owner was not the master of an estate bearing that name, but rather one sufficiently interested in the classical tradition to christen his vehicle in remembrance of an ancient Italian city reputedly founded by the son of Ulysses. Now, for some years Tusculum has passed from the scene, and now, to the deep regret and sorrow of all connected with the Villanova Law School, its intriguing owner, Professor John George Stephenson, III, has also passed from the scene.

What sort of a man was John? Like all of us, he was many men, but he stands out most distinctly, to a colleague of a dozen years, as the model of the ideal trust officer. If one were to typecast for such a role, the person selected would radiate qualities of integrity, honesty, reliability, competence, conservatism, dedication, and compassion, all under such firm self-control as to be unflappable; the sort of a man to whom you could entrust the family fortune, as well as its secrets, and sleep well knowing they would be protected and preserved for future generations to enjoy. John was that ideal.

He came by these qualities through background and education. Born in Pittsburgh, he was graduated from Princeton where his scholarship merited him a Phi Beta Kappa key which, typical of his modesty, he never wore. His law degree was earned at the Harvard Law School, to be followed later by a scholarly stint at the Yale Law School as a Sterling Fellow. Prestigious was his education, and John wore the prestige proudly, never losing his fond association with these institutions. They were his many mothers and he their adoring son.

His professional life began in his native Pittsburgh in private practice which he left to accept employment with the People's Pittsburgh Trust Company, again an association which observably made a profound impression upon his character and outlook. With the advent of World War II he experienced, for the first time, the immense satisfactions of teaching, having been appointed respectively to the faculties of the Provost Marshall General's School and the Judge Advocate General's School of the Army. He was never again to return to the practice of law, his overwhelming love having become

legal education. This love he pursued at the Law School of the University of Miami, and later at the gestation, birth, and nurturing to adulthood of the Villanova Law School.

The area of his legal interest and scholarship was property, real and personal, ancient and modern. Over the years the courses he taught ran through the entire spectrum — from medieval interests to twentieth century condominiums. His writings in the field were, in the early period of his teaching career, considerable.¹ Later he gave his undivided attention to the education of his students — inside and outside of the classroom. His philosophy was summed up in his observation that education is the key to the advancement of civilization. The strong bonds of friendship and admiration in which he was held by the alumni give testimony to the success of his endeavors in this advance. The affection with which he was regarded by his students is evidenced by the fact that he was the first of the teaching faculty to be honored by having his portrait in oil hung on the walls of the Law School by way of a class gift.

But this gives us only a partial picture of the man. Only through day-by-day association could one come to appreciate his deeper qualities, his unfailing good humor and pleasant smile being the outward manifestations of the serenity of his disposition. Not without reason was he known and long remembered by his students in the military schools as "Smilin' Jack from Ann Arbor." It was a gloomy day, indeed, when his face did not wear a cherubic beam.

John was a man of culture, refinement, and taste. A devotee of the opera and symphony, he could not bring himself to risk exposure to the inanities of the television media until very recent years when he concluded that it had reached a somewhat hopeful state of incipient maturity. But then, should not a property man have a well developed sense of history and a similarly well developed skepticism of prescience? A deeply-dyed conservative when that philosophy was not particularly popular with his pedagogical colleagues, he showed himself to be a man of courage in staunchly defending his convictions in the face of widespread assault. His courage was also amply demonstrated when his physical strength and well-being were so heavily ravaged in his recent and final illnesses. His serenity in the face of these challenges was indeed inspiring.

But beyond everything else, John had a deep sense of humanity. For a number of years he served on the Law School committee for

1. See, e.g., Stephenson, *The Probate Jurisdiction of the War Department*, 1 *MIAMI L.Q.* 57 (1947); Stephenson, *Quarterly Synopsis of Florida Cases: Private Law*, 4 *MIAMI L.Q.* 47, 210, 344, 493 (1950); Stephenson, *Constitutional Inviolability of Possibilities of Reverter and Rights of Entry in Florida*, 6 *MIAMI L.Q.* 162 (1952); Stephenson, *Land Office Business in Pennsylvania*, 4 *VILL. L. REV.* 175 (1958).

readmission of students who had been excluded because of inferior work. His philosophy concerning second chances for such students was not always popular with the rest of his associates but certainly caused us all to re-evaluate our thinking and our approach to students and legal education. It was his firm belief, so ably defended and advanced, that once a student had been accepted into the Law School, and had in our judgment the qualifications to become a good lawyer, he should not be cast aside and his legal career abruptly ended, when, because of immaturity, or lack of inspiration, he had not done the work of which he was deemed capable. Rather, it was his position that such a student should be considerably treated, with any judgment on his career chances suspended until, by contact with life and the outside world during a leave of absence from legal studies, he matured sufficiently to be able to pick up the law books with confidence and with a mentality prepared to accept the challenges of legal study. John could not be convinced that a law career should be terminated because of lack of maturity or effort. I believe he felt the failure of a student was his failure as well as the failure of the rest of us teaching that student. He often chided us on our attempts to judge students by our own standards (based on the assumption, rightly or wrongly, that law professors have always been outstanding law students) rather than by the standard of the average student. His position we found to be particularly entitled to respect in view of his own excellent academic qualifications and the exceedingly high standards by which he judged his own conduct. On this battlefield John's position was not popular, but, on reflection, might well have been the wiser, more considerate, and more humane one.

And this was John Stephenson, very much the individualist. Where else might one expect to see law books carried in the green bag of law students of a generation or two ago? Where else a man stalking into his office wearing the blue beret of a Basque and carrying a walking stick with a steel tip of the type used by Swiss Alpinists to break crusty snow as they trample the mountains and vales? Where, indeed, now that he has gone? A gentleman of the old school whose like unmistakably we will never see again. We will miss John George Stephenson, III.

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