

VENERABLE  
*Edel Quinn*  
by Frank Daff



*Nihil Obstat:*

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# EDEL QUINN

By Frank Duff

I was going to begin at the end in a certain sense, and that for the purpose of putting things in regard to Edel Quinn in their proper setting from the first moment. I take for you the words of the Holy Father spoken in respect of Cardinal Suenens' book on that great little lady. The Holy Father says in a peremptory sort of way that this Life must be made known. Lest you might think that the Holy Father issues that sort of compliment or saying freely, let me assure you to the contrary. His suggestion to that effect represents something which is unusual.

In the second place, the Holy Father's great Representative, first in Africa and later on in China, Mgr. Riberi, endorses a statement made by Cardinal Suenens in the course of the book. That statement was, that hidden in the depths of the African jungle Edel Quinn was helping to save China. And in his Preface to that book, Mgr. Riberi rises even higher, asserting that this girl was destined by sheer force of example to influence the course of history. Elsewhere he says that but for the inspiration which he derived from her he could not have found possible the task of launching the Legion of Mary in civil-war China. It is to be insisted that those are not words spoken lightly just for the sake of being pleasing; because the subject is too serious for that. You will realise that in those words lies an extraordinary valuation of a person. Saving China! Influencing the course of history! These are rather big enunciations to make about a person.

Next, I tell you what you already know, namely that her Cause has been introduced. It is at an unexpectedly early stage. The long period of waiting which usually occurs after the death of the person has been cut short. While the majority of those who knew her well are still in the land of the living, there is her Cause on the carpet! And to a big number has been given the privilege of standing before a Tribunal and testifying concerning her. Mostly the testimonies about those whose Cause is being examined into, proceed from the reading of documents written by people who are long dead, and that is not the most satisfactory way of examining into a case.

It is evident that we are in the presence of no common personage. Editions of her Life continue to issue from the printing presses in many languages. And now letters are pouring in to us abundantly which tell of favours which people think they have received through her intervention. I have read a number of them. They give the impression that there is something at work. It is sufficiently evident in any case that a vast number of people are now thinking in terms of her, and in their various trials and needs are turning to her and saying to her: "Won't you help me?"

While I am not going to attempt a sketch of her life, still I suppose I had better lay a foundation by giving a recital of the major events of her earlier life.

She was born in 1907 in a part of Ireland which has produced many distinguished people, that is Co. Cork. The precise place was Kanturk. Her father was a bank official, whose lot it is to be transferred a good deal. As he moved around, he took his little family along with him, eventually settling down in Dublin. Thus he was in many places. You will remember what is said about Homer the Greek poet, that once he was dead a hundred cities disputed the honour of being his birthplace. Now we find that not a few places are claiming the distinction of having Edel Quinn resident in them for a while.

## **Edel Joins the Legion**

Her first job was about 1925; it was that of shorthandtypist. It immersed her in the ordinary bustle of the city; work, amusement, religious activity getting their turn. About the year 1927, a friend brought her into the Legion and of that encounter she declares that it was a case of love at first sight. It laid its grip upon her heart at once and that grip did not relax but did indeed tighten with each new day. In its system she found what she needed. Nourished by its Marian doctrine, its practical idealism, and by the pretty grim tasks which fell to her lot, her essential quality began to show itself. Anything committed to her was done well, and quickly it was seen how well. Her fellow-members marked her down as first-rate, and then the higher authorities of the Legion got word of her and began to discuss her.

The presidency of a very difficult branch became vacant. It was the branch which visited the low-down women's lodging houses of Dublin. At that time these were unspeakable dens and accordingly the work was really exacting. The president, as I say, left, and the members sent word along that a specially excellent person was needed to fill the vacant post. After a little pause Edel Quinn arrived on the scene to take up office. To say that - they were horrified is to put it mildly. As they said in a caucus meeting (with her absent): A child has been sent to lead us! And they did not think this adequate. So they dispatched their Spiritual Director over to headquarters to register their emphatic protest. He came back to them the following week and communicated the result of his mission rather briefly. He said that he had cut no ice.

## **Her Vocation**

Soon it became evident to them that they had a worthy leader: a leader among leaders. They rejoiced in their good fortune. But not for too long. Because it became rumoured around that she had other ideas; that she had always cherished the ambition of becoming a Poor Clare, and that the time was now approaching when she was going to realise that aim.

The place in question was Belfast. Her original intention had been to enter the Convent in Donnybrook, that farfamed, even proverbial suburb of Dublin. But the Poor Clares thought that Belfast was the more in need of a newcomer. So to

Belfast it was settled she should go. All prior arrangements were complete, but on the eve of her departure came a shattering event. It was her physical breakdown. The trouble was T.B., more gravely regarded then than now; even in the few years which have elapsed great gains have been secured against that malady.

She was rushed off to Newcastle Sanatorium in Co. Wicklow, and there she spent about a year and a half. In that place she made an indelible impression. The collection of evidence from people who met her there has been an interesting process. The Matron's judgment concerning her – and here let it be added that the Matron was not a Catholic – was that nobody had ever been in that hospital who was like her. She stood out in ways that were tangible and ways that were not. As an example of the pressure of her personality, note the incident recounted in Cardinal Suenens' book of the young nurse on night duty who was faced with the sudden collapse of a patient. Actually the patient died on her hands. It is a remarkable fact that it was not to her own authorities – the Matron or anybody else – that she ran in this moment of panic, but to Edel Quinn. She roused Edel up out of bed and brought her along to help her. An extraordinary fact, if you just analyse it!

The circumstances under which she departed from Newcastle Sanatorium are not of the very clearest. I have no doubt that the distinguished Roman Official, who is popularly called the Devil's Advocate, will be asking awkward questions there. It is not absolutely certain that she got a clear bill or a clear permission. In any case, out she came. She went back to her home and to her job. After an interval she came back to the Legion. She was so shepherded along that she complained that it was as if they had her sitting up in a coffin. She was not allowed to do the sort of satisfying (by which she meant enterprising and trying) work that she wanted.

Then a period ensued in which that extraordinary spirit was kept in a cage, harnessed, tied down in every way. It lasted until 1936, and it terminated rather dramatically. In that year efforts were being made to spread the Legion over England. The English Legionaries had then no experience of extension work, whereas we had many practised in it. So it was agreed that many teams would be put into the field, each consisting of an English Legionary and an Irish one.

We appealed for volunteers and a large number presented themselves. Among them was her ladyship. This was more than a surprise; it was startling. The notion did not recommend itself at all. Her offer was gently refused and she was reminded of the arduous nature of the work in question. Indeed she had no need to be reminded, for she had done much of it and she knew.

## Extension Work in Wales

But she pleaded with an insistence, which only she could manage, that she be allowed to go. She argued that all were killing her with kindness and really preventing her recovery by tying her down too much. Of course the young lady, as she always did, had her way. It was agreed that she should go. There was one difference. Instead of putting her with an English Legionary, she was partnered by an old friend of her own, Muriel Wailes, who knew every detail about her and would ensure watchfulness and check.

The spiritual scene was one of dire necessity. Religion was languishing, capable of being described as half-dead, hardly a lay person lifting his finger for it. Hardly one who even thought he had any duty in that direction. The conversion of the country was unthought of; the supreme height aimed at was good conduct. What wonder then that lapsing was the order of the day.

The two knights-errant had no idle moments. From dawn to dark they moved through the area, proposing this New Idea. What travelling! How much explaining and repetition! How much apparent beating of the air! And yet plenty of success in the end! Goodwill stirred up; many branches actually started, with others in prospect.

The pair returned overjoyed. A very comforting report was presented. The invalid was radiant and it was evident that the exertions had done her no harm. Not long after her return she made a second visit to H.Q. It was to voice some afterthoughts. She considered it to be essential that there should be someone living over there who would carry on the efforts of that fortnight. And so she had made up her mind to go to Chester, get a post there, and fill that role.

Behold at this juncture a notable coincidence! From Rudy Dennison, then the Legion Envoy in South Africa, were proceeding most urgent appeals for help in her vast area. And so the thought came: what about sending Edel Quinn to South Africa? It would be a good assignment from the point of view of her ailment, and certainly it would give her the sense of mission which seemed to be necessary to her. After some consideration this was proposed to her and it was accepted with an eagerness which was wonderful to witness. Thus it was arranged that she should go to South Africa.

But we know the old saying: "The best laid schemes of mice and men gang aft a-gley." And that one went astray because at that moment Dr. Heffernan, C.S.Sp., then Bishop of Zanzibar and Nairobi, wrote to say that he had heard there was question of Edel Quinn going out to Africa. Might he beg that she be sent to his territory which was so much in need of the Legion? If she were, he would look after every detail. He would guarantee the cooperation of all his missionaries. He would arrange her itinerary.

What a tempting proposition! After all, South Africa had a good envoy while Central Africa had none. The difficulty was already being felt of helping missionaries to start branches through correspondence. How admirably that problem would be solved by her being an envoy there! And what an envoy! She would start a prairie fire there – that is if she survived. For the fact had to be faced that Central Africa was a greater health hazard. Accordingly there was much weighing up, many misgivings, but in the end the Officers agreed to recommend that she be sent.

The question of getting sanction from the Concilium, the central governing body of the Legion, came next, and provides a whole chapter in Cardinal Suenens' book. What happened had a peculiar supernatural quality, because at that time really only the higher Officers of the Legion were in favour of the scheme. The general body of the Legionaries were against it. People would meet you in the street, stop you, and protest indignantly against the story which they had heard that this delicate young girl was marked down for slaughter. Feeling appeared to be rising and the indications were that when the proposition came up at Concilium, it would be overwhelmed. Yet the amazing Concilium session on the subject ended in a contrary result; it unanimously decreed her mission. Though several initially spoke against it, not one person maintained that course to the point of voting against her going. In the circumstances one would be tempted to exclaim: "A miracle!" but for the fact that here that word must be sparingly applied.

## **Off to Africa**

Then arrangements had to be hurried on feverishly Bishop Heffernan had requested that Edel should come out with a party of his own missionaries who were travelling at the end of October. Rushing to book a berth for her on that boat, it was found that there was not one left. But later on the Company signified that a single-berth first-class cabin was available. Normally, envoys cannot receive that amount of consideration, for funds have always been restricted. But this was different. Edel had to be on that boat, and it was a case of that cabin or nothing. So it was booked. It was destined to play an additional, a providential role. There were a good number of priests on board so that a sacristy was needed and an extension of the Mass-saying accommodation. Accordingly Edel was appointed sacristan. She vacated the cabin early in the morning and it became an Oratory in which many Masses were said daily. But this is looking ahead.

The date of sailing was to be the 29<sup>th</sup> October, 1936, from London. A party accompanied her thus far. Some days were spent there in making visits and purchases. One episode must be given because of its picturesqueness. The London Legionaries had written that they wished to make it plain how much their hearts were with her in her great adventure and that they were arranging a farewell function on the evening before her departure. So to it our party went. When we arrived, the then President of the Legion in England Mrs. de la Mare,

was in a remoter part of the premises and she was sent for. Coming, she was introduced to Edel Quinn, whom she surveyed with a bewildered gaze. Why?

Years before that evening, Mrs. de la Mare had made her first visit to Ireland. One day some Legionaries came to her and said: "We are taking you on a trip through the Garden of Ireland, namely Co. Wicklow. Also we will drop in to see a sick friend of ours who is in hospital down there." I have not to tell you who the sick friend was. Mrs. de la Mare spent a session with Edel who made the profoundest sort of impression upon her. Mrs. de la Mare was terribly oppressed by whatever report had been given to her of the health of Edel; she put her into the category of the dying. Yet she was overwhelmed by the vivid personality that was before her, and by the incredible impression of good spirits and life and even vigour. Though Miss Quinn's name did not remain in her mind, her face remained vivid ever afterwards in Mrs. de la Mare's memory. After a while she assigned her to the company of the dear departed. Then came the rumours about this envoy to Africa, and now is the night of the reception. Mrs. de la Mare is face to face with Edel Quinn who, I might inform you, was an absolutely ravishing figure that evening. She was wearing a blue silk dress, to which other tongues could do more justice than mine. She certainly looked most beautiful.

"Imagine," said Mrs. de la Mare, when speech came back to her, "my stupefaction to behold in the intrepid adventurer of Africa the poor invalid of Newcastle! It is like seeing somebody step up out of a grave and greet you."

An eleventh-hour postponement put back the sailing to the 30<sup>th</sup>. On the sunny morning of that day the voyage to Africa commenced. The boat was the Llangibby Castle, which only recently made its own last voyage to the shipbreakers.

## **Envoy to Africa**

Edel's log, or almost daily series of letters, kept her in touch with home during the three-week ocean journey. It exhibited her in a new and lively light, for never before had there been a substantial exchange of letters with her. The picture thereby afforded of her trip – and of herself – is really worth reading through the medium of Cardinal Suenens' book.

Mombasa was reached on the morning of the 23<sup>rd</sup> November. By the instructions of Bishop Heffernan, Edel did not remain there but proceeded that very day to Nairobi, a long journey of 350 miles and 18 hours. There began the toil of envoyship which terminated nearly eight years later with her death in the same place.

One may divide that superb adventure into four parts. The first phase was the one disposed by Bishop Heffernan. The arrangement in the main was that each missionary would be responsible for her in his own area. He would provide her

with transport and with audiences. He would help her in all possible ways towards the explaining of the Legion and the setting up of branches. When her work was done, he would place her in the care of the next missionary.

That arrangement worked out perfectly from our point of view for many reasons. It spared us all expense in regard to transport and we had the comfort of knowing that somebody was looking after her and preventing excesses. But it did not please the little lady herself. And I need not tell you that this meant that the arrangement was going to cease at an early date. She said that it imposed an unjustifiable burden upon the missionaries; that it was all very well in these home countries to talk of a missionary putting her into the hands of the next missionary. But when the next was 100 miles away and through the jungle, the thing was not right or fair and she protested against it. She proposed that she be permitted to buy a car. That permission was given and she announced the purchase in the quaint fashion almost of a Royal Proclamation – something to this effect. “Take note that on this day the Legion of Mary has become the owner of a Ford coupe, model V8, of the year 1932, at a cost of £40.” Apparently the car was not as bad as that price suggests. In any case it looked all right in the photograph which came along.

One condition had however been imposed upon her by us and was going to be insisted upon. It was that she was not to drive that car herself except around a town. In other words there were to be no long trips where she would drive herself. The reason for this was that she would not be physically able to crank up the car if that were required. Nor would she be able to repair it, so that a breakdown in the heart of the jungle would be an unthinkable prospect. Hence the insistence that she must have a driver. She agreed to that condition and observed it.

Her driver was a man. His name was Ali, but we always called him Ali Baba. He was a Mohammedan. With that man in the driving seat, she beside him, and a rifle in the back of the car for protection against animals, she covered uncountable thousands of miles. An epic was accomplished exceeding any other that one remembers hearing of. That young girl, at the mercy of that driver, plunging out to the end of every track! It was her duty to get to all the missionaries (and they lived in difficult and inaccessible places enough) and help them to start the Legion. But should you speak to her about the risk of those proceedings, the only satisfaction you would get would be her gentle laughter, perhaps a reference to “heroics” and the suggestion that mountains were being manufactured out of molehills.

For the modernised knight-errantry Edel was ideally cast, save for the health factor which did not as yet cause trouble. In that plunging out on those incredible jungle missions, through the swamps and the forests, she had come into her element. Imperturbable, smiling, happy, eager for fun and (to use her own words)

“leg-pulling” – you could not distress her, you could not disturb her. It was impossible to ruffle the cheerfulness which was her first feature.

But that light manner was not accompanied by slack performance. Her competence was supreme, her will was firm, her methods exact. Nothing was left to take care of itself. To her with justice could be applied that Scriptural valuation: “Thou good and faithful servant.”

## **An African Mud-Bath**

The stories that poured in from the various missionaries and other people who dealt with her are innumerable and impressive. One of the early ones comes to mind. A missionary came to us, as they all did, to tell us about her. He had been hearing for some time of her approach to his own region, and accordingly he was more or less expecting her. One day at Mass he turned round from the altar to give Holy Communion and among the faces along the altar-rails was a contrasting one. Then, as he put it, he knew that Edel Quinn had come to town. He sent the altar-boy to tell her not to go away after Mass but to join him at breakfast, and that was his first encounter with her. She worked out the preliminaries with him then, and she told him that on the following day she had to travel back to her port of previous call where the first meeting of the Praesidium had been arranged for.

“That is good,” he said, “because I would like to go with you and see how a first meeting is run off. I will look after the question of transport.”

But during the night an African storm raged, and the following day an ocean of mud lay between the two places. He said to her after Mass: “You are not making that little journey to-day as you expected.” “Oh,” she replied, “I will have to do it. I promised faithfully to be there and I emphasised that nothing at all should keep anybody away. It would be a ludicrous thing if I myself am the chief absentee.”

“They will understand” he said. “They know the conditions and they will be the first to appreciate your inability to be present.” In real grief she said: “I would not understand it myself,” and she added: “I will have to go.” He explained that there was no means of going; no car and no driver could negotiate things. For the road was not visible. His case was convincing but it did not convince her to whom it was presented. Finally he had to yield to her distress. He went off and got a very powerful lorry and a very expert driver. They put chains on the wheels and the three of them set out for the place which was 8 miles away. In some incredible fashion they managed seven miles. At the end of that distance the lorry got stuck in the mud; the three of them scrambled out and more by swimming than walking they reached their destination in a state that can be imagined. But they reached it. That was one of the touches which were found proceeding from her all the time and which were so typical of her as to be her veritable trade-mark. Idealism, which is latent in all, is just ready to be stirred up

by such things, so that those around Edel put forth their best and tried to meet her half-way.

Another luminous episode was the time they were defrauded in the matter of petrol. Insufficient petrol was put into the tank with the result that the car stopped in the middle of the jungle. The driver told her that they would have to walk back and try to get a drop of petrol somewhere. But that journey might be a big one, and Edel would not be able to do it. It was agreed accordingly that she would stay behind in the car, and he set out on his journey of discovery. I need not tell you that the thoughts of the average person in that emergency would not be very pleasant ones. Out there in the heart of the jungle! At any moment there may be a lion pawing savagely at the window to get in! You know the corroding power of anxiety and how strain can upset mental balance, so that one becomes almost sure that the driver will never come back. He was gone for good, leaving me to my fate! Well, when many hours later he did come back with a little petrol, enough to start the car and keep it going for a while, he found her very placidly working away at her correspondence, quite unperturbed by any of those thoughts that might afflict the weaker ones among us.

Another happening, which certainly did not lose in the subsequent telling around the territory, was based on the fact that it was her custom to offer a lift to anyone who might be going her way. Frequently this invitation would be accepted. On this occasion a Holy Ghost Brother availed of the lift. He was going on holidays and he said that the rapid run in the car would be a tremendous facility to him. But it was far from rapid; it stretched out to two days. We are told that he spent most of those days on the broad of his back either repairing mechanical defects in the car or mending punctures. He mended eight punctures. When he got to his destination he took himself to bed, and the Bishop said he had merited it well.

It is not suggested that this misbehaviour was typical of the car, because in general it was satisfactory. Archbishop McCarthy, who has introduced Edel's Cause, and who was the representative of the Holy See there, writes rather brightly about the car. Among others of its features he claims that its rattling was heard at long distances and regarded with pleasure, because Edel always brought spiritual sunshine with her.

It is alleged that there were competitions as to what colour the car was, because it varied according to the angle of inspection, and according to the degree of light.

## **Thumbing a Ride**

When she had no car, as was the case before and after the possession of this celebrated vehicle, her ordinary method of getting about, if she was not luckier, was to thumb a lift from a lorry. There were no buses; the ordinary method of travelling would be those lorries. The routine was that she would go out on to the road early in the morning, at 5 or 6 o'clock, and she would hold up her hand for

an approaching lorry. These lorries would be packed full of African men. They would always stop for her and take her along – perhaps for a hundred miles. She would be deposited in some place where she would set about her business. Sometimes she might be able to come back later in the day, but sometimes she might have to stay for days. Again the return journey would be under the same conditions, a lift from a lorry. I wonder how many women would face up to that, to these long journeys alone among those crowds of men. And yet there never was a case in her whole adventure where she was molested. The people realised that she loved them; that there was not in her one spark of that superiority of the stranger which they so much resent. They knew that she was glad to be with them, and they loved and respected her as they did nobody else. Her fame travelled through the whole territory and everybody was at her beck and call; everybody was eager to serve her.

## **The Island of St. Maurice**

The next phase of her adventure lay in her visit to Mauritius, far out in the Indian Ocean. She had been promised to that Island for a long time. Finally she saw a moment when she could do it, and she went. It was the time of the unrestricted submarine warfare in the Indian Ocean when one out of every two ships that sailed was torpedoed. Archbishop Leen watched her intently during the whole of her time on the Island, because in the early moments of her visit he recognised that she was unusual. He was an expert in the science of the saints. He watched her from that angle, and he subsequently delivered his considered opinion. It was that she was definitely “canonisable.” He said he could detect no weakness in her. Incidentally he referred to that aspect I have mentioned, that is her apparent freedom from fear. She did not appear to be subject to its dominion in any shape or form. Nothing seemed to deter or intimidate her.

It is said of her stay in Mauritius that it represented the only place from which she ever departed in tears. Whatever strange quality attached to the affection of the people there, one cannot guess. But such was its effect on her.

The interest of the Archbishop and her efforts were blessed. She left thirty-six excellent Praesidia at work behind her, and the movement was destined to grow ever stronger. She journeyed back through the peril of the Ocean, again without mishap, landing in Tanzania. From that time forward she had no car. When she set out for Mauritius, she left it at Nairobi and she was never destined to sit in it again.

Back on the mainland but in more primitive territory! The climate was harder and there were few converts where she could put up. And though it was not suspected at home, she had been losing ground physically. Her bulletins showed the same steady output of energy and a corresponding yield in branches. Untiringly, unremittingly, interest always at full pitch, she pressed on from place to place. It was like saying a rosary except that each bead was a new locality;

each was a contribution towards a clearly-seen purpose, towards the functioning of a primary missionary principle – which is the responsibility of the Africans for the evangelisation of their own continent. The idea is so fundamental that if it be not brought into full play, the Church cannot be universally extended or solidly founded.

### **“Miss Quinn – You Are Dying!”**

But that rosary of places was said at a terrible cost to herself. Too late and with much sorrow, it was known that she was only half-alive. But on she went, her will outweighing her weakness. Till one day she entered into a conference with a Swiss missionary about the affairs of the Legion in his area. As she talked, he was looking at her in consternation. Suddenly he interjected: “Miss Quinn, do you not realise that you are dying? Have you made your preparation?” Such was the incredible position: she was a dying person, yet going around, carrying on her work. His statement was only too true, because she collapsed immediately. That event took place at Lilongwe, Malawi, in the year 1941. She was seized with dysentery, malaria and then pleurisy. She weighed at that time 70 lbs. A wire to us told us that she was dying. Bishop Julien, the White Father in whose territory she was working, came down to her to pay his final respects. He said Mass for her in an adjoining room and brought her Holy Communion. Then he stood beside her and thanked her for all that she had done for his people. He continued: “Everything that I have been able to do for you I have done. One thing remains to be done. It is to give you a funeral worthy of the great apostle that you are.”

There she was – a broken creature; reduced to the very last; all vitality drained out of her; far away from her kith and kin. One would expect those tender words of the Bishop to open the gates of emotion; that she would treat herself to the little luxury of giving into tears. But no. He tells how she reacted to his announcement about the grand funeral that she was to get: she burst into uncontrollable laughter! It was so typical of her.

But she did not die. She pulled herself together sufficiently to be flown down to Johannesburg. In the hospital there, they said she might live a month. At the end of the month, they said she might live to the end of the year. At the end of the year, they said they thought she would live on, but she would never be fit to do any more work. All these predictions were successively proved wrong. She was transferred from Johannesburg to the Dominican Sanatorium in Umlamli, Aliwal North, and from there to the Benedictine one in Nongoma, Zululand. There she staged a restoration.

Ruby Roberts was our envoy at this time in South Africa. She wrote asking that Edel be prohibited from going back to Nairobi as she was saying she was going to do. So off went a wire prohibiting her from moving. The answer to that was a

medical certificate saying that she was fit to go and should go; Nairobi would be a better place for her.

## **Back on the Road**

She flew back to Nairobi. The journey occupied three days, during all of which time she was air-sick. She had to be taken out of the plane in an ambulance and brought off to the convent where she was going to stay. She was in bed for twenty-four hours. She got up and resumed her old life in its old tempo. All this in wartime, with its added difficulties! She resumed her work but soon found that she had not her former strength. The prolonged safaris or rounds that she used to make, she found to be beyond her. She gained this knowledge in the hard way. She undertook an extended trip to Kisumu and broke down during it. After that in discussion with us she agreed that she would not try any more long journeys, but only short ones in the effort to find what we called her formula of resistance. She promised co-operation and we all thought the formula was gradually being worked out. We believed that there was a slow but steady restoration taking place. But all the time we were in a fool's paradise. Her centre was Nairobi. From it, as on a pivot, her activities radiated. She was staying with the Precious Blood Nuns, a German Order, and their kindness to her was unexampled. They gave her more than care. Her room was a disused sacristy beside the chapel in which was the Blessed Sacrament. This proximity was an honour and a joy to her. During this time occurred some episodes which are strange to read, and difficulties suggest themselves. On one occasion when the Nuns opened up in the morning time, they found her lying on the verandah outside, covered with the light coat which the day temperature of the place dictated. But this was in sight of Kilimanjaro, the peaks of which are snow-clad even out there, and icy winds proceed from them at night. When the Nuns came out to her, she was shaking all over with cold. She was quite blue and frozen and could hardly stand up. Observing this, they protested most angrily to her: "How could you do this to us? Why did you not ring the bell when you came back last night?" I must explain that comings and goings out there could not be regulated as in a city. Distances and journeys were big and transport unreliable, and storms were to be expected. The Nuns continued their indignant protest: "If only you had rung the bell, one of us would get up out of bed and let you in." She replied: "I could not bring myself to do that. You had your hard day and must get your rest." Again they pleaded: "Don't you do that to us. What is it to get up when we can go back again? You must promise that never will you do the like again." Her answer was: "I cannot give you that promise because I know I will do it again if the situation recurs." And she did it again.

It seems incorrect, and there again the Devil's Advocate will ask searching questions. The answer is of course that there is no use applying the ordinary rules to her. The supreme ingredient in her was considerateness. She had a "delicate" soul. She could not hurt, she could not disturb, she could not inconvenience anybody; and it would be more than her brand of human nature

would permit that she would ring the bell and take the Nuns up out of bed. In her we are not dealing with normality. We may as well realise that fact and allow for certain behaviours in her just as we would accommodate ourselves to a particular climate. The climate of her soul was different. Those occasional "imprudences," "disobediences," "recklessnesses" and kindred phenomena spring from holy depths in her and should be regarded thoughtfully. They might well be evidence of sanctity rather than arguments against it.

## **Death Comes to the Envoy**

In spite of the tender care given to her by everybody, her condition steadily deteriorated. Her steps grew slower and more feeble and shorter. Her breath became more laboured and more rapid; and every day new grey hairs came on to her head. She tells about this time that she was being taken for 60 years of age. But her spirit never weakened, in fact it seemed to assert itself the more; it positively drove her on. She gave the impression that she was filled with a desperate sense of urgency; that she knew now that she had very little time left, and that every second of that time must be availed of. So she pressed on and on and on in defiance of exhausted nature. But of this pathetic struggle those at home knew nothing. It would have been unduly optimistic to expect that Edel would be communicative on that subject. But it is at the least a puzzling circumstance that of all the people around her who loved her so dearly, not one thought fit to relay home the facts of her condition.

One Saturday I came home and found awaiting me one of those photographic airgraph letters of the wartime. It was from her. I opened it. I read it with an icy hand upon my heart. She described herself as too exhausted to work. When I read that, I said to myself: she is telling us that she is dying. Because those words had never been said by her before and never would in normal conditions. While I was reading that message over and over again, there was a ring on the door and a cable was delivered. That cable announced her death. Her brave spirit was no longer contained by its frail habitation. The date of her death was the 12<sup>th</sup> May, 1944. It was my sad mission to bear to her parents the news of her death. They lived in Monkstown, Dublin. When her mother saw me, she burst out into loud sorrow and hurried to her bedroom to weep her heart out, although no one had yet told her, nor do I feel that my appearance told the tale. She knew at first glance.

In Africa there was an absolute wave of sorrow. Everyone seemed to feel her going as a personal loss. In that warm climate they hurry on a funeral. In her case they delayed it for twenty-four hours, so as to give the missionaries and the people over a wide area the opportunity of coming into Nairobi to be present. There a wonderful ceremonial attended the laying of her in the Missioners' Cemetery, where now she rests. Really if you want to read something effective, you should study those chapters of Cardinal Suenens' book which deal with her passing away and with that funeral. They represent some of the most beautiful

descriptive writing I have ever known. Do not deny yourself that elevating experience.

Edel was a legend even in her lifetime, and that legend has gone on increasing, and now another stage has been entered by the introducing of her Cause.

## **The Mystery of Edel**

It is extraordinary that one so essentially simple and singleminded, moved by such direct motives, should at the same time present us with a mystery. Yet that is the position. It is impossible to solve her. She was a completely intangible character. She maintained an impenetrable reserve regarding her interior, and the digging up of material in that department presented an immense difficulty to the author of her Life. He had to go to infinite trouble by way of approaching all the priests and nuns who knew her in order to delve beneath the surface of her life.

I mentioned what Archbishop Leen said about her freedom from fear, but the same could be said in regard to the other natural repugnances. What did she like? What did she dislike? Nobody could ever make out. You could not imagine her being held back by anything from what she conceived to be her duty; nor could you think of her as displaying weakness in any position. Mention has been made of the possibility of a lion trying to get into the car in that period of waiting in the jungle. How would she react to that? I think I know perfectly well. Her reaction would be like that of St. Francis of Assisi. She would welcome that lion and say to him: "Have you come to take me away to the Lord, Brother?"

Was she grim or insensitive like many hard men who have no sense of fear, but who have no other sort of feeling in them either? Do not think that about her, because it would be the opposite of the case. She was ultra-sensitive. She had a highly developed sensitive quality and her nature must have thrilled to every one of the natural signals. She loved her family intensely, especially her mother, but she never intended to go back to them again. She loved all her set of friends tremendously, but she walked away from them. I think everybody was in tears when the Llangibby Castle moved out from Tilbury Docks, except the young lady herself. What is the explanation of the mystery? Now the best explanation I am able to give is this one: that to an extent which is very seldom met with, spiritual motives were in possession of the centre of her being. I might put it more simply and say that the Lord and His Mother were living there in a way that They are not in most of us. Everything that presented itself through her senses was referred to Them. If things were not right, they just, so to speak, rebounded; they did not penetrate to cause harm or even hesitation. If things were right, in they rushed and lit a flame. There were two effects in all that. One was that the ordinary weaknesses and temptations which afflict us and toss us about like hay, did not affect her. It was as if her defenses kept the enemy out, whereas with us the enemy gets in and is only dislodged after a struggle. Then on the other hand,

things that were regarded as for good came in and lit that fire in her and carried her away. That is the explanation of those incorrectnesses that many people think they find in her. She is lying in bed in a state bordering on complete collapse and under strict orders not to get up. She hears that a Bishop has come into the territory 100 miles away, somebody that she had been waiting and wishing to see for a long time because much depended on it. She gets out of bed, dresses, crushes down nature, sets off on that trip, accomplishes her mission, and comes back to bed! Wrong! Absolutely wrong! But you cannot apply the common rules. The transaction ran away with her and that is all! But it had to be something essentially good to be able to do that with her.

The everyday faults were not to be seen in her and there could be no question of sin. If ever devotion were on tap, it was in her case. If ever there were courage, and if ever endurance were shown in a Cause, she showed it. At least in the first part of her expedition she exceeded the physical output of strong men, even of the Africans, which is an admitted fact. Would you know all that from being with her? No. she avoided doing anything which would bring attention on her. All around are girls who would behave much as she did. A prominent aspect was her tendency towards humour and good spirits. She was great fun in company. She laughed her way through everything. As a nun, who was protesting to her about something, once said indignantly: "Don't start your laughing at me now, Miss Quinn. Just answer me these questions." She had an intense sense of humour and occasionally this caused her to be misunderstood. She dropped in one time on a friend. Finding her lurching off baked beans, she smilingly remarked: "You are treating yourself to great luxury." Her friend took that seriously and afterwards quoted it as an example of Edel Quinn's austerity: that she considered baked beans a tremendous luxury for lunch. In her outward behaviour Edel was the most natural of people. She would eat what was put before her, within certain limits. The things which could be acts of self-denial were so guarded from public attention that only a close observer would be led to comment on them. In which case she would insist that it was a matter of liking and not of deprivation. Again I say: it was impossible to diagnose her.

She did not talk much. In a group it was not Edel's voice which was heard. When this is pointed out to those who knew her well, they are at first incredulous, so much did she make her presence felt in any company. She was not conspicuously silent. She seemed to play her part in a conversation while at the same time it was others who were doing the major part of the talking. And very definitely there was an atmosphere of grace and peace about her which softened people. The note of any group where she was would be that of good humour and harmony.

## **Her Love of Fun**

At the risk of startling some, I must quote one incident concerning her which drastically shows that outstanding holiness is no bird of a feather with melancholy, but can in fact descend into unrestrained prankery. Mention has been made of the last-minute postponement of the sailing of the "Llangibby Castle." By reason of business in Dublin, two of the party who had come to London could not wait over. So the interesting feature obtained of Edel, seeing them off instead of their seeing her off. This set her and the other girls plotting and scheming. When Euston Station was reached, we found that the compartment in which the pair (lady and gentleman) were booked to travel, was decorated with wedding favours on a scale which would never been seen in the case of a genuine wedding. The train was crowded so that alternative accommodation was not available and the victims had to submit to the outrage. The lady pretended to enjoy the situation. Perhaps she did! But the gentleman was unutterably embarrassed. He sought to cloak this by vowing his indifference in regard to his own plight and vehemently protesting his sympathy for his companion. Then the whistle went. All the girls produced packets of confetti and simply deluged the pair. Imagine for yourself that journey to Holyhead.

While those who were left behind were laughing over the business, the porters arrived on the scene with brushes, none too pleased with the task of sweeping up, and voicing their feelings. They explained that usually they had one wedding party but this night they had three, one at each end of the train, and one in the middle. Ours was the one in the middle! And the porters said it was the noisiest!

That leaning towards fun was typical of Edel. It was somewhat suppressed in certain types of company or by hard work, but it was always in her and must be borne in mind if a true perspective is to be gained of her.

There is the tale of the cow which a convent had asked her to bring to the next village. The cow was none too willing to go, with the result that the whole population had to be mobilised to chase it. It was finally captured, tied to a plank, put in the back of the van, and delivered to its destination. There Edel got into her discussion with the missionary about starting the Legion. When he learned all that this entailed, he cried out in mock dismay: "Why had that cow got to come to this place?" Those who knew Edel will have no trouble picturing to themselves her face all alight with its typical expression of humour, as she exclaimed: "It was not the cow that brought me, Father. It was I who brought the cow."

## **Testimony to Her Holiness**

And now to turn from gay to grave, from lively to severe. I had the pleasure of listening in to the questioning of her family by Cardinal Suenens. It was a stirring experience. At an early point he asked what was her dominant characteristic as a young child. Without taking even a moment to reflect, her mother answered:

“Her unselfishness.” And at once the others chimed in with their comment: “Yes, Edel was completely unselfish.” Then the question came: “At what age did that develop in her?” Her mother said: “It was always in her from the time she was a baby.” Which produced from us the objection: “But that could not be. Babies are at best selfish little animals and they have to learn the better things from the grown-up people!” “No, No, No!” – almost indignantly: they had never seen a sign of selfishness in her. And that incredible assertion was adhered to.

That testimony is found recurring in the documents which are before us. The phrase “the most unselfish person I ever met” is often repeated. The Carmelites and other Orders in Africa speak of her comings to them as being “angels’ visits,” leaving an overwhelming impression. This means that eminently holy people regarded it as a spiritual favour to come in contact with her – an astounding valuation to make of anyone! Everybody who had such a visit from her talks about it.

She had no enemies. She had no critics, which is an amazing thing, because she had to be unyielding. She had to set up the authentic Legion of Mary, not a watered-down product, and she was going to do it. In her unutterably sweet, gentle fashion, she was inflexible where she had to be firm.

But perhaps it goes too far to say she had no critics. The note of criticism has been lightly sounded: to the effect that she should have been in a sanatorium instead of wandering widely and possibly conveying infection! Apply to this the fact, already voiced, that considerateness was her first characteristic. Somewhere in her mind she squared all these things, one with another, and found justification for her action. It is profoundly significant that no case of infection has ever been alleged against her, although it might be expected that she would be blamed for everything of the sort which would occur along her line of march.

Before she went to Africa, she was a great beauty. It is a pity, a sort of tragedy, that her true likeness has not been put on record. That photograph which appears on the cover of her *Life* is so inadequate as to be almost a travesty. For one thing, nobody ever saw her so grave looking as that picture represents her. Perhaps it would be too much to say that she was always smiling, but definitely there was always the suggestion of a smile, a brightness, a radiation of benevolence. Looking out through her lovely features, and animating them, was a spiritual quality which could not be captured by a camera or anything else. For it was the projection of her soul itself.

Her charm of manner was supreme, but it went far deeper than the surface. There was nothing of the artificial in her. She attracted people very strongly. In trying to analyse this fact, one is thrown back on that suggestion which Chesterton makes about St. Francis of Assisi: that the secret of the Saint’s power lay in the conviction which people gained that he was really interested in each

one of them. I would say that anyone who spoke with Edel Quinn ended up with that same idea. As a consequence they loved her and wanted to do what she asked of them. Originally she must have been physically strong, because she came of a family that was strong. One sister was a champion swimmer, third in Ireland in the national championship, and a member of the Irish team against England. Another sister was in the same category, almost as good. Another sister played provincial hockey for Leinster.

And now a final word. There is no use reading this little account of Edel Quinn and leaving matters so. For what is her contained is but the merest sketch. The standard Life by Cardinal Suenens must be read. It is a memorable document, worthy of its subject. You will rise up from the reading of it with thoughts that will not fade. It will give you a new aspect on holiness. It will make it evident that great holiness is not inhuman, unattainable or unattractive. There is nobody, whosoever it be, who will not derive benefit from reading about her.

Most biographies colour their subjects a little. Possibly this is inevitable. Readers want to be edified, not burdened by a recital of weaknesses. Lest one might expect to find that process at work in the story of Edel Quinn, it is important to state that there is not a word of exaggeration in it. One Bishop from the territory has made representations to the opposite effect, i.e. that Edel is insufficiently portrayed!

Everyone owes it to his own soul to read the book and seek to learn the lesson it affords: How out of her physical wreckage and her short life Edel Quinn fashioned an achievement which can rank with any of the epics of the past, but which is bigger than common history for it helped to build the Catholic Church.

Justly of her could Homer's words be sung: "Short is my tale, but deathless my renown."

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\*\* "Edel Quinn" by H.E. Leon-Joseph Cardinal Suenens; available from Concilium Legionis Mariae, De Montfort House, Brunswick Street, Dublin 7, Ireland.

## **Approved Prayer for the Beatification of Edel Quinn**

Eternal Father, I thank You for the grace You gave to Your servant, Edel Quinn, of striving to live always in the joy of Your presence, for the radiant charity infused into her heart by Your Holy Spirit, and for the strength she drew from the Bread of Life to labour until death for the glory of Your name, in loving dependence on Mary, Mother of the Church.

Confident, O Merciful Father, that her life was pleasing to You, I beg You to grant me, through her intercession, the special favour I now implore, and to make known by miracles the glory she enjoys in Heaven, so that she may be glorified also by Your Church on earth, through Christ Our Lord. Amen.

Permissu Ordinarii Dioec, Dublinen.  
die 5 September 1966.

Favours attributed to the intercession of Edel Quinn should be reported to:

Legion of Mary, De Montfort House,  
Brunswick Street, Dublin 7, Ireland

Copies of Edel Quinn Prayer Leaflet available from address given above or from local Legion Councils.