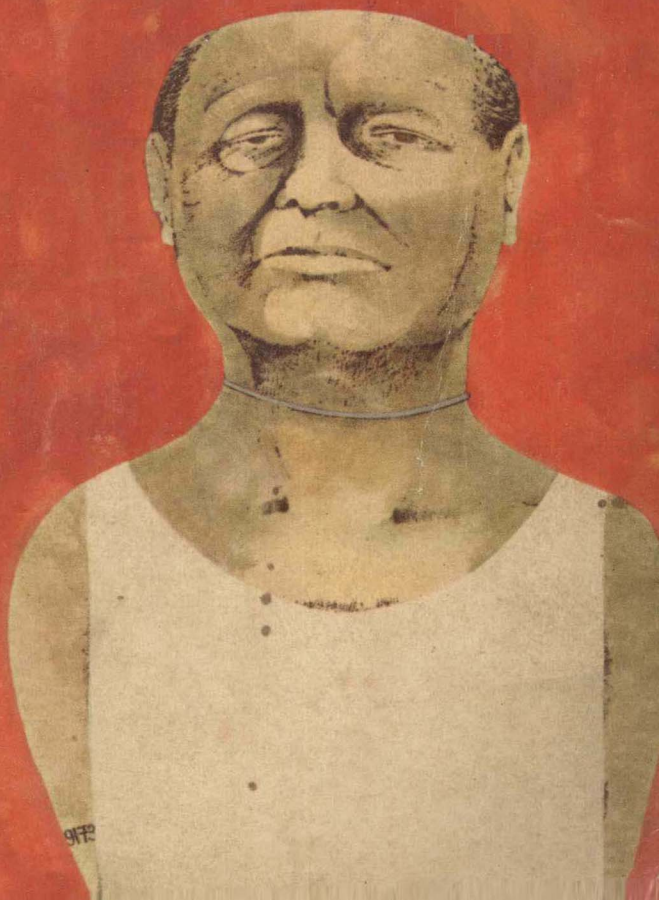


a Penguin Book

The Birthday King

Gabriel Fielding



Penguin Book 2093

The Birthday King

Gabriel Fielding is the pseudonym of a doctor who practises in Kent. He was born in Hexham, Northumberland, in 1916, and educated at St Edward's School, Oxford, and Trinity College, Dublin. He completed his medical studies at the Medical School of St George's Hospital, and became a Member of the Royal College of Surgeons and a Licentiate of the Royal College of Physicians in 1942. During the war he served in the R.A.M.C.

In 1948 he entered private practice in Kent, and since that time has also worked part time in the Prison Medical Service. He published his first book, *The Frog Prince and Other Poems*, in 1952, and this was followed by *XXVII Poems*, and four novels, *Brotherly Love*, *In the Time of the Greenbloom*, *Eight Days*, and *Through Streets Broad and Narrow*. Gabriel Fielding is married and has five children.

The Birthday King

Gabriel Fielding



Penguin Books

by arrangement with Hutchinson of London

Penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth,
Middlesex, England
Penguin Books Pty Ltd, Ringwood,
Victoria, Australia

First published by Hutchinson 1962
Published in Penguin Books 1965

Copyright © Gabriel Fielding, 1962

Made and printed in Great Britain by
The Whitefriars Press Ltd,
London and Tonbridge
Set in 10 on 11 pt Baskerville

This book is sold subject to the condition
that it shall not, by way of trade, be lent,
re-sold, hired out, or otherwise
disposed of without the publisher's consent,
in any form of binding or cover other
than that in which it is published.

**This story is dedicated to my wife
Edwina Eleanora Barnsley**

There is something in every eye which warns us not to trust it infinitely; greatly perhaps we may trust it, but not to the uttermost. It is the feeling of being at the mercy of this cruelty, which makes us shrink from sorrows that come as if directly from the hands of creatures. Our sense of security is gone. We do not know how far things will go. Strange to say, it seems as if we know all when we are in the grasp of the inscrutable God, but that when creatures have got their hands upon us there are dreadful things in the background; undiscovered worlds of wrong, subterranean pitfalls, dismal possibilities of injustice magnified like shadows and to appearances inexhaustible.

FREDERICK WILLIAM FABER

There is an unfeelt pause between mere being
And of being good. There is a lapse in time
And an extension both unseen – unseeing,
While within, the gamut of the bad is run
Like many raging scales, ramping in their
 climb
To contrary variety through all
That can be done
In murder, theft and harmful jealousies. . . .
The pause lifts up the self-condemned to grace.

ERICA MARX

Chapter I

At ten minutes to nine o'clock, silence everywhere; the instrument-room of the observatory interpenetrated by it as by the motionless mountain air, as by the soundlessness of outer space where only the hydrogen atoms 'speak', cheeping like chicks in a limitless incubator: the crepuscular buzz of the universe seeping down through the ionized layer whose depths it was the observatory's purpose to measure.

But at five minutes to nine o'clock, Professor Erwin Lillesand, the old man in the room above, the not-so-old Director of Research, aged about fifty-five or so, would sit up in his truckle bed and lower first one foot and then the other to the floor. He would sit there on his rump in his flannel night-shirt and rub his fresh grey face before starting to dress for the night's work.

Below him, his assistant, Ruprecht Waitzmann, also of the Aeronautical Institute, Berlin, was enjoying the last minutes of silence as he recorded the previous night's findings in the log book; collating the latest data neatly and not thinking about them overmuch at all, his mind flying about over a dozen different considerations as restlessly as one of the main transmitter's signals over the Heaviside layer. The Director, he knew, would grunt over this pabulum, fitting it somewhere into the broader project he had in mind. Later, the 'old man' would bully Schmidt the technician and then go to the equipment shed to feed his owls and, in a better temper, return to make his nightly report to Berlin.

'But tonight I shall feed his owls first,' Waitzmann assured himself. 'It's the weekend; and as from nine o'clock I'm officially on leave.' He ruled off his column of figures. Tomorrow morning I enter a different world; and, in the

meantime, as always, I have myself. He closed the log and looked out through the signal-room window. There was no sign of Schmidt returning for night duty and this pleased him; for he wanted himself to himself for at least another hour. He was very much enjoying being himself that evening; in fact, he found that he could think about nothing that was not intensely original and interesting.

He checked the instruments, left a fairly courteous note for his superior, tore it up and rewrote a rather more arrogant one:

23 August '39

Herzogstadt Observatory.

Herr Direktor, Sir,

I have had to go off duty a little earlier than usual as I have certain matters to attend to in the village.

The Baron von Hoffbach is calling for me at 08.00 hrs tomorrow and should you wish to contact me over the weekend I may be found either at my home in Bergedorf or alternatively chez my friend von Hoffbach at Schloss Schönform.

I fancy that the discrepancies in last night's readings are due to a condenser overheating or else to a fault in one of the relays. No doubt the good Schmidt will check both before you yourself take over.

Heil Hitler!

Waitzmann R. Chief assistant.

He particularly liked that 'the good Schmidt'; it did not strike him as callow at all until he was half-way down the mountainside when it was too late to return and alter it. Even then, he assured himself, Professor Lillesand, being himself ambitious, would understand how fortunate he was to have such an influential assistant as his junior; that, in such circumstances, the unspoken might occasionally be spoken without loss.

He stepped out now into the summer's dusk. It was precisely nine o'clock. The hands of his wrist-watch, set by the observatory's clock, confirmed it as did the bells of the entire landscape. From the valleys below, from towers across the lake, the clocks of several churches struck the hour, their notes and keys mingling and clashing as they drifted up into the last light of the August day.

It was brighter up here, keen; a late hawk hovered over the dark floors, drifting over the lights of the two nearest villages. It hung delicately on its wing-tips then slid across the face of the lake and fell abruptly into the darkness rising like a tide up the sides of the valleys.

Sometimes, at this hour, Waitzmann would go up the steps to the weather shack on the extreme peak of the Herzogstadt. From there, as inclusive as his thoughts, his eye could sweep the northern horizon to take in the whole country of his youth: in the foreground the monastery in which he had been educated; further north, Onkel Fritz's one-time castle on the peninsula jutting out into the Tegernsee; and beyond these, Munich and the plain on which the Waitzmann factories smoked as they had smoked for the last seventy years.

But tonight he did not wish to think about either the past or Onkel Fritz. He was in a hurry, hurrying towards those smoking factories as a prince to a cathedral. Quite distinctly he saw this prince, or it might have been a bishop, heading for some large building. Even as he himself walked across to the 'stores' the image suddenly possessed his mind, rising from what he supposed was his 'Culture', the legends, pagan and Christian, on which he had been reared and which no amount of scientific training had been able wholly to destroy.

Pleasurably, he followed up the implications of his vision. The prince, he realized, had many dangers to overcome before he could possess his inheritance. The young aspiring bishop, a figure dredged perhaps from the pages of Stendhal, whom he had read when he was sixteen, had many powerful elders to outwit before he achieved his consecration. But each ultimately would overcome all obstructions and distractions and enter into the closer embrace of destiny; obstructions, perhaps, such as Onkel Fritz, distractions like 'the Angel', his elder brother, Alfried, whom he would be seeing again that very weekend, on their return from the United States.

Glancing back at the main building to assure himself that the professor's bedroom light was still on, he entered the

'stores'. The 'old man' was by now shaving in cold water, his flat grey eyes confronted by themselves in the wall-mirror, the stubby hands smoothing out the skin-folds in his heavy cheeks for the touch of his cut-throat. There were fifteen minutes in which to feed the owls; and tonight, as opposed to a leg of rabbit or mountain hare, it should be a mouse. The owls enjoyed mice and the observatory kept a supply of them for research purposes.

Ruprecht closed the door of the shed and switched on the light. As always, he ran his eyes over the spares, checking each shelf to see that neither Schmidt nor the Professor had left anything out of place. He made a swift inventory of everything there: electrical components to the left, each valve and condenser stacked neatly in its carton; to the right, weather-gear; mittens, winter helmets, defrosting equipment, mercury jars and glycol. On the upper shelves, the tinned duty rations; below these, chemicals for the latrine, washing soap and disinfectant. Against the remaining wall, the three labelled lockers: the Professor's, Ruprecht's own and Technician Schmidt's.

Satisfied, he moved over to the window beneath which the two cages stood on a bench. 'The Mousery' had always fascinated him. It was a charming conceit of Schmidt's father, an Oberammergau wood-carver whose calvaries sold for the highest prices. As a compliment to the Professor he had fashioned it as a perfect miniature of a medieval cottage: the frame exquisitely carved, the little window-boxes filled with paper flowers and even a minute Madonna of Succour poised in a corner niche between the first and second floors.

At the back, through a plexiglass window, the twenty-odd mice could be seen going about their daily affairs: chewing up paper to make their breeding beds, nibbling oat-ears in the dining-room and scurrying up and down the little balustraded staircase which connected the two floors. For some seconds, Waitzmann, quite forgetful of his purpose, gazed in at them, then he lifted off the roof-section with its over-hanging eaves and selected three mice: a piebald, a pure white and a dun-coloured. They trembled in his hand,

their snouts and sharp yellow teeth gnawing at his palm as they sought a means of escape.

His intervention had caused the customary pause. For ten seconds not a mouse was to be seen. They were all hiding in their bed-nests, which quaked and quivered like boiling oatmeal. Then, quite soon, the veterans began to emerge; one by one, the bulls, the cows and the young pushed out into the open, questioning and investigating just as they did when their feed-bowls had been replenished.

In the other larger cage, zinc barred for three-quarters of its height, but with a deep glass tray at the bottom, Professor Lillesand's two owls stood stiffly on their perches: breasts and faces paper-grey, their amber eyes so placed at the bottoms of their immaculate craters that they seemed to be a separate creation altogether: as solitary as single drops of dew. Waitzmann opened the cage door and dropped the mice one by one into the tray. He saw them start on their immediate investigations, their rapid circling tours and brief councils, then stood back from the cage and looked at the owls. Since their eyes were so set that without moving they could see each pattern traced by the mice on the shining floor, the birds did not even incline their heads to look downwards; and the mice, conferring now in a group, never once looked upwards at the wooden perches just above their heads.

As the first owl, talons outstretched, dropped from its perch, Waitzmann switched off the light and set off down the mountainside to Schorgast.

In the morning the Baron was hallooing from beside his open car long before the appointed hour. Ruprecht heard his cries from a turn in the path when he was half-way down the Herzogstadt. He shouted back and saw the shrunken sun-bright figure get back into the front seat and level a pair of binoculars at him. He waved and made signals and the Baron blew morse on the horn and semaphored with his arms.

When Ruprecht reached him he leapt out of the car again and said,

'Don't I look the better for it? Aren't the rewards there for all to see? For the first time in years I've a clean tongue in the mornings; my bowels are moving superbly.'

'You look magnificent, Baron.'

'It was very arduous, my boy.'

'What was the treatment?'

'Expensive; particularly the singing.'

'You had singing lessons?'

'Every morning before breakfast. Half-an-hour of it, with breath-control to mobilize the diaphragm. It was all explained to us in a series of lectures; most interesting.'

'And what does that do?'

'It helps to discharge the juices of the gall-bladder and the sweetbread. One has no idea what a lot there is to the digestive processes until one has attended a good clinic. And I, I might tell you, was one of the star performers, Ruprecht. The doctors told me I had a particularly fine baritone, good enough for Lohengrin.'

'And the food?'

'Food, my dear boy! In the accepted sense, it wasn't food at all. We lived entirely on vegetable juices, minerals and fruit pulp. We had hydrotherapy four times daily: scalding hot hosing followed by ice-water baths. My urine turned white as water and my skin tightened up like an athlete's.'

'And you feel the better for it?'

'Ten years younger! In Berlin now I shall speak to some purpose - and not only in Berlin.' He flashed Ruprecht a straight glance. 'I am even ready to deal with your mother.'

'And my brother, Alfried.'

'Ah yes! Your brother. Your mother tells me that he and your uncle are due back from the States this weekend?'

'You've heard from her?'

'She telephoned me two days ago. But let's not get to that just yet. There'll be time enough when we know exactly what's what. Tell me instead how you are yourself; how's the ionosphere behaving? I trust you're getting on well with Lillesand?'

'Oh, he's not too bad. We don't take much notice of one another.'

The Baron laughed. 'What self-confidence you have. I wanted his opinion of you, not yours of the Professor.'

'I don't think he's displeased with me. But really since I've no intention of making a career of physics I'm not greatly interested.'

'Then you must become so. It will make things easier for myself when the time comes.'

This was the Baron's way. He would be an open-air man and jolly for most of the time; but behind the presentation, or so Ruprecht was beginning to think, was a harder fellow, as calculating as a father. Yes, looking at him as he sat beside him, he saw this older man as strong and seasoned: square knees, behind the green hunting breeches, as heavily boned as a bull's, thick sinews, a massive skull. Not in his prime, admittedly, already beyond it; old enough to have sired a full-grown man of Ruprecht's own age, old enough to have sired Leo von Hoffbach who was in fact a year older.

But I'm in no need of a father, Ruprecht told himself as this splendid creature impelled his old car along the tortuous mountain road. No, no, I don't need a father at this stage. I've got on without one for years. But I can do with a man of his age behind me to be used. I'll use his strength, his ageing bones and his knowledge of power until I'm in a position to dispense with them.

But immediately after he had thought like this he also began to decry the Baron as a dusty old squire essentially out of practice in dealing with anything more complex than his crumbling castle and its neglected acres. Though he himself might imagine he was grooming Ruprecht to his own advantage, in reality Ruprecht was pushing the older man forward like a stalking-horse and watching his progress far more narrowly than he could ever have supposed.

'What scenery!' exclaimed the Baron as they came out on to the main road. 'You can have no idea how it moves a born countryman like myself to be overshadowed by trees again after the rigours of Karlsbad. Trees do something for the soul, my boy, and the body too. The smell of our native resin does more for me, I assure you, than all the imported incense of our monasteries.'

'I know exactly what you mean.'

The Baron was not a fine bull any longer. He was a grizzled boar such as his son Leo loved to shoot. A wily old male snuffling about for acorns in the forests of Schönform.

'We'll stop here,' he said, 'and take a look down through our native trees to our fair Isar. We'll hasten slowly, Ruprecht, and we'll be all the better able to deal with anything your Onkel Fritz may have in store for us.'

They got out of the car at an official viewing place and stood for a few moments trying to see down to the green water which at this point flowed through a narrow ravine. The beech trees were in full leaf and awkwardly placed; whichever way they looked they were prevented from even a glimpse of the river. The Baron inveighed against the city fathers and, turning his back, 'christened' the slope. He said it was unreasonable and inept to make a parking area and go to the trouble of erecting rustic seats and notices when the view for which they were intended was not at all times visible. With what Ruprecht took for 'old man's stubbornness' he walked up and down the retaining wall and then, in his smart breeches and white stockings, clambered over the parapet and went noisily downwards, stopping every now and then to do some breathing exercises. In a few minutes, when he had disappeared from Ruprecht's view, it must have occurred to him that he had parked his car incorrectly and he called up to ask if the rear wheel was in proper alignment with the edge of the road. Ruprecht called back good-humouredly that all was well but the Baron was not satisfied and instructed him to look again.

'Then I will measure,' Ruprecht assured him.

Without moving from the seat, glowering into the trees, he waited the necessary time and then once again called down into the valley that all four tyres were off the metal.

The Baron returned slowly, grunting as he scrambled up the steep slope. He refused Ruprecht's offer of help in climbing back over the parapet, and then, as suddenly, apologized for his ill-humour.

'It's Carin,' he said. 'I can't tell you how I worry about

my wife, especially when she's staying with her mother, Frau de Luce.'

Ruprecht, who had only met Carin von Hoffbach once, and had only heard accounts of her mother, Frau de Luce, from Leo, agreed that it was a pity for a mother and daughter to dislike one another so much.

'It's not merely a question of dislike,' the Baron corrected him. 'They're a bad influence on each other, my boy. They bring out the worst in one another. My mother-in-law, Eva, disapproves of Carin and the poor girl can't stand it, yet she cannot keep away from the old woman; she's always running off back to East Prussia to renew the quarrelling. When she eventually returns to Berlin she spends more wildly than ever and the cycle repeats itself.'

Ruprecht was interested. Carin von Hoffbach, the Baronin, French on her father's side, had been a glittering figure of his adolescence who had for a time haunted his boldest fantasies. Even in those days, he remembered, her breath had smelt of French drinks, her laughter had been harsh and she had painted her finger-nails violet. It was well known that she had always, as she might have put it herself, had 'a *penchant* for young men'.

'And then,' the Baron was continuing, 'when she has come down to her last mark of credit, what does she do but return once more to the old widow at Rastenburg to renew the very mood that causes all the trouble? And this, my dear fellow, when she might be living peacefully at Schönform with Leo. In confidence, it would not only be more economical but it would be much less embarrassing for us all.'

'I suppose the Baronin has expensive tastes, sir?'

'You should see the bills I get. Every month vast sums at the Adlon and the Kaiserhof, to say nothing of a sheaf of papers from Paris and Rheims for perfumes and champagne, and most of it for the benefit of young subalterns from my own regiment.'

'Disgraceful!'

'I'm glad you agree. What on earth d'you suppose is the matter with her?'

'I haven't an idea, sir. I suppose it might be something to

do with the fact that her mother disapproves of her. I find myself that this can have a great effect on one, even though, of course, I'm so much younger than your wife.'

'Of course, of course,' said the Baron in sudden excellent humour again. 'I'm very glad I've confided in you like this, Ruprecht. Everything will work out well in the end. One mustn't let these personal affairs drain one's energies at a time like this.'

'You're sanguine about the situation?'

'On the whole, very. Mind you, I had my doubts to begin with; but you've got to give Hitler his due, the fellow knows what's wanted.'

'How would you say the atmosphere compared with the last affair, sir, nineteen fourteen?' Ruprecht asked gloomily.

'No comparison at all,' said the Baron a little irritably. 'Those were very good times, Plumes, my dear fellow!'

'Plumes?' Ruprecht repeated in some surprise.

'Sorry! I was in my own thoughts, Ruprecht. I was young then, you realize? In fact, I wasn't old enough to join the family regiment until the early part of '14 but I remember the feathers and I can't think of that business without seeing them. It all started so innocently; whenever the Kaiser held a review the whole parade ground positively sprouted feathers like an ostrich farm. The generals wore them, the top echelons of the best regiments and the women too - a magnificent sight. Feathers and bicycle-croquet, my boy. That's how I think of that affair.'

'Really?'

The Baron was plunged in a nostalgia inseparable from those boyhood recollections. Visions of his walrus-moustached father, his veiled and beautiful mother, his fierce courtship of the half-French Carin, assailed him like a flock of bright-faced ghosts. Lost innocence and the confidence of his youth contended once again for recognition in his least-visited memory.

'Even the early cannon,' he vouchsafed, 'blew out feathers of cordite in August of '14; but it was different at the end of course: that was the trouble.'