

The Riddle of the Sands - A Record of Secret Service Recently Achieved

The setting is the Friesian Islands in the northwest of Germany on the eve of the First World War. Two friends aboard a restored lifeboat are extending their summer in an increasingly desperate quest to unravel a riddle in the sands. Welcome yourself into Erskine Childers' world of intrigue. So unfolds "The Riddle of the Sands" - one of the original mystery novels with a popularity which spills over to enthusiasts of all stripe.

Biographer Jim Ring describes Childers' style in "Riddle of the Sands" as "one of dedicated realism, in which a concrete, detail and graphic description of situation and character tends to make us less observers of the scene than participants in it."

The story is essentially a simple one: two men, one a Londoner stuck in the city in the summer, the other a desperately determined skipper trying to squeeze the

last out of his summer cruise, pick up the threads of a mystery in the seemingly barren, windswept, and hostile dunes and tidal pools of a foreign coast at a time of unsuspected hostility.

Carruthers, the guest, introduces their adventure thus: "Yachting in the Baltic at the end of September! The very idea made one shudder! In plain fact we were merely two young gentlemen in a seven-ton pleasure boat, with a taste for amateur hydrography and police duty combined."

The chief character of the novel is Arthur Davies, who Carruthers describes

"a sunburnt, brine-burnt zealot smarting under a personal discontent, athirst for a means, however tortuous, of contributing his effort to the great cause, the maritime supremacy of Britain . . . He drew inspiration from the very wind and spray. He communed with his tiller, I believe, and marshaled his figures with its help. To hear him talk was to feel a current of clarifying air blustering into a closed club-room."

The real beauty of the book lies in the detail and accuracy of description. It is essentially an accessible text, the story line being tautly strung along like candy through the forest. In the pointed simplicity of Davies, the leader, is a David-and-

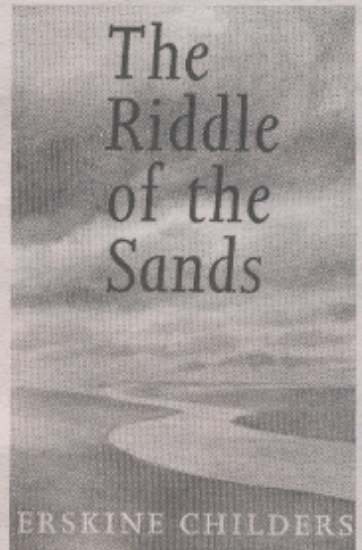
Goliath scenario: oily weekenders aboard the little "Dulcibella" against a polished naval officer on his yacht "Medusa."

The novel's anti-hero is Herr Dollmann, owner of "Medusa" and father of the young sailing enthusiast Clara. At a critical point in the narrative, Dollmann offers to guide Davies and his much smaller yacht through a stormy sea to safe anchorage. In good faith Davies accepts. Childers' own real-life logbook describes for us the result:

"Wind grew to an even worse gale, with heavy rain and hurricane look in the sky . . . Got into the channel but found the booms (markers) almost covered by an abnormally high tide and very hard to see. When close inshore, sea less bad - missed booms altogether and grounded, but blew off again. Whole population (of the island village) on the beach yelled."

Having survived that treachery, they make for the nearest port:

"Tide so high all dunes were obscured but conned her on and were soon tearing in to the mouth of the 'harbor,' about 15 feet wide, at about 7 knots. It was a tiny basin with not even room to round up. Tried to get sail down but peak jammed: let go anchor with a run,



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