

ALFRED JOYCE KILMER

The name of the Catholic soldier-poet, Alfred Joyce Kilmer, continues to excite admiration not only because of the heroism he displayed in his generous death-sacrifice, but also because of the nobility of his whole character as revealed so delicately in his writings.

Let us briefly review his career. He was born at New Brunswick, N. J., December 6, 1886; was graduated from Rutgers College in 1904; received his A. B. from Columbia in 1906; began teaching the same year as instructor in Latin at Morristown High School, N. J.; some time after he became lexicographer; conducted for nine years the poetry department of the Literary Digest; finally, in 1913, he engaged as special writer for the New York Times Sunday Magazine. This year of 1913 marked the great turning-point in his life, for then it was that he professed, together with his wife, the Catholic faith, having hitherto adhered to the Episcopalian persuasion.

His conversion was thorough. Staunchly Catholic he remained, laboring heartily withal for the spread of God's kingdom through a literary mission of piety and mirth; giving thereby a new impetus to our Catholic journalism. When the United States went into the World War Mr. Kilmer volunteered in the "Sixty-ninth." In his "Apology" he tells us why he laid down his pen, grasped the gun, and with a farewell to wife and family, crossed the seas to fight:

"Is freedom a will-o-the-wisp
To cheat a poet's eye?
Be it phantom or fact, it's a noble cause
In which to sing and to die."

Sweetly did he sing, bravely did he fight, and manfully did he die in the cause of justice and freedom on August 1, 1918, his age being thirty-one years. Joyce Kilmer gladly endured like a true soldier the trying hardships and bitter sufferings of the battlefield, and his spirit of patient resignation is unmistakably evinced by the following "Prayer":

"My shoulders ache beneath my pack,
(Lie easier, Cross upon His back.)
Men shout at me who may not speak

¹ Kilmer, Joyce—Memoirs and Poems, Doran Co., N. Y., p. 132.

(They scourged Thy back and smote Thy cheek.)
Then shall my fickle soul soul forget
(Thy agony of Bloody Sweat?)”

And again :

“Lord, Thou didst suffer more for me
Than all the hosts of land and sea.
So let me render back again
This millionth of Thy gift. Amen.”

The worth of a man's life is measured by his deeds. In his generous death, then, will the sagacious find proof of Joyce Kilmer's fidelity to the sentiments he breathed into his poetry. “I see daily,” he said, “the expression of beauty in action instead of words. And to tell the truth I am not at all interested in writing now-a-days except in so far as writing is the expression of something beautiful.” Which is the key that unlocks for us the mind of our Catholic poet-hero.

Religion gave a purifying tinge to all his work; and it was his aim, principally, to delineate anew, to our edification, the masterpieces of the Divine Artist. Realizing with the Psalmist that “the heavens show forth the glory of God and the firmament declareth the works of His hands,” he thus addresses the stars:

“Gay stars, little stars, you are little eyes,
Eyes of baby angels playing in the skies.
Now and then a winged child turns his merry face
Down toward the spinning world—what a funny place!
Christ's troop, Mary's guard, God's own men,
Draw your swords and strike at hell, and strike again.
Every steel-born spark that flies where God's battles are
Flashes past the face of God and is a star.”²

Not only does the poet see the hand of God moving and lighting the tiny lanterns of the firmament, but in trees as well he recognizes the same divine hand:

“I think that I shall never see
A poem lovely as a tree.
A tree whose hungry mouth is prest
Against the earth's sweet flowing breast;
A tree that looks at God all day
And lifts her leafy arms to pray;
Poems are made by fools like me,
But only God can make a tree.”³

² *ibid.* 181.

³ *ibid.* 180.

Kilmer was undoubtedly a poet of nature. His verses awaken our unseeing souls to the appreciation of the beauties of creation in order to lead us to its Creator. "For by the greatness of the beauty of the creature," says the book of Wisdom, "the Creator of them may be seen, so as to be known thereby." Our soldier-poet had truly a spiritual sensibility for whatever was beautiful—as when he sang so touchingly of the destruction of the cathedral of Rheims:

"That which was splendid with baptismal grace
The stately arches soaring into space,
The transepts, columns, windows gray and gold,
The organ in whose tones the ocean rolled,
The crypts, of mighty shades the dwelling-places,
The Virgin's gentle hands, the Saints' pure faces
All, even the pardoning hands of Christ the Lord
Were struck and broken by the wanton sword
Of sacrilegious lust
O beauty slain, O glory in the dust!"⁴

If there is one prominent characteristic in Joyce Kilmer's poems, it is simplicity. This simplicity, at once so charming and so forceful, reminds one of the children's poet, James Whitcomb Riley. Witness his witty fun-making of the "Delicatessen":

"He never heard of chivalry,
He longs for no heroic times;
He thinks of pickles, olives, tea,
And dollars, nickels, cents and dimes."

Our self-sacrificing hero's heart in true Celtic fashion blended his joyful sentiments with the sorrowful, so that it is not surprising to note the transition from the lines just quoted to the following sympathetic tribute to Ireland's martyrs of Easter week, 1916:

"Lord Edward leaves his resting place,
And Sarsfield's face is glad and fierce.
See Emmet leap from troubled sleep
To grasp the hand of Padriac Pearse.
Romantic Ireland is not old,
For years untold her youth will shine.
Her heart is fed on heavenly Bread
The blood of martyrs is her wine."⁵

⁴ *ibid.* 165.

⁵ *ibid.* 164.

In speaking of Ireland, Kilmer pays a tribute to the favorite Irish devotion, the Rosary:

"There is one harp that any hand can play
And from its strings what harmonies arise.
There is one song that any can sing,
A song that lingers when all singing dies.
When on their beads our Mother's children pray
Immortal music charms the grateful skies."⁶

If some one should ask, how did Joyce Kilmer accomplish so much in such a brief span of human existence—writing so many poems, essays, and lectures, in should answer that the great secret of his success was this:

He knew the magic of Manhattan's busy mart
And humbly walked with Jesus Christ apart.

⁶ *ibid.* 201.

—Bro. Ceslaus McEniry, O. P.

ON FIRST VISITING A COAL MINE

(With apologies to Keats.)

Much have I wandered in the realms below,
And many dark and sombre kingdoms seen;
In Tartarus with Virgil have I been
And gazed upon Plutonian gloom and woe.
With laurelled Dante have I dared to go
Where Satan lords it o'er his sad demesne;
Yet never did I feel the awful scene
Ere entering this lightless mine and low:
Now feel I like a shivering ghost forlorn
Imploring sullen Charon's fickle aid—
Like Polydorus begging to be borne
Across the swollen Styx—and thus dismayed,
I watch the flaming jewels that adorn
This Hades where the gnome-men ply their trade.

—Bro. Chrysostom Kearns, O. P.