

# THE BOOKMAN

February, 1920

## FATHER DUFFY'S STORY

**A**MONG war books, there are some which make their strongest appeal to men who, in a big or little way, were part of the A. E. F.—books which, by a potent magic, pick them up bodily out of here and now and bear them back across the Atlantic in the swarming transports of memory. Such a one is "Father Duffy's Story", a book which carries A. E. F. readers back to lousy, old French barns, to chill, soupy, Argonne mud and, at last, to a wintry Rhineland, held hostage in gingerly fashion by its diffident conquerors. It is a delightfully characteristic narrative by the priest whose itinerant parish, whose wildly itinerant parish, was the 165th Infantry, that group of Irishmen from New York who put the streak of green in the Rainbow.

Characteristic! Well, something of Father Duffy's shrewdness and a little of his all-steadying serenity is in this book of his memories. Then it is rich in his sympathy for the hurt and lonely, strong with his pride in the brave. And it is full to the brim with his quiet laughter, the unruly laughter that lurks even in the dread chapters of the story. Also, it is no more than half fancy that a bit of brogue clings to the more stirring passages, like morsels of egg-shell to a chicken.

In the regimental history, of which Sergeant Joyce Kilmer had completed only the preliminary chapters when he was killed, there occurs just at the end



this tale of the first raid by the men of the 165th:

"It is a matter of no military importance but of deep interest to every one who sympathizes with the 69th Regiment and knows its history and traditions, that when the raiding party marched up past Regimental Headquarters on their way to the trenches, there fluttered from the bayonet of one of the men a flag—a green flag marked in gold with the harp that has for centuries been Ireland's emblem—the harp without the crown—and inscribed 'Erin Go Bragh!' This flag had been given to Sergeant Evers of the Band and by a stranger—an old woman who burst through the great crowd that lined the streets when the Regiment marched from the armory to the dock on their journey to Camp Mills and, crying and laughing at the same time, thrust it into his hands. The flag went 'over the top' twice that night, and for memory's sake the name 'Rouge Bouquet' was embroidered on it. Later, the embroidered names became so numerous that the design of the flag almost disappeared. Who the woman was who gave the Regiment this appropriate tribute is unknown. Perhaps it was Kathleen ni Houlihan herself."

Well, it may be said that Father Duffy carried this flag all the way through his book until, back in New York once more, all the men shook hands, looked down a moment and then scattered to the four winds. The book itself is, of course, the one which was to have been written by Kilmer, whose chapters now serve merely as an appendix. Naturally the task fell to Father Duffy, and all the men in the regiment would have had it so.

His story is properly parochial, a storehouse of names, a book for the families of the regiment's dead, and yet the names are so deftly distributed that the casual reader is not crushed by them. The book is skilfully kept from reading like the Dublin telephone book. It remains an eminently readable, plainspoken history of one of the most picturesque, characterful, and likable regiments in the A. E. F.—a great regiment, all in all, which, in its latest adventures, so honored its old tradition that its new history belongs on any Five Foot Shelf of the war.

The flavor of it you can taste for yourself from such a typical passage as this:

It was a beautiful soft June night. No moon, but the French highway rolled out before us dull white in the gloom, as if its dust were mingled with phosphorus. The men trudged along behind—joking and singing—it was the beginning of the march. After a couple of hours, we entered Chalons, a dream city by night.

Or this:

I came to Grand and thus made the acquaintance of the establishment of Madame Gerard at the sign of the Golden Boar. I have seen a M. Gerard but, as in all well-regulated families, he is a person with no claim to figure in a story. I am in love for the first time, and with Madame Gerard. Capable and human and merry, used to men and their queer, irrational, unfeminine ways, and quite able to handle them, hundreds at a time. A joke, a reprimand, and ever and always the final argument of a good meal—easy as easy. She reigns in her big kitchen, with its fireplace where the wood is carefully managed but still gives heat enough to put life and savor into the hanging pots and the sizzling turnspits. Odors of Araby the Blest! And she serves her meals with the air of a beneficent Grand Dame of the age when hospitality was a test of greatness. Private or General—it makes no difference to her. The same food and the same price and the same frank, motherly humor—and they all respond with feelings that are common to all. I sit before the kitchen fire while she is at work, and talk about the war and religion and our poor soldiers so far from their mothers, and the cost of food and the fun you get out of life, and when I get back to my cold room I go to bed thinking of how much I have learned and that I can see at last how France has been able to stand this war for three and a half years.

You can learn from that single paragraph a good deal about three great institutions—France, the A. E. F., and Father Duffy.

Then it is a satisfaction to find his story candid, to find that he is not one of those censored historians who feel obliged to pretend that everything worked smoothly, that mistakes were never, never made. Certain episodes in the great adventure of the Rainbow, which were rather comically ignored in a recently published history of that splendid division, are discussed frankly enough by Father Duffy. He tells the story of the recall blown too late to delay the charge across the Ourcq; he makes no bones about the collapse of pay and supplies; and he goes at length into that bitter Argonne business when so many men were killed and wounded, and when the brigade and regimental commanders were summarily removed by a corps commander, with whom Father Duffy very obviously does not agree.

It is best to have these things gone into. Indeed it is to be hoped that the entire overseas achievement will be unsparingly scrutinized, that America will learn whatever lessons can be learned from her mistakes in France.

Of course, the more exuberant onlookers will grow despondent then. Realizing that much of what was said and written at the time was exaggerated (and some of it sheer buncombe), they will begin to wonder if none of their pride and enthusiasm of 1918 was justified. Then they will go down into the valley of reaction and wish to forget about the war.

Yet it would be a pity if we lost, even for a little while, our belief in the great spirit of our troops. Whatever the cost of unpreparedness, whatever the mistakes of the higher command, whatever the streaks of corrupting selfishness and indolence to be found here and there, there was evidenced again and again by the rank and file that dauntless bravery which no chronicler could exaggerate and which no later critic has any right to forget. Our industrial age, in time of need, called upon its multitudinous youth to show a courage as high and pure and self-forgetting as men showed when the world was young. They showed it. To that courage, one of their priests bears witness a hundred times in a narrative that warms the heart.



[OldMagazineArticles.com](http://OldMagazineArticles.com)