

ERSKINE CHILDERS

BY HENRI BÉRAUD

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ONE evening, in October 1920, Desmond Fitzgerald said to me, 'Go this evening to the house of Erskine Childers, No. 12 Bushy Park Road. He is an Englishman who is fighting with us for the cause of Sinn Fein, a real hero. I'll meet you there.'

This happened in Dublin at a time when all Ireland was baring its breast to the cannon's mouth. No Irishman would have dared to believe then that the day would come when an Irish shoulder would be pressed to the butt of a British Maxim.

There were two of us, French journalists, at the Shelbourne Hotel. The other was Joseph Kessel. We started about nine o'clock. Bushy Park Road lies in the north of Dublin, far distant from the centre of the town. Our outside car, attached to a sturdy cob that took us along at a smart trot, soon left the residential districts and the gardens behind and gained the suburbs. A chilly breeze dissipated into the night the lazy puffs of smoke from the pipe of our blue-nosed cabby.

We had great difficulty in finding the entrance to the cottage. A very awkward situation. A blunder, some thoughtless act, and a man's life might be forfeit. Perhaps the English police were ignorant of the refuge of the one whom we sought, who had just launched the first cry of distress and the first appeal for Ireland upon European public opinion.

Many white-painted gateways, enclosing invisible gardens, were passed in succession. At last, by means of a

thousand detective tricks, we found what we were after.

It was a home of luxury. Erskine Childers, though not a rich man, had filled it with the very best books and the most lovely things. In the drawing-room, we found several persons, and particularly one incomparable woman, the wife of our host. She was ailing, and lay on a couch, her limbs covered with a plaid. An American of old New England stock, Mrs. Childers lived for the liberation of Ireland. She received with the most extreme cordiality the two Frenchmen whom she knew to be favorable to the cause of the 'Irish Republic.' Her husband stood behind her. M. Bourgeois, of *Le Temps*, was present, as well as one of the Galway O'Briens. In front of the chimney-piece the mother of Mrs. Childers was preparing tea over the coals. Kessel sat at my right. At my left was Desmond Fitzgerald.

Fitzgerald was at that time minister of propaganda in the fugitive Cabinet presided over by Arthur Griffith. He was 'on the run' — which is the same as saying that he was in hiding. His face, though ravaged with worry and fatigue, still had something angelic in it. His career, known to all, had been that of a hero. Those who knew Fitzgerald loved him unreservedly. His charm even won the hearts of the English reporters. I am sure that no one gave him a greater measure of affection than I myself — affection in which, indeed, confidence mingled with anxiety, for his friends never ceased to

tremble for his life. For eighteen months we never opened a newspaper without dreading to find the report of his death.

One day, in Paris, came the news of his arrest. Captured by surprise by London agents, he was transported to Dublin Castle, whence, according to the Reuter dispatches, he was to be taken to the Mountjoy prison. For anybody who understood the British suppressive methods in Ireland this news was of sinister character. The troops of Sir Hamar Greenwood and General Macready had an easy way of getting rid of a prisoner — a fictitious attempt to escape was staged and the Sinn-Feiner shot down in his tracks. That was the custom in those frightful days.

Knowing this, and greatly alarmed by what I had heard, I wrote an article which I took in hot haste to M. E. J. Bois, editor of the *Petit Parisien*, whom I begged, supplicated even, to publish it at once. The article appeared the following day on the first page, accompanied by a portrait of Fitzgerald. To-day I still indulge the belief that my appeal, worded with intentional moderation, helped to save his life — he himself showed little enough of the fear of a rebel's death.

It is this same Desmond Fitzgerald who, as an official of the government of the 'Free State,' and the only one of the old days who has survived, bears to-day a great part of the responsibility for the death of Erskine Childers. I mean that he accepted the decision of a ministry of which he formed a part, to put our friend to death. Childers's crime was really that he remained faithful to an ideal which was that of Fitzgerald as well.

At the time when I was in contact with these two men they shared alike in the detestation of all compromise. The spectre of MacSwiney had dis-

sipated the wavering shade of Redmond. And yet Fitzgerald was to sign the Pact of London.

It does not beseem me, I am aware, to judge between the two Irish factions. Whatever my real opinion has been on this subject, I have, in spite of many invitations to do so, refrained from expressing it. But now a life has been destroyed that I loved, and with the consent of a man whom I have loved. To-day I must speak.

To-day I see Desmond Fitzgerald sitting at my right in the drawing-room at Bushy Park. I hear his voice and the voice of the dead man. I see them, both of them, holding their cups of tea in their hands. I have only to close my eyes to conjure up that peaceful scene, that evening when we talked so much of French literature, of Paris, of the Russian ballet, and of Mr. Lloyd George. All this was before my eyes at the moment when I learned that twelve British muskets had stretched on the ground our brave Erskine, and that you, Fitzgerald, had connived at that horror!

I have always defended you, Desmond, with all the energy of loyal friendship. And I certainly regret nothing of this. But I blush at my own credulity. You, you — ! You have so deceived me — me, who believed in you so sincerely, so blindly, that from this time on I shall scan all human visages for the calculation, the deception, and the hate that lie behind them!

Erskine Childers was born in London in 1870. Through his father and his uncle, who was a member of Gladstone's Government, he belonged to the caste of Britons of the most partisan sort. After finishing his studies he secured a place on one of the governmental commissions. The position, at the very heart of constitutional England, as it were, was a very envied one

as well as lucrative. It was at this period that he published his novel, *The Riddle of the Sands*, a book that scored a prodigious success, and which, written in a somewhat light and attractive style, foretold the war of 1914, and denounced German espionage in the North Sea.

In reality *The Riddle of the Sands* recited the adventures of Childers himself and a companion in a small sailing vessel. This companion was Mrs. Childers. I understand that this most admirable of wives contracted on this voyage the ailment of which I have spoken above. The war came. Here let us pass the word to M. Jacques Marsillac:—

Childers volunteered immediately and was given the command of an airplane craft, in which he participated in the famous raid on Cuxhaven on Christmas Day, 1914. Later he entered the naval aviation service, gave a brilliant account of himself, and, as a result of a raid undertaken over positions definitely mentioned in his *Riddle of the Sands*, in the course of which he engaged five German planes, he received a very high distinction, the Distinguished Service Cross. You see what manner of man he was—an Englishman educated in England, residing in England, for a long time holding a position in the English Government, and distinguishing himself in combat for England on two occasions, and brilliantly. The end of the war coincides with an about-face almost unbelievable in character. Childers joins the Sinn Fein, takes part in raids and ambush attacks upon the English army of occupation, and rapidly becomes one of the most trusted men of the Irish extremists. With abilities and a name like his he might have lived in England, honored and happy. But he chose rather to throw himself into the fight for Ireland, to be hounded without cease, an outlaw!

After three days and three nights of hypocritical pettifoggery Childers was finally led out to die. It was the twenty-fifth of November, 1922. The twelve soldiers who were first appointed to

carry out the gruesome duty refused obedience. In vain volunteers were called for. At last, sick of the task, a firing squad was secured by the grim stratagem of loading half the rifles with bullets and leaving half without, and distributing them to the men by lot. In this manner no one of the platoon could be sure that he contributed directly to the death of the martyr. Apparently nothing further was necessary to satisfy their consciences; at all events they obeyed their orders. Few details concerning the last moments have transpired; the executioners merely announced that Erskine Childers died bravely. There is nothing surprising in this, knowing what we do of him, both as soldier and citizen.

‘You see what manner of man he was,’ wrote our distinguished colleague. Yes, we do see him indeed. But in the place of this Childers, henceforth famous and respected by all, I wish for a moment to substitute another, not the hero, but the man—the one who stood there in the drawing-room of a Dublin cottage by the side of his wife, surrounded by his friends.

He was of medium height, very dark, very thin, his temples turning gray, the expression kindly. He was then about fifty years of age. The habit of meditation had furrowed his face; two long parentheses framed his mouth, whose parted lips always disclosed his long incisors. Mrs. Childers, having studied at the Sorbonne, loved to speak French, and the conversations at Bushy Park were therefore carried on in that language. Childers spoke only English. He took little part in our discourse, portions of which his wife translated for him from time to time. It was easy to see that he was little inclined to the amenities of the drawing-room. He manifested in everything, and especially in his friendships, a certain quiet intensity and an affection totally de-

void of rhetoric. I believe that I won his esteem. The letters he wrote me, which I have preserved, bear evidence of an intimate companionship of which I was ever proud, and upon which his death has now conferred a priceless value.

Alas, even the war itself has not inured us to this sort of thing, to such miserable farewells as this. Our hearts will always rise up in revolt at the thought that, by the will of men, that of our friend has ceased to beat. Childers is no more. Those who brought that about will have time for reflection — he did not fall in ambush beside some rainy road of the old island battleground; he was not dragged from his bed and massacred by a horde of drunken Black-and-Tans. He was 'executed' in cold blood after sentence by Lord knows what kind of court martial, on the charge of the illegal carrying of arms. As their first victim the 'regulars' did not dare to accuse him of being a rebel — that was a word from which they still shrunk. In the same way the Chouans, after joining the 'Blues,' dared not belittle the oaths of the Bocage.

In the black solitude of his cell, during those three dismal days and nights at Mountjoy, what were the last thoughts of the condemned man? 'The man,' says Renan, 'who has sacrificed his peace of mind and the legitimate pleasures of life to a great ideal always experiences a moment of despondency when the image of death presents itself to him for the first time and seeks to persuade him that all is in vain.'

Did Childers recall his cruises, the adventures of *The Riddle of the Sands*, the promise of a future of peace and love — could there be in this world two hearts more lofty or more fervid? — that spread out before him? Was he

troubled by a doubt, and did he feel, before he steeled his heart for the last bitter moment, a touch of that weakness that has shaken every apostle and every martyr? Was he aroused to the point of cursing those who were about to consummate the sacrifice, those who, like the insensate witnesses of Calvary, were preparing to shed the blood of their own Redeemer? Or did he bow to his destiny, and, at the moment of death, open his soul to a consciousness of something far above his earthly mission?

Those who knew him best will prefer this second hypothesis. It is true that the tragic end of Erskine Childers is an event the ultimate effect of which upon posterity cannot be measured. Doubtless it will count for more in the political history of the West than these many conferences that engross the attention of the newspapers and the public, or the journeys of statesmen out of office, or many a transalpine coup d'état. That's the way the world wags. Already the 'Move up, Mick, make room for Dick!' of the Irish Republicans, the cry of defiance of the outraged country, is thrown in the face of the murderers of Childers. Blood, alas, always calls for blood.

I will swear that Childers's last thought, as he stood there in front of that line of twelve black muzzles, was one of hope and of noble forgiveness. He knew his Shakespeare by heart. Who can say that he did not think, just before he fell, of that scene in *Antony and Cleopatra*, in which the betrayed hero, learning of the treachery of Enobarbus, sends him his belongings with the marvelous message,

Detain no jot, I charge thee. Write to him —
I will subscribe — gentle adieus and greetings;
Say that I wish he never find more cause
To change a master.

THE FASCISTI MOVEMENT IN GERMANY

BY M. PHILIPS PRICE

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THE end of the Hohenzollern monarchy in Germany meant something more than the fall of a dynasty. The event had important social-political aspects, for it meant nothing less than the removal of one of the pillars which supported the fabric of the old German State, and that was the pillar of agrarian privilege. The ground had been prepared for this revolution as far back as last century, when some of the worst abuses of a semifeudal society on the land were removed and the way paved for the investment of industrial capital in the agricultural industry.

In November 1918, Germany east of the Elbe had ceased to be a land in which the junker alone dominated the public services, and became a land where industrial capital and the junker owners of the latifundia were arrayed against an agricultural laboring population, which had won for the first time in history the right of combination in defense of its occupation. But the junkers, although they have lost their special privileges, still play an important rôle in German politics. They have an industrial policy of their own; and since they can no longer force that policy down the throat of other elements of the population without their consent, and since they cannot totally eradicate the Socialist instincts of the land-laboring population, they seek alliances with the middle-class elements of the industrial centres, whose capital is in the long run indispensable to them, if they are to keep up the productivity of their estates.

One symptom of the change that has come over the Prussian agrarian party to-day is the fact that it has changed its name from *Konservativ* to *Deutsch National*. This shows that the junkers no longer expect to win popular sympathy by harking back to the slogans of the old days. They must have a constructive policy and a national policy in order to get support from the small cultivators and independent peasants in West Prussia and South Germany, and from the numerous elements of the intelligentsia and petite bourgeoisie of the industrial centres, without whom they cannot reckon, now that the three-class electoral system is abolished, to secure a political representation in the Reichstag. And in order to win support from these elements it has been found necessary to have recourse to 'the Socialism of the silly fools.'

Every village of small cultivators has its speculator, who in most districts is a Jew. Every impoverished family of the lower middle classes in the towns, whose sons are unemployed through the break-up of the old Prussian military system and are gaining precarious existences as political secretaries or as bank clerks, has in recent years been forced to call in the pawnbroker to value the family jewels and portraits. And the pawnbroker, too, is as often as not a Jew. What easier task is there than making the Jew responsible for all the evils of modern Germany?

Here, then, are possible recruits for the party of agrarian reaction, which