

Two Women, a Few Poems, and God

by R. Kenton Craven

Reality is outrageous, astonishing, if we would only look with the eyes of poets and saints, and see it as it is. When we look on things as diverse as cabbages and kings with the eyes of the Kingdom, we see miracle upon miracle, sermons in stones and angels on everything. That is one of the messages of the beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount, and it has inspired the visions of Christian poets and philosophers for two thousand years. It is as fresh today as when it appeared in parables on mustard seeds and pearls, for Christianity, as G. K. Chesterton pointed out, is the only old religion that is always new. It is always new, because it is always giving new eyes to see through.

These thoughts crossed my mind as I drove away from Caney Creek in Knott County, Kentucky, after a visit to Alice Lloyd College at Pippa Passes, Appalachia, for all its bleakness and harshness, has somehow been a land that calls to visionaries and seers. Many of these, perhaps even most, retire defeated and overwhelmed. But where the seeds of their visions take root and grow, fantastic things appear and blossom like orchids and mushrooms in abandoned coal mines.

I first saw Alice Lloyd College at midnight when I drove through the narrow hollow of Caney Creek on my way to the Topmost Mine disaster (see *The Mountain Spirit*, March-April 1982). Suddenly, out of nowhere, the college was upon us, strange little old buildings and large impressive new ones, all glowing eerily through the mountain fog and mist. And just as suddenly, it was gone and there were only the walls of the hollow and the darkness of winter. The thousands of tunneled hollows of Appalachia reasserted themselves, and we blinked in wonder.

The wonder did not diminish when I returned to look at the college again for this issue. The *Miracle on Caney Creek*, President of the college Jerry C. Davis called it in his book on Miss June Buchanan, co-founder of the college. I looked for the miracle in the daylight, and was not disap-

pointed. The miracle of this little college in the middle of nowhere is not only that it exists, but that it is the kind of thing that it is. Picture a mountain college, or for that matter, any college, as you would like to see it exist. That's right, put *The Mountain Spirit* down for a moment, and imagine such a place.

If your imagination is as tame as my own, you may not be prepared for the wild quality of Alice Lloyd College—wild, that is, in the sense of freshness and originality. What may strike you first about the patch of soil where Alice Lloyd and June Buchanan labored for nearly a century is the names one hears: the summonser, Macedonias, the Caney Childen Crusaders, the Hunger Din, the Founder's Shack, the Eagle's Nest, Hope Cottage, Wellesley Hall and the Harvard Building, the Firing Line (no relation to Bill Buckley), Greenfly, the Purpose Road, and the Stream of Plenty. Past and present, these names live on at that even stranger name Pippa Passes (or PippaPass, as it was once called). One "passes" into this world of strange names from a surrounding countryside dominated by places like Mousie, Dwarf, Sassafras, Possum Trot, and Troublesome Creek.

Naming, it is said, is the first function of all true poetry. If that is the case, here is poetry in abundance, or rather, here are two kinds of poetry that clash and blend with one another in reckless abandon. But poetry names things, and there is the real miracle of Alice Lloyd College.

Picture a college that takes no federal or state aid, where Kentucky mountain students from seven counties attend free of charge, where dormitory students do not cohabit, where there are rules and codes and moral standards, where



ALICE LLOYD ARCHIVES

Right, Dr. June Buchanan points to one of the modern buildings that grew from the seed planted on Caney Creek in the early part of the century.



From top down, Caney Creek Community Center in the early days; President Davis and Miss June chat with faculty at the daily luncheon in The Hunger Din. Below, left to right: President Jerry Davis reads The Mountain Spirit; Miss June greets a new student at Wellesley Hall in the early days; a modern day coed works her way through Alice Lloyd College.



defeat the culture of the mountains by meeting it head on; according to Jeemes Akers, history professor at Alice Lloyd College, she promised not to interfere with the mountain man's "politics, religion, or moonshine."

Instead, the vision of Alice Lloyd emphasized those very 19th century social and ethical values which the mountaineer had not experienced in his cultural history—the duty to the world beyond the clan and the hollow, the personal obligation to grow in knowledge and ability, and the call to develop oneself in reason and morality. To accomplish this staggering task, Alice Lloyd and June Buchanan turned where all true educators know they must: to the children.

If England is, as G. K. Chesterton wrote, "something wonderful—a piece of chalk," then Alice Lloyd College is equally remarkable—a college founded by two women armed only with a few poems and God.

Though Alice Lloyd has long been buried on a hillside on Caney Creek, Dr. June Buchanan, or "Miss June" as she is known here, remains a driving force at the place where the two women's dreams took root and thrived. From her tiny office in "The Eagle's Nest," she now fondly recalls dozens of memories of the days when Caney Creek Community Center began to spread the doctrine "that all service ranks the same with God" to hundreds of future mountain leaders. "We never meant to start a college," Miss June recalls. Rather it was a case of one thing leading to another—the community center, then dozens of mountain schools, then a junior college, and now a regular four year liberal arts college founded on the same generous philosophy of service.

As Miss June, the doughty co-founder, now looks back on her three quarters of a century of service on Caney Creek, she sums up the living "miracle." In her quiet dignity and stateliness, she moves and speaks as a Dowager Empress, a Victorian Lady. More, she underlines another outrageous fact about Alice Lloyd College—it is a school founded upon poetic vision. In the fine elocution which impressed thousands of mountain children with the existence of higher things, she recites with great pleasure the poems of Browning and Kipling which formed the philosophy that made a college possible. If England is, as G. K. Chesterton wrote, "something wonderful—a piece of chalk," then Alice Lloyd College is equally remarkable—a college founded by two women armed only with a few poems and God.

students work and study hard, where drugs and alcohol are not permitted, where students of all denominations (and no denomination) are admitted and permitted to practice their religion without censure, where all agree on a common purpose in education and pursue it with dedication, where the President and the Co-founder eat lunch daily with the students and faculty, and share prayer and announcements with them, where a spirit of family characterizes its challenging educational program, and where the values of self-reliance, spiritual purpose, free enterprise, and hard work are taught and encouraged without apology.

The strange, unAppalachian names of the Alice Lloyd tradition do, then, match an equally astonishing reality perched on the mountainsides of Knott County. Here is a non-sectarian college based on Christian ethics which seeks to develop the character and minds of its students in harmony with some of the major traditions of Western and Christian culture. If the college seems to speak with a strangely discordant voice in the chorus of modern educational assumptions, that does not bother tough, single-minded Jerry Davis, the president of the college. "In my generation, everything was wrong with America, and it was 'do your own thing.' I personally stand diametrically opposed to that kind of thing, and I believe it is on the wane, that we are indeed 'getting back to basics' in America. Like many of these students at Alice Lloyd, I worked my way up from poverty, and I believe in the values that Alice Lloyd teaches. This school has flourished in the last five years, and it will continue to thrive as long as it does not depart from the traditional philosophy taught by Alice Lloyd and Miss June Buchanan."

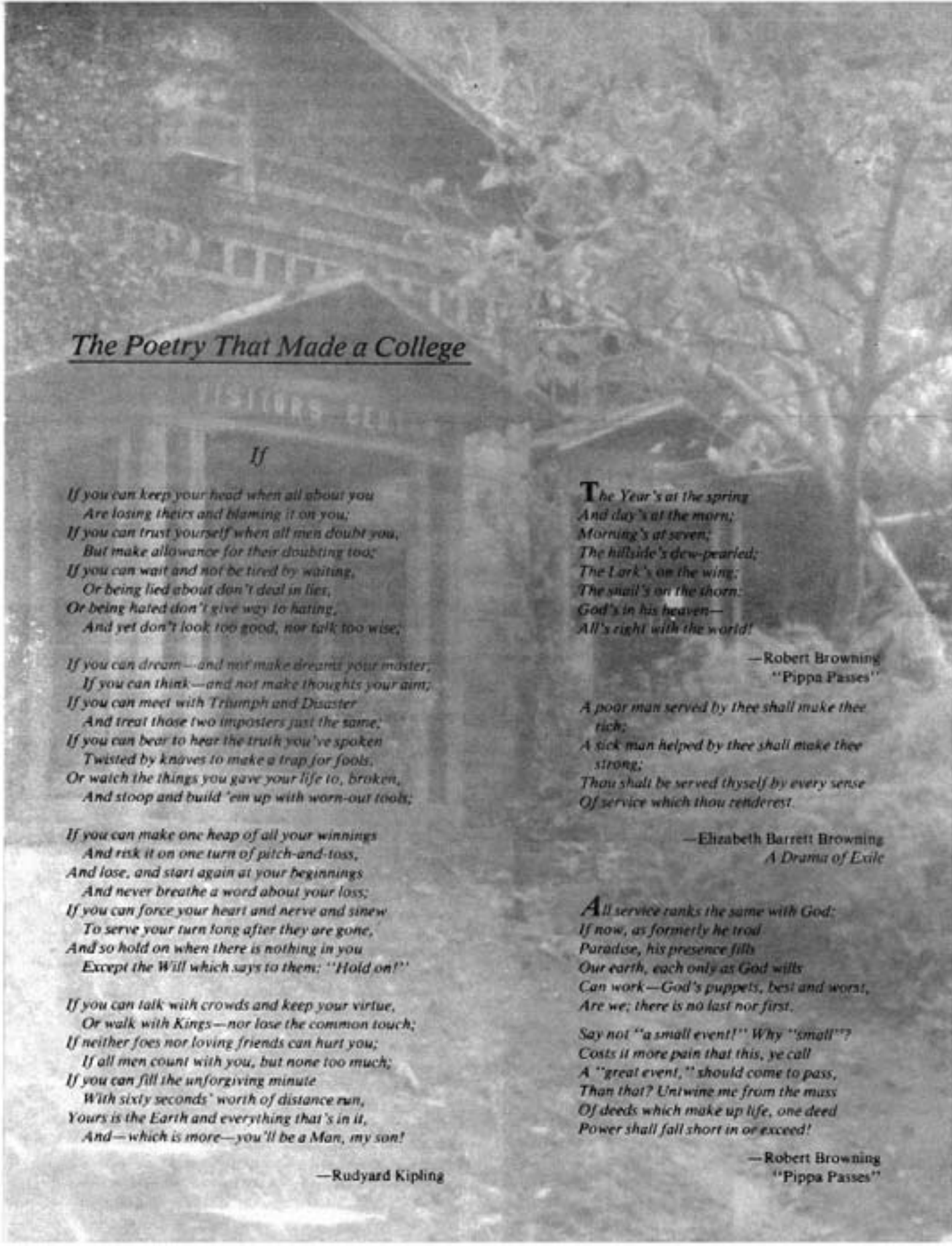
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Miss June Buchanan in her college days.

A college that takes a firm stand on some basic assumptions is a rare thing today, indeed. But it seems that the philosophy of "doing your own thing" has always been around, as a challenge to perennial truths. When Alice Lloyd and June Buchanan came to Caney Creek (1916 and 1919) to teach their gospel of reverence for God and service to mankind, there was a similar attitude common in the air: it was "do what you personally long for," as Miss June now recalls. Opposed to that philosophy "because it might hurt someone else," Miss June taught generations of students on Caney Creek that they must form a conscience based on duty, purpose, and consecrated goals. That that philosophy continues seventy-five years later as the heart of a college that forms leaders for Appalachia is the true miracle of Caney Creek, the kind of miracle that civilization thrives on.

When Alice Lloyd and June Buchanan, two young graduates of Radcliffe and Wellesley colleges in New England, set foot on Caney Creek, they experienced the shock of stepping backwards in time. The several bullets fired in their general direction on several occasions only punctuated a general suspicion and hostility—some believed them to be German agents. The mountaineers on Caney Creek, like Appalachia in general, had been cut off from the rest of America for over a hundred and twenty-five years. Their mentality was seventeenth century, or earlier, while the women they were meeting represented the best of 19th century genteel culture. Alice Lloyd realized quickly that there was no wisdom in trying to



The Poetry That Made a College

If

*If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you;
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
But make allowance for their doubting too;
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or being lied about don't deal in lies,
Or being hated don't give way to hating,
And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise;*

*If you can dream—and not make dreams your master;
If you can think—and not make thoughts your aim;
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two imposters just the same;
If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken
Twisted by knives to make a trap for fools,
Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,
And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out tools;*

*If you can make one heap of all your winnings
And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,
And lose, and start again at your beginnings
And never breathe a word about your loss;
If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
To serve your turn long after they are gone,
And so hold on when there is nothing in you
Except the Will which says to them: "Hold on!"*

*If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
Or walk with Kings—nor lose the common touch;
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you;
If all men count with you, but none too much;
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And—which is more—you'll be a Man, my son!*

—Rudyard Kipling

*The Year's at the spring
And day's at the morn;
Morning's at seven;
The hillside's dew-pearled;
The Lark's on the wing;
The snail's on the shorn—
God's in his heaven—
All's right with the world!*

—Robert Browning
"Pippa Passes"

*A poor man served by thee shall make thee
rich;
A sick man helped by thee shall make thee
strong;
Thou shalt be served thyself by every sense
Of service which thou tenderest.*

—Elizabeth Barrett Browning
A Drama of Exile

*All service ranks the same with God:
If now, as formerly he trod
Paradise, his presence fills
Our earth, each only as God wills
Can work—God's puppets, best and worst,
Are we; there is no last nor first.*

*Say not "a small event!" Why "small"??
Costs it more pain that this, ye call
A "great event," should come to pass,
Than that? Untwine me from the mass
Of deeds which make up life, one deed
Power shall fall short in or exceed!*

—Robert Browning
"Pippa Passes"