

Joyce Kilmer

In alien earth across a troubled sea
His body lies that was so fair and young,
His mouth is stopped, with half his songs unsung;
His arm is still, that struck to make men free.

THUS sang Kilmer in memory of his fellow poet, Rupert Brooke, and in these same words the admirers of the greatest of the "war poets" love to cherish his memory. Little did Joyce Kilmer think when, a few short months ago, he wrote these lines that he also would soon lie "in alien earth, with half his songs unsung." Nevertheless, it is true. One of the greatest American poets of the younger generation is dead and on account of his death the world mourns the loss of one who promised to be among the leading poets of the age, his country mourns the loss of a brave soldier and a noble citizen and the Catholic Church the loss of a devout and obedient son.

When one has read the poetry of Joyce Kilmer he needs nothing more to convince him of the noble character of the author. His deep religious spirit, his admiration for the simple and plain things of life, his love of liberty and freedom, his tender sympathy for the oppressed, his realization and gratitude for the gifts of God and his christian fortitude in trial and hardship are clearly expressed in his poems. Indeed, of no other poet can it be more truly said, "from the fulness of the heart the mouth speaketh." No one knows Kilmer better than he who is familiar with his poetry.

Though this young man of the world found the right path and started his journey upon it but a few short years ago, yet his religion received such a warm reception in his heart and so inspired his thoughts that

most of his poems are upon religious subjects. Perhaps the most beautiful of these is "Roses" in which he pictures the agonies of the Passion and the inexhaustible love of the Sacred Heart.

I went to gather roses and twine them in a ring
For I would make a posy, a posy for the King.
I got an hundred roses, the loveliest there be,
From the white rose vine and the pink rose bush and
from the red rose tree.

But when I took my posy and laid it at His feet
I found He had His roses a million times more sweet.
There was a scarlet blossom upon each foot and hand,
And a great pink rose bloomed from His side for the
healing of the land.

Now of this fair and awful king there is this marvel
told,
That he wears a crown of linked thorns instead of one
of gold.
Where there are thorns are roses, and I saw a line of
red,
A little wreath of roses around His radiant head.

A red rose is His Sacred Heart, a white rose is His face,
And His breath has turned the barren world to a rich
and flowery place.

He is the Rose of Sharon, His gardner am I,
And I shall drink His fragrance in Heaven when I die.

Then he shows his devotion and love for the Blessed Mother in such poems as the Annunciation and the Singing Girl in the latter of which he says of her whom he so loved :

In blue and silver drest,
She sang to God in Heaven,
And God within her breast.

Kilmer says that a main street to him always seemed "humaner" than any other street. So it is with himself, for he is no doubt "humaner" than most

poets of the present day. He writes of the simple things of life and he writes of them in a simple manner. Is it any wonder then that his poems are and will continue to be read by the simple people as well as by the educated? What other poet of today could write such simple yet touching lines as these which are found in his "Snowman in the Yard"?

Now I have only a little house, and only a little lot,
And only a few square yards of lawn, with dandelions
starred ;
But when winter comes, I have something there that
the Judge and the Hales have not,
And it's better worth having than all their wealth—it's
a snowman in the yard.

Among other such poems of this class no less worthy of mention are "Main Street Roofs and Houses."

Many were greatly surprised that Kilmer should abandon such a promising career by exchanging the pen for the sword. However, after reading his poems it is very easy to realize that it was no momentary enthusiasm nor any hope of glory that prompted his act. In his "Proud Poet" he is very profuse in his praises for the warrior, while in "The White Ships and the Red" he condemns the cruelty of the Huns and makes the unfortunate Lusitania speak in these beautiful lines:

Nay, said the scarlet visitor,
Though I sink through the sea,
A ruined thing that was a ship,
I sink not as did ye.
For ye met with your destiny
By storm or rock or fight,
As through the lagging centuries
Ye wear your robes of white.
I went not forth to battle,
I carried friendly men,
The children played upon my decks,

The women sang—and then—
 And then—the sun blushed scarlet
 And Heaven hid its face,
 The world that God created
 Became a shameful place.

And in "Easter Week" he manifests to us his tender sympathy for the oppressed and shows that even though the attempt of the weak be hopeless, yet if it is made with a will it is laudable and is never without its results. Here are a few lines taken from this poem:

"Romantic Ireland never dies !
 O'Leary lies in fertile ground,
 And songs and spears throughout the years
 Rise up where patriot graves are found.
 Immortal patriots newly dead
 And ye that bled in bygone years,
 What banners rise before your eyes ?
 What is the tune that greets your ears ?
 The young Republic's banners smile
 For many a mile where troops convene.
 O'Connell Street is loudly sweet
 With strains of Wearing' of the Green.

Perhaps it is because the gifts of God came so suddenly to Joyce Kilmer under the form of his conversion to the faith, but it is more probable that it is on account of the welcome, which these gifts received within his heart that he speaks so lovingly and with so much gratitude of the wonderful works of God. Thus in "Multiplication":

I take my leave, with sorrow, of Him I love so well ;
 I look my last upon His small and radiant prison-cell ;
 O happy lamp ! to serve Him with never-ceasing light ;
 O happy flame ! to tremble forever in His sight !
 I leave the holy quiet for the loudly human train
 And my heart that He has breathed upon is filled with
 lonely pain.

O King, O Friend, O Lover ! What sorer grief can be
In all the reddest depths of Hell than banishment from
Thee ?

And since his heart burned with such a love and
was overflowing with such a gratitude, we feel sure
that he will never more be forced to take his leave of
Him he loved so well. And again in "Thanksgiving"
he says:

Thank God for the bitter and ceaseless strife,
And the sting of His chastening rod !
Thank God for the stress and the pain of life,
And Oh, thank God for God !

While Kilmer was fighting to uphold his sublime
sentiments of patriotism, he wrote very few poems,
although, as he himself said, he had a rich supply of
memories. But while engaged in his holy task on the
war-torn fields of Flanders, he wrote one poem which
is perhaps one of his best, for in it he teaches us that
which few of us are able to accomplish—to be patient
under trial and suffering. To do this, he tells us we
need only to compare our sufferings with those of
Christ on the cross. Here is the poem, the title of
which is "Prayer of a Soldier in France":—

My shoulders ache beneath my pack,
(Lie easier, Cross, upon His back.)
I march with feet that burn and smart,
(Tread, Holy Feet, upon my heart.)
Men shout at me who may not speak,
(They scourged Thy back and smote Thy
cheek.)

I may not lift a hand to clear
My eyes of salty drops that sear,
Then shall my fickle soul forget
Thy Agony of Bloody Sweat ?
My rifle hand is stiff and numb,
(From Thy pierced palm red rivers come.)
Lord, Thou didst suffer more for me

Than all the hosts of land and sea,
So let me render back again
This millioneth of Thy gift, Amen.

We could thus continue and were to be just to this noble soldier-poet we needs must mention all his poetic works which space will not permit. However, let it suffice to say that in all his writings his own noble character is laid before us and we gaze upon it with eyes full of admiration, love, respect and reverence.

Many beautiful tributes both in prose and poetry have been written to the memory of Joyce Kilmer, but perhaps the most beautiful and most appropriate of all is the following by Elsa Barker :

The singers of a nation
Weep as one soul this day
Our glad child-hearted comrade
Has gone the patriot's way :
A grave in grave-encumbered France
Now wears his wreath of bay.

His youth and self forgotten
When the Great Summons came,
He knew the soldier's purpose
More than the poet's fame.
Does he know today a thousand throats
Choke as they speak his name ?

The candles in St. Leo's
Have flickered with dismay
Each noontime for the long year
He has not come to pray.
Today they burn with steady flame
To light him on his way.

When Joyce came home the white ships
Stirred with the moving tide—
The spectral ships he visioned
Washed clean and glorified.
But one red snip sinks deeper
Because of him who died.

C. N. H. '20.