

## Alfie Lambe

Strange to say, I think that I have never before given a formal talk about Alfie Lambe. Frequently of course he has been the subject of conversation among us; to those who knew him he remains a vivid image. Never has his name been mentioned without causing profound ripples.

Just now he comes up in a new setting. A little while ago His Eminence Cardinal Umberto Mozzoni, who was Apostolic Nuncio to Argentina at the time of Alfie Lambe's envoyship there, revisited that country and declared his astonishment that the Cause of Alfie Lambe had not been introduced there. It is understood that he expressed himself strongly on this point, insisting that Alfie appeared to possess the quality which would justify that step.

After his distinguished career as Papal Nuncio, Archbishop Mozzoni returned to Rome where he was elevated to the Cardinalate and appointed to the membership of many of the Supreme Congregations which handle the affairs of the Church. One of these is the congregation which has charge of canonisations. This would add weight to his recommendations.

Over and above that, His Eminence was personally acquainted with Alfie, saw him at work and had many interviews with him and discussed him with the nuncios and ecclesiastical authorities of all the other South American countries in which Alfie worked. Furthermore it was he who gave the envoy the final blessing as he was about to die.

His Eminence's expression of astonishment that Alfie's cause had not been introduced has apparently been effective. The Legion has been stirred into activity and a committee has been formed to promote the matter. Just now Maria Sofia del Prado, who has been appointed to the presidency of that body, has visited Dublin to acquaint us with these happenings and to ask for the co-operation of Concilium. When she left here, it was to proceed to Rome in order to discuss the matter with Cardinal Mozzoni.

I make the following observations. There is no element of surprise to us here in the proposition of the cardinal. We have always believed that Alfie died in the odour of sanctity and that every place he visited had registered the same judgement about him. We took it as a matter of course that something would be done about it. Actually the moment he died a prayer for his elevation was produced bearing the approbation of Cardinal de la Torre, Archbishop of Quito, Ecuador.

It might be expected that the Concilium would have observed that time was slipping by without formal action being taken and would institute inquiries. But life in the Concilium is lived at a hectic pace. It was presumed that the matter was moving at the deliberate rate appropriate to its importance. So it is with a sense of shock that we are brought to realise that everyone has been waiting on everybody else and that nothing tangible has been done.

It is to be hoped that now we have been wakened up, we will grant very wholeheartedly that co-operation which Maria Prado has requested. It is due from us because we are the main custodians of Alfie's name. Not of us must it be cynically said that men's memories are not a monument.

The progress of the Cause of Edel Quinn has caused her to live vividly on. We owe to Alfie that continuance of life. So we must now do what lies in our power to bring him to notice. We must pray, and we must make him known in such ways as we can. How can people be interested in him except that they know something about him?

### **The Firtel Biography**

An effective way of doing this is to introduce people to the biography of him written by Hilda Firtel, which is a jewel. Hilda was our former envoy to Germany, going there immediately after the war and spreading the Legion over the country. Her own life has been one of rare accomplishment.

Naturally I have just been stimulated to take up that Life and go through it again. I rise up with a renewed appreciation of the subject and of the admirable way in which the author treats it. When you have read it, you will know why Alfie was able to stir hearts as he did, and to cover South America with the legionary army, and incidentally to win such veneration. I leave to the book the task of telling the story of Alfie Lambe.

### **Following the Call**

The first time I saw Alfie, he was only one in a crowd. I did not meet him. He was a novice in the Christian

Brothers house at Marino, North Dublin, and I was giving an address on the Legion. Later he told me it was that talk which awakened his interest in it.

Sometime after that came the trouble about his health. So highly did his authorities think of him, that for a while they played with the idea of departing with the doctor's advice and keeping him. They did not know how near they were to interfering with his true vocation!

To him the severance of his connection with the Christian Brothers seemed an irremediable disaster. He declared that it nearly broke his heart, but he adds that the Legion, which he joined soon afterwards in his own town, provided him with true consolation.

Consider moreover the strangeness of the after-event. When Alfie died, it was the door of the then empty tomb of the Christian Brothers in Buenos Aires that opened to receive him. The Superior had been one of his fellow-novices in Marino. Surely this is more than a striking coincidence? Our sweet Lord recognised how much the Brothers had done for Alfie and in the end handed him back to them.

But that is far ahead. Let us return to the deeply shocked boy who had just had his great ambition wrecked. He did not permit himself to remain long in that condition. He came into the Legion and it represented at least a substitute for what he had lost. But as the whole situation was a providential one, it continued to unfold itself.

The big firm in which Alfie had found employment closed down unexpectedly. If one had been on the alert in regard to Alfie's development, one could have guessed what would happen. The legionary attraction was already strongly asserting itself. He did not seek employment locally, but came to Dublin and entered the Morning Star



hostel as an indoor brother. This meant full-time apostolic work of the most difficult type.

Further horizons soon presented themselves to him. He engaged in efforts to extend the Legion on the countryside of Ireland. In all of these occupations he showed himself to be first-class, and he had those around him wondering as to what was coming next.

### Latin America Calls

And then the bell of destiny sounded for him. It had been decided to send Brother Grace as envoy to Colombia and Venezuela. This announcement electrified Alfie. It crystalized all his yearnings, until then hardly understood by himself. That was what he was craving for – something really big, a going somewhere into the unknown to look for souls, and prepared to pay any price for them.

Make no mistake about it. It was the idea of utter giving of himself that allured Alfie. Why should it be supposed that he was of lesser metal than the countless Irish monks of the *Peregrinatio Pro Christo* who plunged into the wilds of Europe, most of them never to be heard of again? Why should his dream be less than theirs, or his vision meaner than theirs, for they were his models?

Neither would it be right for us to imagine that his thoughts were weaker ones than Edel Quin's. You will recall her remark at the celebrated Concilium Meeting which commissioned her as envoy. The great Dr Elias Magennis, who knew intimately the area in Africa to which she was being assigned, had pointed out its dangers and difficulties which he declared were going to prove too much for her. Only the very strongest of men, he said, could stand up to solitary wandering in such conditions. You know her reply: 'I do not want to be sent off on any

picnic.' Those elements of danger and hardship were no deterrent; they were part of the attraction. Have no doubt on this point. Neither did Alfie ambition a picnic. Indomitable spirit drove Edel on for eight years and Alfie for six, and in each case a continent received a deluge of grace.

Edel died in 1944; that is nine years before Alfie became envoy. It would be unquestionable that her example exercised a peremptory influence over him

Perhaps I have dallied unduly over this aspect of heroism in the cause of religion. But as the note of canonisation has been sounded in respect of Alfie, it is necessary to emphasise that aspect.

Brothers Grace and Lambe were commissioned at the April 1953 meeting of Concilium and at once started their preparations. On 16 July they set out by plane, spending a week in New York and then going on to Bogota, the capital of Colombia. Waiting for them at the airport was the gallant figure of Joaquina Lucas who had been envying in South America since 1946. She had already made almost a complete round of the continent. She came to Bogota in the hope of helping the newcomers. Alfie worked along with her and she was his chief Spanish teacher. His progress in the language was remarkable. By the end of the year he was fit to stand alone. Then at once the bell of destiny rang.

### **Ecuador Opened Up**

Ambato was a diocese in Ecuador; its head was Bishop Echeverria, a Franciscan. The diocese was described as in a deplorable condition, marked by indifference, ignorance and constant leakage. The bishop had summoned a meeting of his priests to consider this serious position.

One of those present described a recent experience with the Legion which had impressed him. This moved the assembly with the result that all present bound themselves by a promise to make trial of the Legion.

At once the bishop wrote to the Concilium describing the situation and making the urgent request that an envoy be sent to show them how to begin. This was not a little overwhelming, for just then the Concilium was discussing the question as to where Alfie would first be sent. Many were the places which required him. Bishop Echeverria's letter was the pointing finger. Incidentally, Ambato was just over the nearest frontier. The bishop must have thought we kept a supply of ready-to-go envoys, because our reply notified him that Alfie was already on his way. Their meeting was a joyful one and Alfie justified the bishop's hopes by starting two praesidia at once and preparing the way for many others.

So impressed was the bishop that he brought Alfie to the meeting of the whole hierarchy held at Quito under the presidency of Cardinal De la Torre. Alfie was invited to address the august body which responded by accepting the Legion for Ecuador.

There followed something which was to prove typical of Alfie. He appealed to the new legionaries for generous giving in order to avail of the many opportunities. The raw material reacted worthily and a sensational campaign of spreading the Legion throughout the whole country was put in motion. The resulting praesidia were of every type from prisoners, lepers and illiterates to the upper sections of the population. The work had all the air of solidity and soon Ecuador was covered with a net of branches. This was watched from over the surrounding frontiers and soon Alfie was besieged by urgent invitations to come to other

South American countries. With mixed feelings his own bishop agreed, but Cardinal De la Torre insisted on first bringing him to the International Eucharistic Congress in Rio de Janeiro so that he would recommend him to the innumerable bishops whom the Congress would bring together. This shows the extraordinary impression which Alfie and his work had already created in Ecuador.

The fact is of course that he was being made the output-point of heavenly forces. He, who had been adjudged to be insufficiently strong for a religious order in his own temperate climate, is giving a display of energy which is overwhelming to look at. On the same plane is his capacity to persuade and organise. Most important of all, everyone he encounters is immediately convinced that there is a radiation of holiness from him. There is an instinctive readiness to do what he wants. In every sort of difficulty, including spells of complete exhaustion, he remains imperturbable and charming.

### **The Key to a Continent**

This radiation of force had not been anticipated by the Concilium. Good they had estimated him to be, but not to that invincible quality. It did not require length of time to realise its phenomenal character and then to sum it up in a phrase: 'Alfie is the key to the continent.' Not taking too seriously such physical weaknesses as were showing themselves, the Concilium followed in sheer delight the spread of the Legion there. Especially impressive was the fact that Alfie was well aware of the immense things which were taking place. Repeatedly he speaks of their supernatural quality. But apparently he had not the slightest temptation to ascribe anything to his own action. Modesty shone out of him.



At Rio de Janeiro amid the grandeurs of the Congress he had the pleasure of meeting three other envoys, the redoubtable Joaquina Lucas once again; Maria Diepen from Holland who had just arrived to work up the Legion in the Guyanas and the Dutch Antilles; and Mary Clerkin who was to divide up the gigantic Brazil with Joaquina.

During the Congress the four envoys had innumerable opportunities of contacts with the nuncios and members of the world's hierarchies, but a heavy price had to be paid in the way of pressure. Joaquina complained to the Concilium that the others were killing themselves. Bishop Echeverria was conspicuous in his efforts to introduce them to everybody.

Alfie was so moved by the possibilities which he saw in Brazil that he made up his mind to stay on there for the present. He was finding that his progress in Portuguese was rapid and it is to be remembered that Brazil is the size of Europe. But a letter arrived from the Concilium asking that he go to Argentina.

In view of what he had already decided in regard to the necessities in Brazil, this must have been a shock. There was the further consideration, which must have weighed heavily with him, that Argentina might mean the prolonged immobilising of him, because it had already refused every appeal to admit the Legion. Would his assignment to that country mean that he would spend perhaps years knocking fruitlessly at doors when in the other countries every hour would be turned to profit.

However, the Concilium had been pondering the problem too. From their central position they saw all the angles of it. Particularly they saw it in the light of that judgement which they had already formed in regard to

Alfie, namely that he was the key to the continent; that he had only to be sent to a place and its doors would open.

### **To Argentina without a Demur**

It was of course the expectation that Alfie would go without demur, and that is what he did. In the late autumn of 1955 he landed in Buenos Aires where only a few specialised praesidia had been permitted. He waited on the nuncio from whom he received welcome and appreciation. But the decision of the great Archdiocese of Buenos Aires still remained unfavourable, so he turned his steps elsewhere.

In the Diocese of Salta and Catamarca small Legion foundations existed. He travelled there and vivid life and growth entered at his touch. Then began his monumental round of the bishops of the entire country, involving journeying on a vast scale. He proved indeed to be the key. In turn each bishop saw his power and granted his request. In one year he had seen many of them and praesidia were rising up throughout the land.

In the midst of these labours, events almost obliged him to go to Bolivia and Paraguay and there to get the Legion going extensively. For periods he had the company of Oonagh Twomey, the newly-appointed envoy to Bolivia. He had suggested that she be sent to him for her initial training. Also he went back to Ecuador for five months, finding that things had greatly prospered. The praesidia numbered four hundred with many efficient Curiae, and he renewed acquaintance with all his old friends.

Then back to Argentina where many bishops wanted him urgently. What a change from a few years before when that seemed to be the shut-off country! But still Buenos Aires, the capital, maintained its attitude of exclusion, greatly to the woe of Alfie. But suddenly that

situation reversed itself. Rome divided into five that huge, unwieldy diocese of four million people. Immediately the doors of four of them opened to the Legion, and not long afterwards the fifth diocese gave the long-deferred permission. That was on 9 December 1957. 'Even still I can hardly believe it,' said Alfie in his report to the Concilium.

Now Buenos Aires is a hub of legionary industry. It has a *Senatus* and thirty Councils functioning in its area. In the whole of the million square miles of Argentina, are now two thousand *praesidia* under the rule of three *Senatus* and a *Regia*.

### Strange Attraction of Russia

In her book Miss Firtel gives a chapter to the strange fascination which Russia began to exercise over Alfie. He contemplated, though in an infinite way, the completion of his work in South America. He saw clearly that the Legion was a firm growth and that envoyship was a passing phase. There is no doubt that he had some circumstances in his mind which would mean that he would move on elsewhere, and likewise, that it would be a Legion assignment. For he had a total and growing conviction in regard to the Legion.

It was of course on Russia that his mind was dwelling. He spoke of going there as envoy. He worked at the language and would of course have mastered it. He set on foot a translation of the handbook into Russian, mixed with Russians in Buenos Aires, and as part of this he succeeded in getting a *praesidium* established among the Orthodox there. This was by a singular privilege granted to the Legion by the Vatican.

He touched on this subject in his correspondence and eventually asked permission to pay a tourist visit to



Russia. This was denied to him for reason which seemed to be good, i.e. that it would be costly without exhibiting a rational hope of securing any benefit, and that it might prove a dangerous distraction to him. Of course what Alfie had in mind was some miraculous help during that trip; he had come to regard such things as part and parcel of his envoyship.

It must not be thought that he was just 'shot down' in this matter. Quite the contrary. At home every word he spoke was taken with supreme seriousness and discussed with him. In the background there would be little doubt that he would be appointed as envoy to Russia whenever it would be deemed possible to send such a one. Obviously too this would depend on his mission to South America being sufficiently discharged. Alfie had already superabundantly proved himself to be adequate to any legionary enterprise.

In the final issue, as we sadly know, it was not God's will that Alfie should enter Russia. But neither should we think that all those yearnings and preparations of his were wasted. Far from it! Legionary outlook would oblige that we discern in that orientation of Alfie's mind a positive pointing of grace, a sort of twilight to an actual operation. In the practical order it would gain in the keeping of the problem in our minds. It is further testimony to Alfie's saintly quality that he did not allow our refusal to weigh on him even as a disappointment.

At this point I make a jump ahead of some years. Many minds had likewise been thinking about Russia and in the year 1969 it was felt that a symbolic gesture should be made. This took the shape of a Peregrinatio party to that country. It worked out to a success which could never have been anticipated and now those expeditions



to Russia are an annual and wonderful event. None of us would doubt that Alfie's yearnings and preparations formed a contributory part of that development.

### **The Thief in the Night**

He had been suffering to a considerable extent from stomach trouble. But we did not take this too seriously. Alfie was a darling child of Jesus and Mary. Such souls have their own set of rules; they go on when others cannot. A doctor shakes his head over them and yet they live on in impossible conditions, fulfilling missions, putting forth efforts outside the powers of the strongest.

Of course we pleaded with Alfie, as we had done with Edel, to moderate, but they just went on being superhuman. It was not that they were disobedient, such was not in them. It was just that they saw things from a different angle. They judged that they were operating within their strength and that Mary their Mother was beckoning them on.

It is probable that Alfie did not even take our admonitions seriously. We did not insist because we did not view his condition as really grave. We ascribed it to everything except the awful thing that it really was.

Like a thunderbolt came the end. In December 1958 the Archbishop of Cordoba gave sanctions for the starting of the Legion there and Alfie proceeded to that important centre. After setting up five praesidia he was seized by extreme illness and taken to hospital. The x-ray showed him to be a subject for operation. He was out on a plane to Buenos Aires and lodged in the Blue Nuns Hospital. The operation demonstrated that he was full of cancer, beyond the power of surgery to ameliorate.

Alfie was going to die very soon.

The archbishop himself, Cardinal Copello – who had kept out of the Legion for a long time, came to administer the Last Sacraments. The nuncio, who had always been a pillar of consolation for the envoy, gave him the last blessing. It was from that noble soul, Mr T.J. Horan the Irish Ambassador, that we heard the first news of this crushing development. Two of us at once drove down to Tullamore to tell his mother. An elder brother of his opened the door. Standing with him as if expecting us was his mother. Though knowing nothing, she thought that Alfie was dead. She was in the grip of premonition. The newspapers of that morning had reported the crash of a plane flying from Cordoba to Buenos Aires and incredibly she concluded that Alfie had perished in it, so that our news that he was still alive was momentarily a relief.

### El Corderito

It was on 21 January 1958 that he died, the feast of St Agnes, befitting the purity which was a feature of him. On that day every year the Holy Father is presented with two lambs in Rome. It has been pointed out that the Legion gave the Eternal Father a Lamb on that 21 January, the reference being to the term *cordero* or *corderito* (meaning a lamb) by which Alfie was everywhere affectionately known.

Do I think that Alfie is canonisable? Yes, I do. I could not see any defect in him. That by itself could be a negative state. In him it was supplemented with a faith without limit, and other heroic qualities. He gave all his energies to the pursuit of souls. He had Our Blessed Lady in a perfect perspective. One may institute a parallel between him and Edel Quinn. Each was wise, charming, lovable

and without kinks. Each represented a frustrated vocation converted into a supreme triumph. In her case it was accomplished in eight years and in his case in six. She is being acclaimed as a model for modern youth. He would fulfil the same role and in a particular way for male youth.

Two days after Alfie's funeral, Noel Lynch arrived on the scene, sent to assist him but in fact to take his place. He was aged twenty-two and without any Spanish. Elisa Fox, who had provided lodgings for Alfie when he was in Buenos Aires, exclaimed indignantly that it was a shame to send a boy on a man's errand. We did not hesitate to write to her. 'Wait and see.' She waited and saw that the six foot boy was every inch of him a man. He nobly reaped where Alfie had sown and did his own fine job in the vineyard.

Earlier I have mentioned the distinguished personage, Cardinal Mozzoni who was nuncio in Argentina during Alfie's days there and who helped him so much. The cardinal has just written a most important letter to Srta Maria Sofia Prado, the president of the group in Buenos Aires, which has presented a petition to the archbishop there for the constitution of a tribunal to examine into the sanctity of Alfonso Lambe. The cardinal's letter is by way of a testimonial on favour of the petition. It is a significant item and I give you the pleasure of hearing it.

### **A Princely Tribute**

My Good Lady,

First of all let me thank you for your Easter greetings and I reciprocate them though tardily. But as the Ascension of today completes the Easter season with the glorious Ascension of

Jesus to Heaven, my prayer for you is that he will always raise you to the heights and liberty of spirit and serenity of heart. I wish to tell you now that I know nothing of the Cause of Edel Quinn. I heard some legionaries in Lourdes speak in very high praise of her virtues and her heroic dedication to the Africans. I believe that what Edel was for the Africans, our Alfonso was – perhaps a little less – for Latin America. At twenty years of age he left Dublin and at twenty six, when he died in Buenos Aires, he had laid down firm foundations of the Legion in almost all of the Southern hemisphere, in Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia and Argentina. I have witnessed with admiration his apostolate in Argentina and Bolivia. The author Hilda Firtel defined him thus: ‘A giant of the apostolate’ and he was. Alone and without knowing the language and poor, he faced men and women, youths and adults in the name of Mary. For example in Bolivia he lived many days in Oruro among the miners, all of them Indians. It takes a lot to try and imagine what Oruro was then and still is. Oruro is 360 kilometres from La Paz and the spirit of violence predominated there. Well, our Alfonso succeeded in founding the Legion in Oruro itself. When I heard that, I said to myself: ‘This youth works miracles’.

In Argentina I had to guide him and apply the brakes a little to his anxiety for foundation and conquest. Physically he seemed to me a little less than tall, delicate and with the infirmity which was consuming his whole being and which he attributed to the climate. His character was strong



and at the same time very sweet; temperamental and ready as few are for any sacrifice. His vocation was the Legion, and I think that, once well directed, he would have dedicated his whole life to Mary in the priestly service of her son, Jesus.

The love of God was reflected constantly in the love of his neighbour and of the sick whom he visited and cured spiritually and attended to, and whom he incited the legionaries to serve. Those were heroic days of the Legion, lived in humility and total dedication to the Legion ideal: to live the Legion! The apostolate became an absolute obligation. Alfonso is a star, one of those which in full summer in the limpid clear nights rapidly cross skies leaving a trail of light and disappearing, and that light remains to the eyes of all Argentinians.

As a tribute to Alfonso that document reaches topmost heights. And likewise how it touches hearts!