CHAPTER THE FOURTH

MR. BRITLING IN SOLILOQUY

Section 1

Very different from the painful contentment of the bruised and broken Mr. Direck was the state of mind of his unwounded host. He too was sleepless, but sleepless without exaltation. The day had been too much for him altogether; his head, to borrow an admirable American expression, was "busy."

How busy it was, a whole chapter will be needed to describe....

The impression Mr. Britling had made upon Mr. Direck was one of indefatigable happiness. But there were times when Mr. Britling was called upon to pay for his general cheerful activity in lump sums of bitter sorrow. There were nights--and especially after seasons of exceptional excitement and nervous activity--when the reckoning would be presented and Mr. Britling would welter prostrate and groaning under a stormy sky of unhappiness--active insatiable unhappiness--a beating with rods.

The sorrows of the sanguine temperament are brief but furious; the world knows little of them. The world has no need to reckon with them. They

cause no suicides and few crimes. They hurry past, smiting at their victim as they go. None the less they are misery. Mr. Britling in these moods did not perhaps experience the grey and hopeless desolations of the melancholic nor the red damnation of the choleric, but he saw a world that bristled with misfortune and error, with poisonous thorns and traps and swampy places and incurable blunderings. An almost insupportable remorse for being Mr. Britling would pursue him--justifying itself upon a hundred counts....

And for being such a Britling!...

Why--he revived again that bitter question of a thousand and one unhappy nights--why was he such a fool? Such a hasty fool? Why couldn't he look before he leapt? Why did he take risks? Why was he always so ready to act upon the supposition that all was bound to go well? (He might as well have asked why he had quick brown eyes.)

Why, for instance, hadn't he adhered to the resolution of the early morning? He had begun with an extremity of caution....

It was a characteristic of these moods of Mr. Britling that they produced a physical restlessness. He kept on turning over and then turning over again, and sitting up and lying back, like a martyr on a gridiron....

This was just the latest instance of a life-long trouble. Will there

ever be a sort of man whose thoughts are quick and his acts slow? Then indeed we shall have a formidable being. Mr. Britling's thoughts were quick and sanguine and his actions even more eager than his thoughts. Already while he was a young man Mr. Britling had found his acts elbow their way through the hurry of his ideas and precipitate humiliations. Long before his reasons were marshalled, his resolutions were formed. He had attempted a thousand remonstrances with himself; he had sought to remedy the defects in his own character by written inscriptions in his bedroom and memoranda inside his watch case. "Keep steady!" was one of them. "Keep the End in View." And, "Go steadfastly, coherently, continuously; only so can you go where you will." In distrusting all impulse, scrutinising all imagination, he was persuaded lay his one prospect of escape from the surprise of countless miseries. Otherwise he danced among glass bombs and barbed wire.

There had been a time when he could exhort himself to such fundamental charge and go through phases of the severest discipline. Always at last to be taken by surprise from some unexpected quarter. At last he had ceased to hope for any triumph so radical. He had been content to believe that in recent years age and a gathering habit of wisdom had somewhat slowed his leaping purpose. That if he hadn't overcome he had at least to a certain extent minimised it. But this last folly was surely the worst. To charge through this patient world with--how much did the car weigh? A ton certainly and perhaps more--reckless of every risk. Not only to himself but others. At this thought, he clutched the steering wheel again. Once more he saw the bent back of the endangered

cyclist, once more he felt rather than saw the seething approach of the motor bicycle, and then through a long instant he drove helplessly at the wall....

Hell perhaps is only one such incident, indefinitely prolonged....

Anything might have been there in front of him. And indeed now, out of the dreamland to which he could not escape something had come, something that screamed sharply....

"Good God!" he cried, "if I had hit a child! I might have hit a child!" The hypothesis flashed into being with the thought, tried to escape and was caught. It was characteristic of Mr. Britling's nocturnal imagination that he should individualise this child quite sharply as rather plain and slender, with reddish hair, staring eyes, and its ribs crushed in a vivid and dreadful manner, pinned against the wall, mixed up with some bricks, only to be extracted, oh! horribly.

But this was not fair! He had hurt no child! He had merely pitched out Mr. Direck and broken his arm....

It wasn't his merit that the child hadn't been there!

The child might have been there!

Mere luck.

He lay staring in despair--as an involuntary God might stare at many a thing in this amazing universe--staring at the little victim his imagination had called into being only to destroy....

Section 2

If he had not crushed a child other people had. Such things happened. Vicariously at any rate he had crushed many children....

Why are children ever crushed?

And suddenly all the pain and destruction and remorse of all the accidents in the world descended upon Mr. Britling.

No longer did he ask why am I such a fool, but why are we all such fools? He became Man on the automobile of civilisation, crushing his thousands daily in his headlong and yet aimless career....

That was a trick of Mr. Britling's mind. It had this tendency to spread outward from himself to generalised issues. Many minds are like that nowadays. He was not so completely individualised as people are supposed to be individualised--in our law, in our stories, in our moral judgments. He had a vicarious factor. He could slip from concentrated reproaches to the liveliest remorse for himself as The Automobilist in

General, or for himself as England, or for himself as Man. From remorse for smashing his guest and his automobile he could pass by what was for him the most imperceptible of transitions to remorse for every accident that has ever happened through the error of an automobilist since automobiles began. All that long succession of blunderers became Mr. Britling. Or rather Mr. Britling became all that vast succession of blunderers.

These fluctuating lapses from individuation made Mr. Britling a perplexity to many who judged only by the old personal standards. At times he seemed a monster of cantankerous self-righteousness, whom nobody could please or satisfy, but indeed when he was most pitiless about the faults of his race or nation he was really reproaching himself, and when he seemed more egotistical and introspective and self-centred he was really ransacking himself for a clue to that same confusion of purposes that waste the hope and strength of humanity. And now through the busy distresses of the night it would have perplexed a watching angel to have drawn the line and shown when Mr. Britling, was grieving for his own loss and humiliation and when he was grieving for these common human weaknesses of which he had so large a share.

And this double refraction of his mind by which a concentrated and individualised Britling did but present a larger impersonal Britling beneath, carried with it a duplication of his conscience and sense of responsibility. To his personal conscience he was answerable for his private honour and his debts and the Dower House he had made and so on,

but to his impersonal conscience he was answerable for the whole world. The world from the latter point of view was his egg. He had a subconscious delusion that he had laid it. He had a subconscious suspicion that he had let it cool and that it was addled. He had an urgency to incubate it. The variety and interest of his talk was largely due to that persuasion, it was a perpetual attempt to spread his mental feathers over the task before him....

Section 3

After this much of explanation it is possible to go on to the task which originally brought Mr. Direck to Matching's Easy, the task that Massachusetts society had sent him upon, the task of organising the mental unveiling of Mr. Britling. Mr. Direck saw Mr. Britling only in the daylight, and with an increasing distraction of the attention towards Miss Cecily Corner. We may see him rather more clearly in the darkness, without any distraction except his own.

Now the smashing of Gladys was not only the source of a series of reproaches and remorses directly arising out of the smash; it had also a wide system of collateral consequences, which were also banging and blundering their way through the Britling mind. It was extraordinarily inconvenient in quite another direction that the automobile should be destroyed. It upset certain plans of Mr. Britling's in a direction growing right out from all the Dower House world in which Mr. Direck

supposed him to be completely set and rooted. There were certain matters from which Mr. Britling had been averting his mind most strenuously throughout the week-end. Now, there was no averting his mind any more.

Mr. Britling was entangled in a love affair. It was, to be exact, and disregarding minor affinities, his eighth love affair. And the new automobile, so soon as he could drive it efficiently, was to have played quite a solvent and conclusive part in certain entangled complications of this relationship.

A man of lively imagination and quick impulses naturally has love affairs as he drives himself through life, just as he naturally has accidents if he drives an automobile.

And the peculiar relations that existed between Mr. Britling and Mrs. Britling tended inevitably to make these love affairs troublesome, undignified and futile. Especially when they were viewed from the point of view of insomnia.

Mr. Britling's first marriage had been a passionately happy one. His second was by comparison a marriage in neutral tint. There is much to be said for that extreme Catholic theory which would make marriage not merely lifelong but eternal. Certainly Mr. Britling would have been a finer if not a happier creature if his sentimental existence could have died with his first wife or continued only in his love for their son. He had married in the glow of youth, he had had two years of clean and

simple loving, helping, quarrelling and the happy ending of quarrels. Something went out of him into all that, which could not be renewed again. In his first extremity of grief he knew that perfectly well--and then afterwards he forgot it. While there is life there is imagination, which makes and forgets and goes on.

He met Edith under circumstances that did not in any way recall his lost Mary. He met her, as people say, "socially"; Mary, on the other hand, had been a girl at Newnham while he was a fellow of Pembroke, and there had been something of accident and something of furtiveness in their lucky discovery of each other. There had been a flush in it; there was dash in it. But Edith he saw and chose and had to woo. There was no rushing together; there was solicitation and assent. Edith was a Bachelor of Science of London University and several things like that, and she looked upon the universe under her broad forehead and broad-waving brown hair with quiet watchful eyes that had nothing whatever to hide, a thing so incredible to Mr. Britling that he had loved and married her very largely for the serenity of her mystery. And for a time after their marriage he sailed over those brown depths plumbing furiously.

Of course he did not make his former passion for Mary at all clear to her. Indeed, while he was winning Edith it was by no means clear to himself. He was making a new emotional drama, and consciously and subconsciously he dismissed a hundred reminiscences that sought to invade the new experience, and which would have been out of key with it.

And without any deliberate intention to that effect he created an atmosphere between himself and Edith in which any discussion of Mary was reduced to a minimum, and in which Hugh was accepted rather than explained. He contrived to believe that she understood all sorts of unsayable things; he invented miracles of quite uncongenial mute mutuality....

It was over the chess-board that they first began to discover their extensive difficulties of sympathy. Mr. Britling's play was characterised by a superficial brilliance, much generosity and extreme unsoundness; he always moved directly his opponent had done so--and then reflected on the situation. His reflection was commonly much wiser than his moves. Mrs. Britling was, as it were, a natural antagonist to her husband; she was as calm as he was irritable. She was never in a hurry to move, and never disposed to make a concession. Quietly, steadfastly, by caution and deliberation, without splendour, without error, she had beaten him at chess until it led to such dreadful fits of anger that he had to renounce the game altogether. After every such occasion he would be at great pains to explain that he had merely been angry with himself. Nevertheless he felt, and would not let himself think (while she concluded from incidental heated phrases), that that was not the complete truth about the outbreak.

Slowly they got through the concealments of that specious explanation. Temperamentally they were incompatible.

They were profoundly incompatible. In all things she was defensive. She never came out; never once had she surprised him halfway upon the road to her. He had to go all the way to her and knock and ring, and then she answered faithfully. She never surprised him even by unkindness. If he had a cut finger she would bind it up very skilfully and healingly, but unless he told her she never discovered he had a cut finger. He was amazed she did not know of it before it happened. He piped and she did not dance. That became the formula of his grievance. For several unhappy years she thwarted him and disappointed him, while he filled her with dumb inexplicable distresses. He had been at first so gay an activity, and then he was shattered; fragments of him were still as gay and attractive as ever, but between were outbreaks of anger, of hostility, of something very like malignity. Only very slowly did they realise the truth of their relationship and admit to themselves that the fine bud of love between them had failed to flower, and only after long years were they able to delimit boundaries where they had imagined union, and to become--allies. If it had been reasonably possible for them to part without mutual injury and recrimination they would have done so, but two children presently held them, and gradually they had to work out the broad mutual toleration of their later relations. If there was no love and delight between them there was a real habitual affection and much mutual help. She was proud of his steady progress to distinction, proud of each intimation of respect he won; she admired and respected his work; she recognised that he had some magic, of liveliness and unexpectedness that was precious and enviable. So far as she could help him she did. And even when he knew that there was nothing behind it,

that it was indeed little more than an imaginative inertness, he could still admire and respect her steady dignity and her consistent honourableness. Her practical capacity was for him a matter for continual self-congratulation. He marked the bright order of her household, her flowering borders, the prosperous high-born roses of her garden with a wondering appreciation. He had never been able to keep anything in order. He relied more and more upon her. He showed his respect for her by a scrupulous attention to her dignity, and his confidence by a franker and franker emotional neglect. Because she expressed so little he succeeded in supposing she felt little, and since nothing had come out of the brown depths of her eyes he saw fit at last to suppose no plumb-line would ever find anything there. He pursued his interests; he reached out to this and that; he travelled; she made it a matter of conscience to let him go unhampered; she felt, she thought--unrecorded; he did, and he expressed and re-expressed and over-expressed, and started this and that with quick irrepressible activity, and so there had accumulated about them the various items of the life to whose more ostensible accidents Mr. Direck was now for an indefinite period joined.

It was in the nature of Mr. Britling to incur things; it was in the nature of Mrs. Britling to establish them. Mr. Britling had taken the Dower House on impulse, and she had made it a delightful home. He had discovered the disorderly delights of mixed Sunday hockey one week-end at Pontings that had promised to be dull, and she had made it an institution.... He had come to her with his orphan boy and a memory of a

passionate first loss that sometimes, and more particularly at first, he seemed to have forgotten altogether, and at other times was only too evidently lamenting with every fibre of his being. She had taken the utmost care of the relics of her duskily pretty predecessor that she found in unexpected abundance in Mr. Britling's possession, and she had done her duty by her sometimes rather incomprehensible stepson. She never allowed herself to examine the state of her heart towards this youngster; it is possible that she did not perceive the necessity for any such examination....

So she went through life, outwardly serene and dignified, one of a great company of rather fastidious, rather unenterprising women who have turned for their happiness to secondary things, to those fair inanimate things of household and garden which do not turn again and rend one, to aestheticisms and delicacies, to order and seemliness. Moreover she found great satisfaction in the health and welfare, the growth and animation of her own two little boys. And no one knew, and perhaps even she had contrived to forget, the phases of astonishment and disillusionment, of doubt and bitterness and secret tears, that spread out through the years in which she had slowly realised that this strange, fitful, animated man who had come to her, vowing himself hers, asking for her so urgently and persuasively, was ceasing, had ceased, to love her, that his heart had escaped her, that she had missed it; she never dreamt that she had hurt it, and that after its first urgent, tumultuous, incomprehensible search for her it had hidden itself bitterly away....

Section 4

The mysterious processes of nature that had produced Mr. Britling had implanted in him an obstinate persuasion that somewhere in the world, from some human being, it was still possible to find the utmost satisfaction for every need and craving. He could imagine as existing, as waiting for him, he knew not where, a completeness of understanding, a perfection of response, that would reach all the gamut of his feelings and sensations from the most poetical to the most entirely physical, a beauty of relationship so transfiguring that not only would she--it went without saying that this completion was a woman--be perfectly beautiful in its light but, what was manifestly more incredible, that he too would be perfectly beautiful and quite at his ease.... In her presence there could be no self-reproaches, no lapses, no limitations, nothing but happiness and the happiest activities.... To such a persuasion half the imaginative people in the world succumb as readily and naturally as ducklings take to water. They do not doubt its truth any more than a thirsty camel doubts that presently it will come to a spring.

This persuasion is as foolish as though a camel hoped that some day it would drink from such a spring that it would never thirst again. For the most part Mr. Britling ignored its presence in his mind, and resisted the impulses it started. But at odd times, and more particularly in the afternoon and while travelling and in between books, Mr. Britling so far

succumbed to this strange expectation of a wonder round the corner that he slipped the anchors of his humour and self-contempt and joined the great cruising brotherhood of the Pilgrims of Love....

In fact--though he himself had never made a reckoning of it--he had been upon eight separate cruises. He was now upon the eighth....

Between these various excursions--they took him round and about the world, so to speak, they cast him away on tropical beaches, they left him dismasted on desolate seas, they involved the most startling interventions and the most inconvenient consequences--there were interludes of penetrating philosophy. For some years the suspicion had been growing up in Mr. Britling's mind that in planting this persuasion in his being, the mysterious processes of Nature had been, perhaps for some purely biological purpose, pulling, as people say, his leg, that there were not these perfect responses, that loving a woman is a thing one does thoroughly once for all--or so--and afterwards recalls regrettably in a series of vain repetitions, and that the career of the Pilgrim of Love, so soon as you strip off its credulous glamour, is either the most pitiful or the most vulgar and vile of perversions from the proper conduct of life. But this suspicion had not as yet grown to prohibitive dimensions with him, it was not sufficient to resist the seasons of high tide, the sudden promise of the salt-edged breeze, the invitation of the hovering sea-bird; and he was now concealing beneath the lively surface of activities with which Mr. Direck was now familiar, a very extensive system of distresses arising out of the latest, the

eighth of these digressional adventures....

Mr. Britling had got into it very much as he had got into the ditch on the morning before his smash. He hadn't thought the affair out and he hadn't looked carefully enough. And it kept on developing in just the ways he would rather that it didn't.

The seventh affair had been very disconcerting. He had made a fool of himself with quite a young girl; he blushed to think how young; it hadn't gone very far, but it had made his nocturnal reflections so disagreeable that he had--by no means for the first time--definitely and forever given up these foolish dreams of love. And when Mrs. Harrowdean swam into his circle, she seemed just exactly what was wanted to keep his imagination out of mischief. She came bearing flattery to the pitch of adoration. She was the brightest and cleverest of young widows. She wrote quite admirably criticism in the Scrutator and the Sectarian, and occasionally poetry in the Right Review--when she felt disposed to do so. She had an intermittent vein of high spirits that was almost better than humour and made her quickly popular with most of the people she met, and she was only twenty miles away in her pretty house and her absurd little jolly park.

There was something, she said, in his thought and work that was like walking in mountains. She came to him because she wanted to clamber about the peaks and glens of his mind.

It was natural to reply that he wasn't by any means the serene mountain elevation she thought him, except perhaps for a kind of loneliness....

She was a great reader of eighteenth century memoirs, and some she conveyed to him. Her mental quality was all in the vein of the friendships of Rousseau and Voltaire, and pleasantly and trippingly she led him along the primrose path of an intellectual liaison. She came first to Matching's Easy, where she was sweet and bright and vividly interested and a great contrast to Mrs. Britling, and then he and she met in London, and went off together with a fine sense of adventure for a day at Richmond, and then he took some work with him to her house and stayed there....

Then she went away into Scotland for a time and he wanted her again tremendously and clamoured for her eloquently, and then it was apparent and admitted between them that they were admirably in love, oh! immensely in love.

The transitions from emotional mountaineering to ardent intimacies were so rapid and impulsive that each phase obliterated its predecessor, and it was only with a vague perplexity that Mr. Britling found himself transferred from the rôle of a mountainous objective for pretty little pilgrims to that of a sedulous lover in pursuit of the happiness of one of the most uncertain, intricate, and entrancing of feminine personalities. This was not at all his idea of the proper relations between men and women, but Mrs. Harrowdean had a way of challenging his

gallantry. She made him run about for her; she did not demand but she commanded presents and treats and surprises; she even developed a certain jealousy in him. His work began to suffer from interruptions. Yet they had glowing and entertaining moments together that could temper his rebellious thoughts with the threat of irreparable loss. "One must love, and all things in life are imperfect," was how Mr. Britling expressed his reasons for submission. And she had a hold upon him too in a certain facile pitifulness. She was little; she could be stung sometimes by the slightest touch and then her blue eyes would be bright with tears.

Those possible tears could weigh at times even more than those possible lost embraces.

And there was Oliver.

Oliver was a person Mr. Britling had never seen. He grew into the scheme of things by insensible gradations. He was a government official in London; he was, she said, extraordinarily dull, he was lacking altogether in Mr. Britling's charm and interest, but he was faithful and tender and true. And considerably younger than Mr. Britling. He asked nothing but to love. He offered honourable marriage. And when one's heart was swelling unendurably one could weep in safety on his patient shoulder. This patient shoulder of Oliver's ultimately became Mr. Britling's most exasperating rival.

She liked to vex him with Oliver. She liked to vex him generally. Indeed in this by no means abnormal love affair, there was a very strong antagonism. She seemed to resent the attraction Mr. Britling had for her and the emotions and pleasure she had with him. She seemed under the sway of an instinctive desire to make him play heavily for her, in time, in emotion, in self-respect. It was intolerable to her that he could take her easily and happily. That would be taking her cheaply. She valued his gifts by the bother they cost him, and was determined that the path of true love should not, if she could help it, run smooth. Mr. Britling on the other hand was of the school of polite and happy lovers. He thought it outrageous to dispute and contradict, and he thought that making love was a cheerful, comfortable thing to be done in a state of high good humour and intense mutual appreciation. This levity offended the lady's pride. She drew unfavourable contrasts with Oliver. If Oliver lacked charm he certainly did not lack emotion. He desired sacrifice, it seemed, almost more than satisfactions. Oliver was a person of the most exemplary miserableness; he would weep copiously and frequently. She could always make him weep when she wanted to do so. By holding out hopes and then dashing them if by no other expedient. Why did Mr. Britling never weep? She wept.

Some base streak of competitiveness in Mr. Britling's nature made it seem impossible that he should relinquish the lady to Oliver. Besides, then, what would he do with his dull days, his afternoons, his need for a properly demonstrated affection?

So Mr. Britling trod the path of his eighth digression, rather overworked in the matter of flowers and the selection of small jewellery, stalked by the invisible and indefatigable Oliver, haunted into an unwilling industry of attentions--attentions on the model of the professional lover of the French novels--by the memory and expectation of tearful scenes. "Then you don't love me! And it's all spoilt. I've risked talk and my reputation.... I was a fool ever to dream of making love beautifully...."

Exactly like running your car into a soft wet ditch when you cannot get out and you cannot get on. And your work and your interests waiting and waiting for you!...

The car itself was an outcome of the affair. It was Mrs. Harrowdean's idea, she thought chiefly of pleasant expeditions to friendly inns in remote parts of the country, inns with a flavour of tacit complicity, but it fell in very pleasantly with Mr. Britling's private resentment at the extraordinary inconvenience of the railway communications between Matching's Easy and her station at Pyecrafts, which involved a journey to Liverpool Street and a long wait at a junction. And now the car was smashed up--just when he had acquired skill enough to take it over to Pyecrafts without shame, and on Tuesday or Wednesday at latest he would have to depart in the old way by the London train....

Only the most superficial mind would assert nowadays that man is a reasonable creature. Man is an unreasonable creature, and it was

entirely unreasonable and human for Mr. Britling during his nocturnal self-reproaches to mix up his secret resentment at his infatuation for Mrs. Harrowdean with his ill-advised attack upon the wall of Brandismead Park. He ought never to have bought that car; he ought never to have been so ready to meet Mrs. Harrowdean more than halfway.

What exacerbated his feeling about Mrs. Harrowdean was a new line she had recently taken with regard to Mrs. Britling. From her first rash assumption that Mr. Britling was indifferent to his wife, she had come to realise that on the contrary he was in some ways extremely tender about his wife. This struck her as an outrageous disloyalty. Instead of appreciating a paradox she resented an infidelity. She smouldered with perplexed resentment for some days, and then astonished her lover by a series of dissertations of a hostile and devastating nature upon the lady of the Dower House.

He tried to imagine he hadn't heard all that he had heard, but Mrs. Harrowdean had a nimble pen and nimbler afterthoughts, and once her mind had got to work upon the topic she developed her offensive in half-a-dozen brilliant letters.... On the other hand she professed a steadily increasing passion for Mr. Britling. And to profess passion for Mr. Britling was to put him under a sense of profound obligation--because indeed he was a modest man. He found himself in an emotional quandary.

You see, if Mrs. Harrowdean had left Mrs. Britling alone everything

would have been quite tolerable. He considered Mrs. Harrowdean a charming human being, and altogether better than he deserved. Ever so much better. She was all initiative and response and that sort of thing. And she was so discreet. She had her own reputation to think about, and one or two of her predecessors--God rest the ashes of those fires!--had not been so discreet. Yet one could not have this sort of thing going on behind Edith's back. All sorts of things one might have going on behind Edith's back, but not this writing and saying of perfectly beastly things about Edith. Nothing could alter the fact that Edith was his honour....

Section 5

Throughout the week-end Mr. Britling had kept this trouble well battened down. He had written to Mrs. Harrowdean a brief ambiguous note saying, "I am thinking over all that you have said," and after that he had scarcely thought about her at all. Or at least he had always contrived to be much more vividly thinking about something else. But now in these night silences the suppressed trouble burst hatches and rose about him.

What a mess he had made of the whole scheme of his emotional life! There had been a time when he had started out as gaily with his passions and his honour as he had started out with Gladys to go to Market Saffron. He had as little taste for complications as he had for ditches. And now his passions and his honour were in a worse case even than poor muddy

smashed up Gladys as the cart-horses towed her off, for she at any rate might be repaired. But he--he was a terribly patched fabric of explanations now. Not indeed that he had ever stooped to explanations. But there he was! Far away, like a star seen down the length of a tunnel, was that first sad story of a love as clean as starlight. It had been all over by eight-and-twenty and he could find it in his heart to grieve that he had ever given a thought to love again. He should have lived a decent widower.... Then Edith had come into his life, Edith that honest and unconscious defaulter. And there again he should have stuck to his disappointment. He had stuck to it--nine days out of every ten. It's the tenth day, it's the odd seductive moment, it's the instant of confident pride--and there is your sanguine temperament in the ditch.

He began to recapitulate items in the catalogue of his escapades, and the details of his automobile misadventures mixed themselves up with the story of his heart steering. For example there was that tremendous Siddons affair. He had been taking the corner of a girlish friendship and he had taken it altogether too far. What a frightful mess that had been! When once one is off the road anything may happen, from a crumpled mud-guard to the car on the top of you. And there was his forty miles an hour spurt with the great and gifted Delphine Marquise--for whom he was to have written a play and been a perfect Annunzio. Until Willersley appeared--very like the motor-cyclist--buzzing in the opposite direction. And then had ensued angers, humiliations....

Had every man this sort of crowded catalogue? Was every

forty-five-year-old memory a dark tunnel receding from the star of youth? It is surely a pity that life cannot end at thirty. It comes to one clean and in perfect order....

Is experience worth having?

What a clean, straight thing the spirit of youth is. It is like a bright new spear. It is like a finely tempered sword. The figure of his boy took possession of his mind, his boy who looked out on the world with his mother's, dark eyes, the slender son of that whole-hearted first love. He was a being at once fine and simple, an intimate mystery. Must he in his turn get dented and wrinkled and tarnished?

The boy was in trouble. What was the trouble?

Was it some form of the same trouble that had so tangled and tainted and scarred the private pride of his father? And how was it possible for Mr. Britling, disfigured by heedless misadventures, embarrassed by complications and concealments, to help this honest youngster out of his perplexities? He imagined possible forms of these perplexities. Graceless forms. Ugly forms. Such forms as only the nocturnal imagination would have dared present....

Oh, why had he been such a Britling? Why was he still such a Britling?

Mr. Britling sat up in his bed and beat at the bedclothes with his

fists. He uttered uncompleted vows, "From this hour forth ... from this hour forth...."

He must do something, he felt. At any rate he had his experiences. He could warn. He could explain away. Perhaps he might help to extricate, if things had got to that pitch.

Should he write to his son? For a time he revolved a long, tactful letter in his mind. But that was impossible. Suppose the trouble was something quite different? It would have to be a letter in the most general terms....

Section 6

It was in the doubly refracting nature of Mr. Britling's mind that while he was deploring his inefficiency in regard to his son, he was also deploring the ineffectiveness of all his generation of parents. Quite insensibly his mind passed over to the generalised point of view.

In his talks with Mr. Direck, Mr. Britling could present England as a great and amiable spectacle of carelessness and relaxation, but was it indeed an amiable spectacle? The point that Mr. Direck had made about the barn rankled in his thoughts. His barn was a barn no longer, his farmyard held no cattle; he was just living laxly in the buildings that ancient needs had made, he was living on the accumulated prosperity of

former times, the spendthrift heir of toiling generations. Not only was he a pampered, undisciplined sort of human being; he was living in a pampered, undisciplined sort of community. The two things went together.... This confounded Irish business, one could laugh at it in the daylight, but was it indeed a thing to laugh at? We were drifting lazily towards a real disaster. We had a government that seemed guided by the principles of Mr. Micawber, and adopted for its watchword "Wait and see." For months now this trouble had grown more threatening. Suppose presently that civil war broke out in Ireland! Suppose presently that these irritated, mishandled suffragettes did some desperate irreconcilable thing, assassinated for example! The bomb in Westminster Abbey the other day might have killed a dozen people.... Suppose the smouldering criticism of British rule in India and Egypt were fanned by administrative indiscretions into a flame....

And then suppose Germany had made trouble....

Usually Mr. Britling kept his mind off Germany. In the daytime he pretended Germany meant nothing to England. He hated alarmists. He hated disagreeable possibilities. He declared the idea of a whole vast nation waiting to strike at us incredible. Why should they? You cannot have seventy million lunatics.... But in the darkness of the night one cannot dismiss things in this way. Suppose, after all, their army was more than a parade, their navy more than a protest?

We might be caught--It was only in the vast melancholia of such

occasions that Mr. Britling would admit such possibilities, but we might be caught by some sudden declaration of war.... And how should we face it?

He recalled the afternoon's talk at Claverings and such samples of our governmental machinery as he chanced to number among his personal acquaintance. Suppose suddenly the enemy struck! With Raeburn and his friends to defend us! Or if the shock tumbled them out of power, then with these vituperative Tories, these spiteful advocates of weak tyrannies and privileged pretences in the place of them. There was no leadership in England. In the lucid darkness he knew that with a terrible certitude. He had a horrible vision of things disastrously muffled; of Lady Frensham and her Morning Post friends first garrulously and maliciously "patriotic," screaming her way with incalculable mischiefs through the storm, and finally discovering that the Germans were the real aristocrats and organising our national capitulation on that understanding. He knew from talk he had heard that the navy was weak in mines and torpedoes, unprovided with the great monitors needed for a war with Germany; torn by doctrinaire feuds; nevertheless the sea power was our only defence. In the whole country we might muster a military miscellany of perhaps three hundred thousand men. And he had no faith in their equipment, in their direction. General French, the one man who had his entire confidence, had been forced to resign through some lawyer's misunderstanding about the Irish difficulty. He did not believe any plans existed for such a war as Germany might force upon us, any calculation, any foresight of the thing

at all.

Why had we no foresight? Why had we this wilful blindness to disagreeable possibilities? Why did we lie so open to the unexpected crisis? Just what he said of himself he said also of his country. It was curious to remember that. To realise how closely Dower House could play the microcosm to the whole Empire….

It became relevant to the trend of his thoughts that his son had through his mother a strong strain of the dark Irish in his composition.

How we had wasted Ireland! The rich values that lay in Ireland, the gallantry and gifts, the possible friendliness, all these things were being left to the Ulster politicians and the Tory women to poison and spoil, just as we left India to the traditions of the chattering army women and the repressive instincts of our mandarins. We were too lazy, we were too negligent. We passed our indolent days leaving everything to somebody else. Was this the incurable British, just as it was the incurable Britling, quality?

Was the whole prosperity of the British, the far-flung empire, the securities, the busy order, just their good luck? It was a question he had asked a hundred times of his national as of his personal self. No doubt luck had favoured him. He was prosperous, and he was still only at the livelier end of middle age. But was there not also a personal factor, a meritorious factor? Luck had favoured the British with a

well-placed island, a hardening climate, accessible minerals, but then too was there not also a national virtue? Once he had believed in that, in a certain gallantry, a noble levity, an underlying sound sense. The last ten years of politics had made him doubt that profoundly. He clung to it still, but without confidence. In the night that dear persuasion left him altogether.... As for himself he had a certain brightness and liveliness of mind, but the year of his fellowship had been a soft year, he had got on to The Times through something very like a misapprehension, and it was the chances of a dinner and a duchess that had given him the opportunity of the Kahn show. He'd dropped into good things that suited him. That at any rate was the essence of it. And these lucky chances had been no incentive to further effort. Because things had gone easily and rapidly with him he had developed indolence into a philosophy. Here he was just over forty, and explaining to the world, explaining all through the week-end to this American--until even God could endure it no longer and the smash stopped him--how excellent was the backwardness of Essex and English go-as-you-please, and how through good temper it made in some mysterious way for all that was desirable. A fat English doctrine. Punch has preached it for forty years.

But this wasn't what he had always been. He thought of the strenuous intentions of his youth, before he had got into this turmoil of amorous experiences, while he was still out there with the clean star of youth. As Hugh was....

In those days he had had no amiable doctrine of compromise. He had truckled to no "domesticated God," but talked of the "pitiless truth"; he had tolerated no easy-going pseudo-aristocratic social system, but dreamt of such a democracy "mewing its mighty youth" as the world had never seen. He had thought that his brains were to do their share in building up this great national imago, winged, divine, out of the clumsy, crawling, snobbish, comfort-loving caterpillar of Victorian England. With such dreams his life had started, and the light of them, perhaps, had helped him to his rapid success. And then his wife had died, and he had married again and become somehow more interested in his income, and then the rather expensive first of the eight experiences had drained off so much of his imaginative energy, and the second had drained off so much, and there had been quarrels and feuds, and the way had been lost, and the days had passed. He hadn't failed. Indeed he counted as a success among his generation. He alone, in the night watches, could gauge the quality of that success. He was widely known, reputably known; he prospered. Much had come, oh! by a mysterious luck, but everything was doomed by his invincible defects. Beneath that hollow, enviable show there ached waste. Waste, waste, waste--his heart, his imagination, his wife, his son, his country--his automobile....

Then there flashed into his mind a last straw of disagreeable realisation.

He hadn't as yet insured his automobile! He had meant to do so. The papers were on his writing-desk.

Section 7

On these black nights, when the personal Mr. Britling would lie awake thinking how unsatisfactorily Mr. Britling was going on, and when the impersonal Mr. Britling would be thinking how unsatisfactorily his universe was going on, the whole mental process had a likeness to some complex piece of orchestral music wherein the organ deplored the melancholy destinies of the race while the piccolo lamented the secret trouble of Mrs. Harrowdean; the big drum thundered at the Irish politicians, and all the violins bewailed the intellectual laxity of the university system. Meanwhile the trumpets prophesied wars and disasters, the cymbals ever and again inserted a clashing jar about the fatal delay in the automobile insurance, while the triangle broke into a plangent solo on the topic of a certain rotten gate-post he always forgot in the daytime, and how in consequence the cows from the glebe farm got into the garden and ate Mrs. Britling's carnations.

Time after time he had promised to see to that gate-post....

The organ motif battled its way to complete predominance. The lesser themes were drowned or absorbed. Mr. Britling returned from the rôle of an incompetent automobilist to the rôle of a soul naked in space and time wrestling with giant questions. These cosmic solicitudes, it may be, are the last penalty of irreligion. Was Huxley right, and was all

humanity, even as Mr. Britling, a careless, fitful thing, playing a tragically hopeless game, thinking too slightly, moving too quickly, against a relentless antagonist?

Or is the whole thing just witless, accidentally cruel perhaps, but not malignant? Or is it wise, and merely refusing to pamper us? Is there somewhere in the immensities some responsive kindliness, some faint hope of toleration and assistance, something sensibly on our side against death and mechanical cruelty? If so, it certainly refuses to pamper us.... But if the whole thing is cruel, perhaps also it is witless and will-less? One cannot imagine the ruler of everything a devil--that would be silly. So if at the worst it is inanimate then anyhow we have our poor wills and our poor wits to pit against it. And manifestly then, the good of life, the significance of any life that is not mere receptivity, lies in the disciplined and clarified will and the sharpened and tempered mind. And what for the last twenty years--for all his lectures and writings--had he been doing to marshal the will and harden the mind which were his weapons against the Dark? He was ready enough to blame others--dons, politicians, public apathy, but what was he himself doing?

What was he doing now?

Lying in bed!

His son was drifting to ruin, his country was going to the devil, the

house was a hospital of people wounded by his carelessness, the country roads choked with his smashed (and uninsured) automobiles, the cows were probably lined up along the borders and munching Edith's carnations at this very moment, his pocketbook and bureau were stuffed with venomous insults about her--and he was just lying in bed!

Suddenly Mr. Britling threw back his bedclothes and felt for the matches on his bedside table.

Indeed this was by no means the first time that his brain had become a whirring torment in his skull. Previous experiences had led to the most careful provision for exactly such states. Over the end of the bed hung a light, warm pyjama suit of llama-wool, and at the feet of it were two tall boots of the same material that buckled to the middle of his calf. So protected, Mr. Britling proceeded to make himself tea. A Primus stove stood ready inside the fender of his fireplace, and on it was a brightly polished brass kettle filled with water; a little table carried a tea-caddy, a tea-pot, a lemon and a glass. Mr. Britling lit the stove and then strolled to his desk. He was going to write certain "Plain Words about Ireland." He lit his study lamp and meditated beside it until a sound of water boiling called him to his tea-making.

He returned to his desk stirring the lemon in his glass of tea. He would write the plain common sense of this Irish situation. He would put things so plainly that this squabbling folly would have to cease. It should be done austerely, with a sort of ironical directness. There

should be no abuse, no bitterness, only a deep passion of sanity.

What is the good of grieving over a smashed automobile?

He sipped his tea and made a few notes on his writing pad. His face in the light of his shaded reading lamp had lost its distraught expression, his hand fingered his familiar fountain pen....

Section 8

The next morning Mr. Britling came into Mr. Direck's room. He was pink from his morning bath, he was wearing a cheerful green-and-blue silk dressing gown, he had shaved already, he showed no trace of his nocturnal vigil. In the bathroom he had whistled like a bird. "Had a good night?" he said. "That's famous. So did I. And the wrist and arm didn't even ache enough to keep you awake?"

"I thought I heard you talking and walking about," said Mr. Direck.

"I got up for a little bit and worked. I often do that. I hope I didn't disturb you. Just for an hour or so. It's so delightfully quiet in the night...."

He went to the window and blinked at the garden outside. His two younger sons appeared on their bicycles returning from some early expedition. He

waved a hand of greeting. It was one of those summer mornings when attenuated mist seems to fill the very air with sunshine dust.

"This is the sunniest morning bedroom in the house," he said. "It's south-east."

The sunlight slashed into the masses of the blue cedar outside with a score of golden spears.

"The Dayspring from on High," he said.... "I thought of rather a useful pamphlet in the night.

"I've been thinking about your luggage at that hotel," he went on, turning to his guest again. "You'll have to write and get it packed up and sent down here--

"No," he said, "we won't let you go until you can hit out with that arm and fell a man. Listen!"

Mr. Direck could not distinguish any definite sound.

"The smell of frying rashers, I mean," said Mr. Britling. "It's the clarion of the morn in every proper English home....

"You'd like a rasher, coffee?

"It's good to work in the night, and it's good to wake in the morning," said Mr. Britling, rubbing his hands together. "I suppose I wrote nearly two thousand words. So quiet one is, so concentrated. And as soon as I have had my breakfast I shall go on with it again."