

ERNEST PSICHARI

FEW books published in France during the War made so vivid an impression as the *Voyage du Centurion*, the young author of which already lay dead on the battle-field. It was not only that the book is one of the most revealing studies of spiritual experience in which, under a thin disguise, Ernest Psichari recorded the gradual orientation of his mind towards a better in God, not only that the volume gave evidence of literary gifts of a very high order, but it was the fact of the author being none other than the grandson of Ernest Renan who had taken this means of announcing to the world his break-away from the philosophic and Liberal training of his youth and his approaching submission to the Catholic Church. The revelation, indeed, came as no surprise to his intimate friends, nor to his mother who, remaining faithful to her own creed, yet shewed unusual sympathy with her son's spiritual peregrinations. And a few months later, Ernest's friend, Henri Massis, in a little memorial volume, completed the tale of a conversion that had brought joy to Péguy and Claudel, and above all to Maritain, who for long years had been offering prayers on behalf of the friend of his boyhood.

To-day, after many years, Ernest's devoted sister, Henriette Psichari, comes forward to supplement the story and with much frankness to correct some misapprehensions spread by Catholic admirers concerning her brother which seemingly caused annoyance to his relations.¹ This intimate picture is all the more valuable that, coming from a non-Catholic source, it evades the striving after edification which is the common blot on spiritual biography, while it is animated throughout by warm sisterly affection. Thus we now know all that need be known concerning the gifted and impetuous young Frenchman, dying at the age

¹ *Ernest Psichari, mon frère*. By Henriette Psichari. (Plon, 1933; fr. 13.50.)

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of thirty-one, who had already proved that he had inherited much of the literary ability of his grandfather and who, but for the war, might have lived to become an ornament of the Dominican Order towards which all his hopes had tended during the last months of his life.

Fully to appreciate the almost miraculous grace of Psichari's conversion, one has to recall the special *milieu* in which his boyhood and adolescence were spent. His father, Jean Psichari, was a brilliant Greek scholar and his mother a woman of much culture and high principles, carrying with her the glamour of the Renan tradition, then at its most powerful over French thought. Thus the Psichari's salon attracted all that was intellectual and literary in Paris society and Ernest, with his younger brother, Michel—destined, he also, to a soldier's death—was urged forward, as English boys very rarely are, in his studies and encouraged to take his share in the philosophic and political discussions that went on around him. In those years and in that circle to be the grandson of Ernest Renan was in itself an incentive to intellectual effort and a challenge to established principles. Of religious observances there would appear to have been none beyond baptism in the Greek Church. When Ernest was barely fifteen, the *affaire Dreyfus* began to convulse France and drew the excitable youth still deeper into the embittered controversies of the time, more especially into anti-clericalism and anti-militarism. He possessed, so his sister tells us, great personal charm, much vivacity and the promise of real literary ability, but also much instability of purpose, and before he was twenty he was caught up into the usual dissipations of Paris life. A deep and unreturned passion for a woman some years older than himself flung him into both lamentable excesses and into a state of melancholy so intense that at one moment he attempted suicide. The career so full of promise seemed about to end in disaster.

If one wished to indicate briefly the two organisations most antipathetic to young Psichari by education and environment the reply would have to be the army and the

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Catholic Church. And it was precisely these two which were destined to be the means of his salvation. Banished into the country, so his sister relates, by his mother's wise firmness, Ernest, for several months, tasted something of that solitude which in later years he was to find so marvelously beneficial. He was still wholly deaf to any spiritual appeal, but his vigorous temperament reacted against the state of futile lethargy into which he had sunk, and he came to see that what was essential to his well-being was firm discipline. That love of order and tradition, so deep-rooted in the French nature and so closely interwoven with her military spirit, awoke in him, and although exempt from the necessity, he determined to do his year of military service in a line regiment at Beauvais. So congenial did he find the life that, to the vast distress of family and friends alike, who regarded his action as equivalent to the sacrifice of his literary career, he enlisted as a non-commissioned officer in the colonial artillery. His first long term of foreign service was in the Congo (1905-8). Later he qualified as an artillery officer at the Versailles Military College and spent the three great formative years of his life (1909-12) in Mauritania, winning much military distinction. The few months remaining to him were dedicated to literary work, to his reception into the Church and to his fervent life as a Catholic. Within three weeks of the outbreak of the war he lay dead by his guns, his rosary round his wrist.

In his first novel, *L'Appel aux Armes*, Psichari develops the line of argument that drew him irresistibly to a military career, and compelled him to 'embrace the cause of his forefathers in opposition to his father.' The Capitaine Nangès, with his blind and staunch devotion to the army and the young artilleryman with his passionate longing for active service for France, represent between them the author's own attitude, but the moral of the slight story is brought out too insistently to be artistic. The book is dedicated in affectionate terms to Péguy, traces of whose thought may be seen in the argument, and who, in return, devoted several eulogistic pages in his *Victor-Marie, Comte*

Hugo to the 'ami lointain, cher entre tous,' who was 'contributing antique valour to the heroism of the Mauretanian campaigns—you who alone to-day, alone in modern times, know what silence is, and who for long months at a time have listened to silence.'

This was written in 1910, when Psichari was back in Africa as a lieutenant at the head of a flying column of native levies moving from one outlying French post in the desert to another and, in a word, living the life that was to be enshrined in his posthumous *Voyage du Centurion*. Maxence who, by a mere literary artifice, stands for Psichari himself—the book is frankly autobiographical—explains in the opening pages his moral attitude, the outcome of his education. Leading his detachment out into the desert as the representative of France, he enjoys an invigorating sense of freedom and of youth.

'But towards his own country he felt no gratitude. Indeed he hated her . . . Nothing had opened up his heart to love, while everything, his secret anguish, his bitterness, his mental torment, all inclined him to hatred.'

It was his Voltairean father who had blundered, for Maxence had a soul, and 'he could not reconcile himself to the belief that Truth and Purity were vain words, devoid of moral import.'

Soon the vast solitudes of the Saharan desert, the long hours of silence and the austerity of the nomadic life have a cleansing and purifying effect on the young officer, the one European among the Mahommedan soldiery. He comes to see that he is carrying on the age-long fight of France and of civilisation against pagan barbarism, that the abyss between him and his men is the outcome of twenty centuries of Christianity, that behind him stand twenty thousand crusaders. In the presence of his Moorish soldiers he has to pose as a Christian and he asks himself afresh why he rejects the Cross? The priest and the soldier are alike necessary to order. Can he accept the one and deny the other? Can he truly represent the sovereign dignity of France if the Christian element is wholly lacking in him?

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In the midst of these largely intellectual preoccupations a sordid incident in desert life brings forcibly before him his own moral weakness and teaches him a much-needed lesson in humility. Thus through long weary months the interior conflict proceeds, while at home, as he knows, a faithful friend—Jacques Maritain—prays daily for his enlightenment.

A moment comes at length when Maxence foresees that it will be 'in the silence of the eternal sands that the Good Shepherd will appear holding out His bleeding hands to His newly-found sheep.' Again, a soldier first and foremost, he compares himself with the Centurion in the Gospel and he makes his own the Centurion's prayer. Thus the grace of real prayer is granted to him and the concluding pages of this spiritual voyage have much of the illuminating intensity and indeed the poetic beauty of the *Hound of Heaven*.

It is clear from his sister's account that the idea of a religious vocation filled her brother's thoughts during the last year of his life, spent partly on leave in Paris and partly on garrison duty at Cherbourg, and that more and more he felt himself drawn to the Dominicans. It was Père Clérissac, O.P., who had instructed and received him into the Church, and who continued, with infinite patience, to guide his impetuous steps in the path of spiritual regeneration. We learn that Ernest experienced extraordinary peace and happiness during a visit to the Dominican novitiate at Ryckholt, where he spent a few days previous to his admission into the Third Order (October, 1913). On the other hand when, contemplating at the moment ordination as a secular priest, he visited the seminary at Issy, where his grandfather had studied theology, he felt chilled and depressed. His journal, from which his sister quotes freely—though indeed his thoughts and prayers and aspirations, recorded day by day for himself alone, are almost too intimate for publication—testifies to the persistence of his aspirations to the priesthood in spite of an almost morbid sense of his own unworthiness. Henri Massis, too, in his

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little memoir, was privileged to quote some of Psichari's letters to Père Clérissac, in which he repeatedly begs to be told what *le Bon Dieu* wants of him. Yet clearly there were reasons for hesitation and delay so that, in the end, war broke out before the great decision had been irrevocably made. Perhaps Père Clérissac mistrusted somewhat the undoubtedly emotional quality of Ernest's conversion and the tendency to introspective depression which even his new-found faith failed to overcome. Possibly, too, the Dominican father feared that the world and all it had to offer to so gifted a nature still exercised too strong a fascination over him and that his heart was yet entangled in the thought of the woman he had once loved so unhappily. Certainly his confessor seems to have made no effort to hasten a decision, and the solution as recorded by Massis and apparently the last to be arrived at, that Ernest should go to Rome to study his theology at the Minerva as a free student, would imply some lingering doubt as to the solidity of a vocation which to the young officer himself had become an object of the most fervent desire.

With his intellectual gifts and his brilliant powers of expression it is easy to imagine Psichari as a great preacher, filling the pulpit of Notre Dame, and it adds a note of poignancy to the grief his death called forth that we are mourning not only a gallant soldier but also, possibly, a friar preacher who might well have proved a second Lacordaire to the Church in France.

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