John McCrae

An Essay in Character

By

Sir Andrew Macphail

I

"In Flanders Fields," the piece of verse from which this little book takes its title, first appeared in *Punch* in the issue of December 8th, 1915 At the time I was living in Flanders at a convent in front of Locre, in shelter of Kemmel Hill, which lies seven miles south and slightly west of Ypres. The piece bore no signature, but it was unmistakably from the hand of John McCrae.

From this convent of women which was the headquarters of the 6th Canadian Field Ambulance, I wrote to John McCrae, who was then at Boulogne, accusing him of the authorship, and furnished him with evidence. From memory—since at the front one carries one book only—I quoted to him another piece of his own verse, entitled "The Night Cometh"

"Cometh the night. The wind falls low,
The trees swing slowly to and fro;
Around the church the headstones grey
Cluster, like children stray'd away,
But found again, and folded so."

It will be observed at once by reference to the text that in form the two poems are identical. They contain the same number of lines and feet as surely all sonnets do. Each travels upon two rhymes with the members of a broken couplet in widely separated refrain. To the casual reader this much is obvious, but there are many subtleties in the verse which made the authorship inevitable. It was a form upon which he had worked for years, and made his own. When the moment arrived the medium was ready No other medium could have so well conveyed the thought.

This familiarity with his verse was not a matter of accident. For many years I was editor of the *University Magazine*, and those who are curious about such things may discover that one half of the poems contained in this little book were first published upon its pages. This magazine had its origin in McGill University, Montreal, in the year 1902. Four years later its borders were enlarged to the wider term, and it strove to express an educated opinion upon questions immediately concerning Canada, and to treat freely in a literary way all matters which have to do with politics, industry, philosophy, science, and art.

To this magazine during those years John McCrae contributed all his verse. It was there-

fore not unseemly that I should have written to him, when "In Flanders Fields" appeared in *Punch* Amongst his papers I find my poor letter, and many others of which something more might be made if one were concerned merely with the literary side of his life rather than with his life itself Two references will be enough. Early in 1905 he offered "The Pilgrims" for publication. I notified him of the place assigned to it in the magazine, and added a few words of appreciation, and after all these years it has come back to me.

The letter is dated February 9th, 1905, and reads "I place the poem next to my own buffoonery It is the real stuff of poetry How did you make it? What have you to do with medicine? I was charmed with it the thought high, the image perfect, the expression complete, not too reticent, not too full. Videntes autem stellam gavisi sunt gaudio magno valde. In our own tongue,—'slainte filidh.'" To his mother he wrote, "the Latin is translatable as, 'seeing the star they rejoiced with exceeding gladness.'" For the benefit of those whose education has proceeded no further than the Latin, it may be explained that the two last words mean, "Hail to the poet."

To the inexperienced there is something portentous about an appearance in print and some-

thing mysterious about the business of an editor A legend has already grown up around the publication of "In Flanders Fields" in *Punch* The truth is, "that the poem was offered in the usual way and accepted, that is all." The usual way of offering a piece to an editor is to put it in an envelope with a postage stamp outside to carry it there, and a stamp inside to carry it back. Nothing else helps.

An editor is merely a man who knows his right hand from his left, good from evil, having the honesty of a kitchen cook who will not spoil his confection by favour for a friend. Fear of a foe is not a temptation, since editors are too humble and harmless to have any There are of course certain slight offices which an editor can render, especially to those whose writings he does not intend to print, but John McCrae required none of these. His work was finished to the last point. He would bring his piece in his hand and put it on the table. A wise editor knows when to keep his mouth shut, but now I am free to say that he never understood the nicety of the semi-colon, and his writing was too heavily stopped.

He was not of those who might say,—take it or leave it, but rather,—look how perfect it is, and it was so. Also he was the first to recognize that an editor has some rights and pre-

judices, that certain words make him sick; that certain other words he reserves for his own use, —"meticulous" once a year, "adscititious" once in a life time. This explains why editors write so little. In the end, out of mere good nature, or seeing the futility of it all, they contribute their words to contributors and write no more.

The volume of verse as here printed is small. The volume might be enlarged, it would not be improved. To estimate the value and institute a comparison of those herein set forth would be a congenial but useless task, which may well be left to those whose profession it is to offer instruction to the young. To say that "In Flanders Fields" is not the best would involve one in controversy It did give expression to a mood which at the time was universal, and will remain as a permanent record when the mood is passed away

The poem was first called to my attention by a Sapper officer, then Major, now Brigadier He brought the paper in his hand from his billet in Dranoutre. It was printed on page 468, and Mr *Punch* will be glad to be told that, in his annual index, in the issue of December 29th, 1915, he has mispelled the author's name, which is perhaps the only mistake he ever made. This officer could himself weave the sonnet with

deft fingers, and he pointed out many deep things. It is to the sappers the army always goes for "technical material."

The poem, he explained, consists of thirteen lines in iambic tetrameter and two lines of two iambics each, in all, one line more than the sonnet's count. There are two rhymes only, since the short lines must be considered blank, and are, in fact, identical. But it is a difficult mode. It is true, he allowed, that the octet of the sonnet has only two rhymes, but these recur only four times, and the liberty of the sestet tempers its despotism,—which I thought a pretty phrase. He pointed out the dangers inherent in a restricted rhyme, and cited the case of Browning, the great rhymster, who was prone to resort to any rhyme, and frequently ended in absurdity, finding it easier to make a new verse than to make an end.

At great length—but the December evenings in Flanders are long, how long, O Lord!—this Sapper officer demonstrated the skill with which the rhymes are chosen They are vocalized. Consonant endings would spoil the whole effect. They reiterate O and I, not the O of pain and the Ay of assent, but the O of wonder, of hope, of aspiration, and the I of personal pride, of jealous immortality, of the Ego against the Universe. They are, he went on to expound, a

recurrence of the ancient question: "How are the dead raised, and with what body do they come?" "How shall I bear my light across?" and of the defiant cry "If Christ be not raised, then is our faith vain."

The theme has three phases: the first a calm, a deadly calm, opening statement in five lines, the second in four lines, an explanation, a regret, a reiteration of the first, the third, without preliminary crescendo, breaking out into passionate adjuration in vivid metaphor, a poignant appeal which is at once a blessing and a curse. In the closing line is a satisfying return to the first phase,—and the thing is done. One is so often reminded of the poverty of men's invention, their best being so incomplete, their greatest so trivial, that one welcomes what—this Sapper officer surmised—may become a new and fixed mode of expression in verse.

As to the theme itself—I am using his words what is his is mine, what is mine is his—the interest is universal. The dead, still conscious, fallen in a noble cause, see their graves over-blown in a riot of poppy bloom. The poppy is the emblem of sleep. The dead desire to sleep undisturbed, but yet curiously take an interest in passing events. They regret that they have not been permitted to live out their life to its normal end. They call on the living to finish

their task, else they shall not sink into that complete repose which they desire, in spite of the balm of the poppy Formalists may pro-test that the poet is not sincere, since it is the seed and not the flower that produces sleep. They might as well object that the poet has no right to impersonate the dead. We common folk know better We know that in personating the dear dead, and calling in bell-like tones on the inarticulate living, the poet shall be enabled to break the lightnings of the Beast, and thereby he, being himself, alas! dead, yet speaketh, and shall speak, to ones and twos and a host. As it is written in resonant bronze VIVOS . VOCO . MORTUOS PLANGO FULGURA FRANGO words cast by this officer upon a church bell which still rings in far away Orwell in memory of his father—and of mine.

By this time the little room was cold. For some reason the guns had awakened in the Salient. An Indian trooper who had just come up, and did not yet know the orders, blew "Lights out,"—on a cavalry trumpet. The sappers work by night. The officer turned and went his way to his accursed trenches, leaving the verse with me.

John McCrae witnessed only once the raw earth of Flanders hide its shame in the warm scarlet glory of the poppy Others have watched

this resurrection of the flowers in four successive seasons, a fresh miracle every time it occurs. Also they have observed the rows of crosses lengthen, the torch thrown, caught, and carried to victory The dead may sleep. We have not broken faith with them.

It is little wonder then that "In Flanders Fields" has become the poem of the army The soldiers have learned it with their hearts, which is quite a different thing from committing it to memory It circulates, as a song should circulate, by the living word of mouth, not by printed characters. That is the true test of poetry,—its insistence on making itself learnt by heart. The army has varied the text, but each variation only serves to reveal more clearly the mind of the maker The army says, "*Among* the crosses", "felt dawn *and* sunset glow", "*Lived* and were loved." The army may be right it usually is.

Nor has any piece of verse in recent years been more widely known in the civilian world. It was used on every platform from which men were being adjured to adventure their lives or their riches in the great trial through which the present generation has passed Many "replies" have been made. The best I have seen was written in the *New York Evening Post*. None but those who were prepared to die before

Vimy Ridge that early April day of 1916 will ever feel fully the great truth of Mr Lillard's opening lines, as they speak for all Americans

"Rest ye in peace, ye Flanders dead.
The fight that ye so bravely led
We've taken up."

They did—and bravely They heard the cry —"If ye break faith, we shall not sleep."

II

If there was nothing remarkable about the publication of "In Flanders Fields," there was something momentous in the moment of writing it. And yet it was a sure instinct which prompted the writer to send it to *Punch*. A rational man wishes to know the news of the world in which he lives, and if he is interested in life, he is eager to know how men feel and comport themselves amongst the events which are passing. For this purpose *Punch* is the great newspaper of the world, and these lines describe better than any other how men felt in that great moment.

It was in April, 1915 The enemy was in the full cry of victory All that remained for him was to occupy Paris, as once he did before, and to seize the Channel ports. Then France, England, and the world were doomed. All winter the German had spent in repairing his plans, which had gone somewhat awry on the Marne. He had devised his final stroke, and it fell upon the Canadians at Ypres. This battle, known as the second battle of Ypres, culminated on April 22nd, but it really extended over the whole month.

A CHAT WITH SCYLLA AND CHARYBDIS.

I AM an uncle. I don't say it in any boasting spirit, but simply to show you that I have a stake in the country. I found my nieces the other evening in the nursery.

Lillah, looking distressingly bored, was lying face downwards on the floor. Phyllis was putting the hands of the clock back, lest, as the ancients had it, bed-time anticipate her.

My arrival was not the signal for a furore.

"Here's Uncle James," said Lillah, without emotion, while Phyllis said nothing at all.

Luckily I knew the way to rouse them.

"Good evening, babies," I said.

When the uproar had died down they decided that I might be of some use.

"Tell us about the War," said Lillah.

"Yes," echoed Phyllis.

"The War," I began, "is a very terrible thing."

"That's what Mummie says," said Phyllis with an air of reproach.

I apologised for having pilfered some-one else's *mot*.

"And Daddy says," added Lillah, with obvious effort, "it's a disgrace to sillyvisation."

"And he says, damme, he wishes he was a bit younger," said Phyllis with immense gravity.

"Daddy says," Lillah went on, "that we are fighting for the flag. Are we?"

"Certainly," I answered.

"Do the Germans want our flag?"

"They want everything."

"Why couldn't we give them one like it?" asked Phyllis with deadly common-sense.

"Because they can't even keep their own clean," said I.

"They could send it to the wash," pondered Lillah.

"They will have to," I answered grimly.

"Daddy says we are fighting for sillyvisation too. Are we?"

"Your father," I said, "is always right."

"I know," said Phyllis gravely. "I wanted to see if you knew."

"Your Uncle also," I said with hauteur, "is seldom wrong."

There was a ponderous silence.

"Mummie told Daddy," said Lillah, "that you weren't ever very bright."

"Oh, indeed!" said I. I shall say a few hard words to Margaret about that —putting ideas into the children's heads.

"And when we've won," said Phyllis, "will we have sillyvisation?"

"I hope so."

"What will it be like—a fairy-tale?"

"Very probably."

"Daddy says it's freedom. What's freedom?

"Freedom," I said "is—er—being able to do what you like."

"Then won't there be any policemen after the War?"

"Oh yes, we shall keep the police-men."

"Why?"

"Because the streets would look so bare without them."

They looked at me with suspicion; even at that tender age they could not believe in an æsthetic ratepayer.

"Do people like the War?" said Phyllis.

"No," I answered. That was easy.

"Not even the Germans?"

"I think not."

"But if nobody made the big guns there wouldn't be any war?"

"Er—no," I said.

"Then why do people——?"

"Well—er——" I stopped. I could see that my last rags of reputation for brightness were going. I was in the Uncle's last ditch.

"When you are older," I began; but Lillah interrupted.

"And why don't policemen take the people who make the guns?" It was Phyllis's shot.

"And if nobody wants the War what makes it go on?"

"And if it's a disgrace," queried Lillah, "why does Daddy want to go?"

"And why," began Phyllis; but I put up my hand.

"One day," I said, "I must tell you the story of SOCRATES, who had to drink a very nasty medicine called hemlock."

"What for?" said Lillah.

"For asking too many questions," I said.

"Were the people who gave it to him the people who didn't know the answers?" said Lillah.

"Yes, they were," I said, as I rose. I took out my watch.

"Good heavens, it's after bedtime!"

"Does your watch say right?" said Phyllis.

"It sometimes underestimates, but it never exaggerates," I said. At that moment Daddy himself appeared.

"Good-night chicks," he said. "Has Uncle James been amusing you?"

"We've been playing with him," said Lillah with gravity.

And if ever there was a *double entendre* I'll swear it was there. And so they went to bed.

"I don't know," I said to George as we went downstairs, "why you called your daughters Lillah and Phyllis; their real names are Scylla and Charybdis."

But George is a dull man, and simply said that Charybdis Watson would have sounded ridiculous.

SEASONABLE (?) NOVELTIES.

A CATALOGUE of Christmas toys contains a Mechanical Motor-accident and a Realistic Trench-warfare model, "with apparatus for Poison-Gas." Surely this method of preventing child-ren's minds from dwelling upon the cheery side of life is capable of further extension, as under:—

THE FROZEN-PIPE DOLL'S HOUSE.—Charmingly-furnished six-room House, with complete model system of Leaking Pipes. Real Water can be made to run down the walls. Paper peels off, etc. Endless Fun for Young and Old. 7*s*. 6*d*. and 10*s*. 6*d*.

Larger, with workable Kitchen-boiler Explosion, and death of Cook. 15*s*.

THE INFLUENZA DOLL.—Exquisite model, with hand-painted Red Nose, dressed in real blankets. On being squeezed the Doll emits a cough similar to that produced by severe bronchial congestion. 6*s*.

Superior quality, with Double-Pneu-monia effect. 8*s*. 6*d*.

ELEGANT MODEL CINEMA THEATRE, with Igniting Film and real Flames. Just the toy for a Thoughtful Child. Complete in box, with four refills of combustible Model Audience. 21*s*.

THE LITTLE DENTIST.—Entire outfit, including miniature Forceps, Gags, Gas-bags, etc. Will keep an entire Nursery happy for hours. Help Baby with his Teething. 5*s*. 6*d*. the set (or, including model Electric-drill and old Illustrated Papers for Waiting-room, 12*s*.).

IN FLANDERS FIELDS.

IN Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.

"Will this war bring us to Kidderminster?"
English Churchman.

Well, there are worse places than Kid-derminster.

In Flanders Fields

In Flanders fields the poppies grow
Between the crosses, row on row
That mark our place: and in the sky
The larks still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved, and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch. be yours to hold it high!
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.

John McCrae

Facsimile of an autograph copy of the poem "In Flanders Fields"
This was probably written from memory as "grow" is used in place of "blow" in the first line