

TRAGEDY OF ERRORS

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(By J. L. HAMMOND.)

"I say to the Government that they may to-morrow withdraw every one of their troops from Ireland. Ireland will be defended by her armed sons from invasion, and for that purpose the armed Catholics in the South will be only too glad to join arms with the armed Protestant Ulstermen."—*John Redmond.*

CHAPTER I.

THE IRISH OFFER.

Redmond's declaration on August 4, 1914, was an act of faith; it was also an act of statesmanship.

The world was plunging into a storm of anxieties and hopes in which everyone had to find some absorbing emotion. We talk in a struggle like this of the tenacity of a people, but what really happens is that men and women anchor themselves in some immediate task or duty. Englishmen for the next four years were either serving in the army or making munitions, or helping in war work of one kind or another; they had something to fill their thoughts. A man or woman suddenly deprived of a war task realised at once that it was only this sense of acting, and acting in common with millions of others, that kept them from madness or despair. In one sense it is true that the war lasted so long because there were so few spectators. For one man who was watching its devilish panorama, there were a hundred whose eyes and minds were glued to their personal share in it.

Irishmen do not find it easier than Englishmen to put their imaginations to sleep. They are an emotional people, and they were living in an atmosphere of intense excitement. For two years the Home Rule Bill had been a passionate topic of politics. A powerful Irish party had organised a rebellion; a powerful English party had promised to help. Two great armies were marching and drilling: first the Ulster Volunteers, then a much later creation, the Irish National Volunteers. Ulster had imported arms from Germany and seized the Customs House at Larne; the Nationalists had followed suit; Dublin Castle, inactive in the North, had intervened in the South, and three lives had been lost in the streets of Dublin. This incident happened a few days before the August Bank Holiday, and for nine Irishmen out of ten it overshadowed the German ultimatum to France. Thus anger, hope, and fear were all making a tumult of the Irish mind. One thing should have been evident: it was impossible to postpone the Home Rule Bill and to expect the Irish people to go on buying and selling cows and pigs and butter with nothing to occupy their minds. Something would seize their imaginations. What was it to be?

To Englishmen there were two parties in Ireland: the Unionists, who wanted no change in the system of government, and the Nationalists, who wanted Ireland to have a Parliament of her own, with certain specific powers. Both of these parties lived in one sense by the clocks of 1886. Ulster had not budged from her old antagonism: the Nationalists still stood for Parnell's demand. Irishmen knew that for 20 years there had been growing up a spiritual movement which had sought to give a form and scope at once richer and more ambitious to Ireland's personality and Ireland's claim. The Gaelic League revived Irish culture and the Irish language. Sinn Féin, though it did not oppose the Home Rule Bill, aimed at a more definite national emancipation, to be secured by the means preached by Thomas Davis and practised afterwards by the Nationalists of Hungary under Deak. For these men the ideal was not the Home Rule Bill, but the Renunciation Act of 1783, which declared that the people of Ireland should be "bound only by laws enacted by his Majesty and the Parliament of that kingdom in all cases whatever." Their method was not action in Parliament, but seces-

sion and the organisation of Irish life. They showed more imagination and more statesmanship than the Nationalist party in judging the Ulster problem; they were ready to propose generous concessions to Ulster for the sake of Irish unity, and they set their face against intolerance, whether practised by Catholic or Protestant, the Ancient Order of Hibernians, or Orange Lodges. They were not Republican. Their movement was attractive to the youth of Ireland, who felt towards the veterans of the Irish Party, with their preoccupations with particular interests and traditions in Irish life, rather as Young Ireland had felt towards the tired energies of O'Connell. There were other forces, too, Republican in aim and ready for physical violence, fired not a little by the example of Ulster, which had grown out of the Labor movement, so harshly and unwisely handled by the Government in the Dublin strike, and the survivors of the Fenian tradition.

This world, where the past beckoned with such dangerous power, could not escape the emotions of the war. Ireland would either think about the war, or she would think about her history. The fortunate peoples of the world think little about their history: those who have suffered are apt to think of little else. Ireland would either throw herself into the war, or she would live with her ghosts, and her noble ghosts are rebels, and rebels against British rule. Redmond knew that if she stood aside, without self-government, she would slip into the angry shadows of her history. There is a stone in Donegal where the Irish boy lingers before crossing the seas, because it is said to have a charm against "thinking long," the Irish name for homesickness. Redmond wanted a charm against the homesickness of the Irish memory.

This choice, and nothing less, hung upon Redmond's action and England's answer. Was Ireland going to help or hinder in the war? Were England and Ireland going to make peace or war? One thing was certain. Ireland would emerge from this struggle either the friend or the enemy of England: when emotions are put into such a furnace as this there is no room for any more dispassionate relationship.

In Ireland Redmond was triumphantly successful. Irish recruits poured into the Army throughout Nationalist Ireland as well as in England and Scotland: the Irish Volunteers, where Redmond's influence was not authoritative, were eager to help in a system of defence. Only 12,000 out of 170,000 followed Professor MacNeill in his secession as a protest against the promise to help overseas. By the end of the year 16,500 Volunteers had joined the Army. Redmond's offer was criticised by some as too trustful of England; by others as taking a decision which the Irish people alone had authority to take. But these criticisms scarcely counted at the moment, and there was little difference between England and Ireland in the early weeks of the war. They were just serious enough to serve as a warning to British Ministers that Redmond's offer must be answered at once, in the spirit in which it was made, if Ireland was to remain in the war.

THE COLD SPONGE.

The warning came to Ministers who were listening hard, but no longer listening to Ireland. The world as they had known it was in chaos and confusion: Ireland seemed a small element in the vast problem they were facing, and facing with courage and good sense; in that wild hour she seemed to present a new and comforting stability and peace. In this atmosphere a Government, already old and fatigued, with a habit encouraged by the procedure of the Parliament Act of letting things drift, failed to grasp the essential truth that the treatment of Ireland—an imaginative and sensitive people, offering help to England for the first time since the Union—was a political operation of the first consequence. It could only be successful if Ireland were treated as if she were in fact what she was on paper, a self-governing people. What actually happened was that Nationalist Ireland was treated like a Crown Colony. Mr. Lloyd George, speaking two years later of these months, said, "Some of the—I want to get the right word—some of the stupidities which

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