CHAPTER THE FOURTH

IN THE WEB OF THE INEFFECTIVE

Section 1

Hugh's letters were becoming a very important influence upon Mr. Britling's thought. Hugh had always been something of a letter-writer, and now what was perhaps an inherited desire to set things down was manifest. He had been accustomed to decorate his letters from school with absurd little sketches--sometimes his letters had been all sketches--and now he broke from drawing to writing and back to drawing in a way that pleased his father mightily. The father loved this queer trick of caricature; he did not possess it himself, and so it seemed to him the most wonderful of all Hugh's little equipment of gifts. Mr. Britling used to carry these letters about until their edges got grimy; he would show them to any one he felt capable of appreciating their youthful freshness; he would quote them as final and conclusive evidence to establish this or that. He did not dream how many thousands of mothers and fathers were treasuring such documents. He thought other sons were dull young men by comparison with Hugh.

The earlier letters told much of the charms of discipline and the open air. "All the bother about what one has to do with oneself is over," wrote Hugh. "One has disposed of oneself. That has the effect of a great

relief. Instead of telling oneself that one ought to get up in the morning, a bugle tells you that.... And there's no nonsense about it, no chance of lying and arguing about it with oneself.... I begin to see the sense of men going into monasteries and putting themselves under rules. One is carried along in a sort of moral automobile instead of trudging the road...."

And he was also sounding new physical experiences.

"Never before," he declared, "have I known what fatigue is. It's a miraculous thing. One drops down in one's clothes on any hard old thing and sleeps...."

And in his early letters he was greatly exercised by the elementary science of drill and discipline, and the discussion of whether these things were necessary. He began by assuming that their importance was overrated. He went on to discover that they constituted the very essentials of all good soldiering. "In a crisis," he concluded, "there is no telling what will get hold of a man, his higher instincts or his lower. He may show courage of a very splendid sort--or a hasty discretion. A habit is much more trustworthy than an instinct. So discipline sets up a habit of steady and courageous bearing. If you keep your head you are at liberty to be splendid. If you lose it, the habit will carry you through."

The young man was also very profound upon the effects of the suggestion

of various exercises upon the mind.

"It is surprising how bloodthirsty one feels in a bayonet charge. We have to shout; we are encouraged to shout. The effect is to paralyse one's higher centres. One ceases to question--anything. One becomes a 'bayoneteer.' As I go bounding forward I imagine fat men, succulent men ahead, and I am filled with the desire to do them in neatly. This sort of thing--"

A sketch of slaughter followed, with a large and valiant Hugh leaving a train of fallen behind him.

"Not like this. This is how I used to draw it in my innocent childhood, but it is incorrect. More than one German on the bayonet at a time is an incumbrance. And it would be swank--a thing we detest in the army."

The second sketch showed the same brave hero with half a dozen of the enemy skewered like cat's-meat.

"As for the widows and children, I disregard 'em."

Section 2

But presently Hugh began to be bored.

"Route marching again," he wrote. "For no earthly reason than that they can do nothing else with us. We are getting no decent musketry training because there are no rifles. We are wasting half our time. If you multiply half a week by the number of men in the army you will see we waste centuries weekly.... If most of these men here had just been enrolled and left to go about their business while we trained officers and instructors and got equipment for them, and if they had then been put through their paces as rapidly as possible, it would have been infinitely better for the country.... In a sort of way we are keeping raw; in a sort of way we are getting stale.... I get irritated by this. I feel we are not being properly done by.

"Half our men are educated men, reasonably educated, but we are always being treated as though we were too stupid for words....

"No good grousing, I suppose, but after Statesminster and a glimpse of old Cardinal's way of doing things, one gets a kind of toothache in the mind at the sight of everything being done twice as slowly and half as well as it need be."

He went off at a tangent to describe the men in his platoon. "The best man in our lot is an ex-grocer's assistant, but in order to save us from vain generalisations it happens that the worst man--a moon-faced creature, almost incapable of lacing up his boots without help and objurgation--is also an ex-grocer's assistant. Our most offensive member is a little cad with a snub nose, who has read Kipling and imagines he

is the nearest thing that ever has been to Private Ortheris. He goes about looking for the other two of the Soldiers Three; it is rather like an unpopular politician trying to form a ministry. And he is conscientiously foul-mouthed. He feels losing a chance of saying 'bloody' as acutely as a snob feels dropping an H. He goes back sometimes and says the sentence over again and puts the 'bloody' in. I used to swear a little out of the range of your parental ear, but Ortheris has cured me. When he is about I am mincing in my speech. I perceive now that cursing is a way of chewing one's own dirt. In a platoon there is no elbow-room for indifference; you must either love or hate. I have a feeling that my first taste of battle will not be with Germans, but with Private Ortheris...."

And one letter was just a picture, a parody of the well-known picture of the bivouac below and the soldier's dream of return to his beloved above. But Master Hugh in the dream was embracing an enormous retort, while a convenient galvanometer registered his emotion and little tripods danced around him.

Section 3

Then came a letter which plunged abruptly into criticism.

"My dear Parent, this is a swearing letter. I must let go to somebody. And somehow none of the other chaps are convenient. I don't know if I

ought to be put against a wall and shot for it, but I hereby declare that all the officers of this battalion over and above the rank of captain are a constellation of incapables--and several of the captains are herewith included. Some of them are men of a pleasant disposition and carefully aborted mental powers, and some are men of an unpleasant disposition and no mental powers at all. And I believe--a little enlightened by your recent letter to The Times--that they are a fair sample of the entire 'army' class which has got to win this war. Usually they are indolent, but when they are thoroughly roused they are fussy. The time they should spend in enlarging their minds and increasing their military efficiency they devote to keeping fit. They are, roughly speaking, fit--for nothing. They cannot move us thirty miles without getting half of us left about, without losing touch with food and shelter, and starving us for thirty-six hours or so in the process, and they cannot count beyond the fingers of one hand, not having learnt to use the nose for arithmetical operations.... I conclude this war is going to be a sort of Battle of Inkerman on a large scale. We chaps in the ranks will have to do the job. Leading is 'off.'...

"All of this, my dear Parent, is just a blow off. I have been needlessly starved, and fagged to death and exasperated. We have moved five-and-twenty miles across country--in fifty-seven hours. And without food for about eighteen hours. I have been with my Captain, who has been billeting us here in Cheasingholt. Oh, he is a MUFF! Oh God! oh God of Heaven! what a MUFF! He is afraid of printed matter, but he controls himself heroically. He prides himself upon having no 'sense of locality,

confound it!' Prides himself! He went about this village, which is a little dispersed, at a slight trot, and wouldn't avail himself of the one-inch map I happened to have. He judged the capacity of each room with his eye and wouldn't let me measure, even with God's own paces. Not with the legs I inherit. 'We'll put five fellahs hea!' he said. 'What d'you want to measure the room for? We haven't come to lay down carpets.' Then, having assigned men by coup d'oeil, so as to congest half the village miserably, he found the other half unoccupied and had to begin all over again. 'If you measured the floor space first, sir,' I said, 'and made a list of the houses--' 'That isn't the way I'm going to do it,' he said, fixing me with a pitiless eye....

"That isn't the way they are going to do it, Daddy! The sort of thing that is done over here in the green army will be done over there in the dry. They won't be in time; they'll lose their guns where now they lose our kitchens. I'm a mute soldier; I've got to do what I'm told; still, I begin to understand the Battle of Neuve Chapelle.

"They say the relations of men and officers in the new army are beautiful. Some day I may learn to love my officer--but not just yet. Not till I've forgotten the operations leading up to the occupation of Cheasingholt.... He muffs his real job without a blush, and yet he would rather be shot than do his bootlaces up criss-cross. What I say about officers applies only and solely to him really.... How well I understand now the shooting of officers by their men.... But indeed, fatigue and exasperation apart, this shift has been done atrociously...."

The young man returned to these criticisms in a later letter.

"You will think I am always carping, but it does seem to me that nearly everything is being done here in the most wasteful way possible. We waste time, we waste labour, we waste material, oh Lord! how we waste our country's money. These aren't, I can assure you, the opinions of a conceited young man. It's nothing to be conceited about.... We're bored to death by standing about this infernal little village. There is nothing to do--except trail after a small number of slatternly young women we despise and hate. I don't, Daddy. And I don't drink. Why have I inherited no vices? We had a fight here yesterday--sheer boredom. Ortheris has a swollen lip, and another private has a bad black eye. There is to be a return match. I perceive the chief horror of warfare is boredom....

"Our feeding here is typical of the whole system. It is a system invented not with any idea of getting the best results--that does not enter into the War Office philosophy--but to have a rule for everything, and avoid arguments. There is rather too generous an allowance of bread and stuff per man, and there is a very fierce but not very efficient system of weighing and checking. A rather too generous allowance is, of course, a direct incentive to waste or stealing--as any one but our silly old duffer of a War Office would know. The checking is for quantity, which any fool can understand, rather than for quality. The test for the quality of army meat is the smell. If it doesn't smell bad,

it is good....

"Then the raw material is handed over to a cook. He is a common soldier who has been made into a cook by a simple ceremony. He is told, 'You are a cook.' He does his best to be. Usually he roasts or bakes to begin with, guessing when the joint is done, afterwards he hacks up what is left of his joints and makes a stew for next day. A stew is hacked meat boiled up in a big pot. It has much fat floating on the top. After you have eaten your fill you want to sit about quiet. The men are fed usually in a large tent or barn. We have a barn. It is not a clean barn, and just to make it more like a picnic there are insufficient plates, knives and forks. (I tell you, no army people can count beyond eight or ten.) The corporals after their morning's work have to carve. When they have done carving they tell me they feel they have had enough dinner. They sit about looking pale, and wander off afterwards to the village pub. (I shall probably become a corporal soon.) In these islands before the war began there was a surplus of women over men of about a million. (See the publications of the Fabian Society, now so popular among the young.) None of these women have been trusted by the government with the difficult task of cooking and giving out food to our soldiers. No man of the ordinary soldier class ever cooks anything until he is a soldier....
All food left over after the stew or otherwise rendered uneatable by the cook is thrown away. We throw away pail-loads. We bury meat....

"Also we get three pairs of socks. We work pretty hard. We don't know how to darn socks. When the heels wear through, come blisters. Bad

blisters disable a man. Of the million of surplus women (see above) the government has not had the intelligence to get any to darn our socks. So a certain percentage of us go lame. And so on. And so on.

"You will think all this is awful grousing, but the point I want to make--I hereby to ease my feelings make it now in a fair round hand--is that all this business could be done far better and far cheaper if it wasn't left to these absolutely inexperienced and extremely exclusive military gentlemen. They think they are leading England and showing us all how; instead of which they are just keeping us back. Why in thunder are they doing everything? Not one of them, when he is at home, is allowed to order the dinner or poke his nose into his own kitchen or check the household books.... The ordinary British colonel is a helpless old gentleman; he ought to have a nurse.... This is not merely the trivial grievance of my insulted stomach, it is a serious matter for the country. Sooner or later the country may want the food that is being wasted in all these capers. In the aggregate it must amount to a daily destruction of tons of stuff of all sorts. Tons.... Suppose the war lasts longer than we reckon!"

From this point Hugh's letter jumped to a general discussion of the military mind.

"Our officers are beastly good chaps, nearly all of them. That's where the perplexity of the whole thing comes in. If only they weren't such good chaps! If only they were like the Prussian officers to their men,

then we'd just take on a revolution as well as the war, and make everything tidy at once. But they are decent, they are charming.... Only they do not think hard, and they do not understand that doing a job properly means doing it as directly and thought-outly as you possibly can. They won't worry about things. If their tempers were worse perhaps their work might be better. They won't use maps or timetables or books of reference. When we move to a new place they pick up what they can about it by hearsay; not one of our lot has the gumption to possess a contoured map or a Michelin guide. They have hearsay minds. They are fussy and petty and wasteful--and, in the way of getting things done, pretentious. By their code they're paragons of honour. Courage--they're all right about that; no end of it; honesty, truthfulness, and so on--high. They have a kind of horsey standard of smartness and pluck, too, that isn't bad, and they have a fine horror of whiskers and being unbuttoned. But the mistake they make is to class thinking with whiskers, as a sort of fussy sidegrowth. Instead of classing it with unbuttonedupness. They hate economy. And preparation....

"They won't see that inefficiency is a sort of dishonesty. If a man doesn't steal sixpence, they think it a light matter if he wastes half a crown. Here follows wisdom! From the point of view of a nation at war, sixpence is just a fifth part of half a crown....

"When I began this letter I was boiling with indignation, complicated, I suspect, by this morning's 'stew'; now I have written thus far I feel I'm an ungenerous grumbler.... It is remarkable, my dear Parent, that I

let off these things to you. I like writing to you. I couldn't possibly say the things I can write. Heinrich had a confidential friend at Breslau to whom he used to write about his Soul. I never had one of those Teutonic friendships. And I haven't got a Soul. But I have to write. One must write to some one--and in this place there is nothing else to do. And now the old lady downstairs is turning down the gas; she always does at half-past ten. She didn't ought. She gets--ninepence each. Excuse the pencil...."

That letter ended abruptly. The next two were brief and cheerful. Then suddenly came a new note.

"We've got rifles! We're real armed soldiers at last. Every blessed man has got a rifle. And they come from Japan! They are of a sort of light wood that is like new oak and art furniture, and makes one feel that one belongs to the First Garden Suburb Regiment; but I believe much can be done with linseed oil. And they are real rifles, they go bang. We are a little light-headed about them. Only our training and discipline prevent our letting fly at incautious spectators on the skyline. I saw a man yesterday about half a mile off. I was possessed by the idea that I could get him--right in the middle.... Ortheris, the little beast, has got a motor-bicycle, which he calls his 'b----y oto'--no one knows why--and only death or dishonourable conduct will save me, I gather, from becoming a corporal in the course of the next month...."

Section 4

A subsequent letter threw fresh light on the career of the young man with the "oto." Before the rifle and the "oto," and in spite of his fights with some person or persons unknown, Ortheris found trouble. Hugh told the story with the unblushing savoir-faire of the very young.

"By the by, Ortheris, following the indications of his creator and succumbing to the universal boredom before the rifles came, forgot Lord Kitchener's advice and attempted 'seduktion.' With painful results which he insists upon confiding to the entire platoon. He has been severely smacked and scratched by the proposed victim, and warned off the premises (licensed premises) by her father and mother--both formidable persons. They did more than warn him off the premises. They had displayed neither a proper horror of Don Juan nor a proper respect for the King's uniform. Mother, we realise, got hold of him and cuffed him severely. 'What the 'ell's a chap to do?' cried Ortheris. 'You can't go 'itting a woman back.' Father had set a dog on him. A less ingenuous character would be silent about such passages--I should be too egotistical and humiliated altogether--but that is not his quality. He tells us in tones of naïve wonder. He talks about it and talks about it. 'I don't care what the old woman did,' he says, 'not--reely. What 'urts me about it is that I jest made a sort of mistake 'ow she'd tike it. You see, I sort of feel I've 'urt and insulted 'er. And reely I didn't mean to. Swap me, I didn't mean to. Gawd 'elp me. I wouldn't 'ave 'ad it 'appened as it 'as 'appened, not for worlds. And now I can't get

round to 'er, or anyfing, not to explain.... You chaps may laugh, but you don't know what there is in it.... I tell you it worries me something frightful. You think I'm just a little cad who took liberties he didn't ought to. (Note of anger drowning uncharitable grunts of assent.) 'Ow the 'ell is 'e to know when 'e didn't ought to? ... I swear she liked me....'

"This kind of thing goes on for hours--in the darkness.

"'I'd got regular sort of fond of 'er.'

"And the extraordinary thing is it makes me begin to get regular fond of Ortheris.

"I think it is because the affair has surprised him right out of acting Ortheris and Tommy Atkins for a bit, into his proper self. He's frightfully like some sort of mongrel with a lot of wiry-haired terrier and a touch of Airedale in it. A mongrel you like in spite of the flavour of all the horrid things he's been nosing into. And he's as hard as nails and, my dear daddy! he can't box for nuts."

Section 5

Mr. Britling, with an understanding much quickened by Hugh's letters, went about Essex in his automobile, and on one or two journeys into

Berkshire and Buckinghamshire, and marked the steady conversion of the old pacific countryside into an armed camp. He was disposed to minimise Hugh's criticisms. He found in them something of the harshness of youth, which is far too keen-edged to be tolerant with half performance and our poor human evasion of perfection's overstrain. "Our poor human evasion of perfection's overstrain"; this phrase was Mr. Britling's. To Mr. Britling, looking less closely and more broadly, the new army was a pride and a marvel.

He liked to come into some quiet village and note the clusters of sturdy khaki-clad youngsters going about their business, the tethered horses, the air of subdued bustle, the occasional glimpses of guns and ammunition trains. Wherever one went now there were soldiers and still more soldiers. There was a steady flow of men into Flanders, and presently to Gallipoli, but it seemed to have no effect upon the multitude in training at home. He was pleasantly excited by the evident increase in the proportion of military material upon the railways; he liked the promise and mystery of the long lines of trucks bearing tarpaulin-covered wagons and carts and guns that he would pass on his way to Liverpool Street station. He could apprehend defeat in the silence of the night, but when he saw the men, when he went about the land, then it was impossible to believe in any end but victory....

But through the spring and summer there was no victory. The "great offensive" of May was checked and abandoned after a series of ineffective and very costly attacks between Ypres and Soissons. The

Germans had developed a highly scientific defensive in which machine-guns replaced rifles and a maximum of punishment was inflicted upon an assaulting force with a minimum of human loss. The War Office had never thought much of machine-guns before, but now it thought a good deal. Moreover, the energies of Britain were being turned more and more towards the Dardanelles.

The idea of an attack upon the Dardanelles had a traditional attractiveness for the British mind. Old men had been brought up from childhood with "forcing the Dardanelles" as a familiar phrase; it had none of the flighty novelty and vulgarity about it that made an "aerial offensive" seem so unwarrantable a proceeding. Forcing the Dardanelles was historically British. It made no break with tradition. Soon after Turkey entered the war British submarines appeared in the Sea of Marmora, and in February a systematic bombardment of the Dardanelles began; this was continued intermittently for a month, the defenders profiting by their experiences and by spells of bad weather to strengthen their works. This first phase of the attack culminated in the loss of the Irresistible, Ocean, and Bouvet, when on the 17th of March the attacking fleet closed in upon the Narrows. After an interlude of six weeks to allow of further preparations on the part of the defenders, who were now thoroughly alive to what was coming, the Allied armies gathered upon the scene, and a difficult and costly landing was achieved at two points upon the peninsula of Gallipoli. With that began a slow and bloody siege of the defences of the Dardanelles, clambering up to the surprise landing of a fresh British army in Suvla Bay in

August, and its failure in the battle of Anafarta, through incompetent commanders and a general sloppiness of leading, to cut off and capture Maidos and the Narrows defences.... Meanwhile the Russian hosts, which had reached their high-water mark in the capture of Przemysl, were being forced back first in the south and then in the north. The Germans recaptured Lemberg, entered Warsaw, and pressed on to take Brest Litowsk. The Russian lines rolled back with an impressive effect of defeat, and the Germans thrust towards Riga and Petrograd, reaching Vilna about the middle of September....

Day after day Mr. Britling traced the swaying fortunes of the conflict, with impatience, with perplexity, but with no loss of confidence in the ultimate success of Britain. The country was still swarming with troops, and still under summer sunshine. A second hay harvest redeemed the scantiness of the first, the wheat crops were wonderful, and the great fig tree at the corner of the Dower House had never borne so bountifully nor such excellent juicy figs....

And one day in early June while those figs were still only a hope, Teddy appeared at the Dower House with Letty, to say good-bye before going to the front. He was going out in a draft to fill up various gaps and losses; he did not know where. Essex was doing well but bloodily over there. Mrs. Britling had tea set out upon the lawn under the blue cedar, and Mr. Britling found himself at a loss for appropriate sayings, and talked in his confusion almost as though Teddy's departure was of no significance at all. He was still haunted by that odd sense of

responsibility for Teddy. Teddy was not nearly so animated as he had been in his pre-khaki days; there was a quiet exaltation in his manner rather than a lively excitement. He knew now what he was in for. He knew now that war was not a lark, that for him it was to be the gravest experience he had ever had or was likely to have. There were no more jokes about Letty's pension, and a general avoidance of the topics of high explosives and asphyxiating gas....

Mr. and Mrs. Britling took the young people to the gate.

"Good luck!" cried Mr. Britling as they receded.

Teddy replied with a wave of the hand.

Mr. Britling stood watching them for some moments as they walked towards the little cottage which was to be the scene of their private parting.

"I don't like his going," he said. "I hope it will be all right with him.... Teddy's so grave nowadays. It's a mean thing, I know, it has none of the Roman touch, but I am glad that this can't happen with Hugh--" He computed. "Not for a year and three months, even if they march him into it upon his very birthday....

"It may all he over by then...."

Section 6

In that computation he reckoned without Hugh.

Within a month Hugh was also saying "Good-bye."

"But how's this?" protested Mr. Britling, who had already guessed the answer. "You're not nineteen."

"I'm nineteen enough for this job," said Hugh. "In fact, I enlisted as nineteen."

Mr. Britling said nothing for a little while. Then he spoke with a catch in his breath. "I don't blame you," he said. "It was--the right spirit."

Drill and responsibilities of non-commissioned rank had imposed a novel manliness upon the bearing of Corporal Britling. "I always classified a little above my age at Statesminster," he said as though that cleared up everything.

He looked at a rosebud as though it interested him. Then he remarked rather casually:

"I thought," he said, "that if I was to go to war I'd better do the thing properly. It seemed--sort of half and half--not to be eligible for the trenches.... I ought to have told you...."

"Yes," Mr. Britling decided.

"I was shy about it at first.... I thought perhaps the war would be over before it was necessary to discuss anything.... Didn't want to go into it."

"Exactly," said Mr. Britling as though that was a complete explanation.

"It's been a good year for your roses," said Hugh.

Section 7

Hugh was to stop the night. He spent what seemed to him and every one a long, shy, inexpressive evening. Only the small boys were really natural and animated. They were much impressed and excited by his departure, and wanted to ask a hundred questions about the life in the trenches. Many of them Hugh had to promise to answer when he got there. Then he would see just exactly how things were. Mrs. Britling was motherly and intelligent about his outfit. "Will you want winter things?" she asked....

But when he was alone with his father after every one had gone to bed they found themselves able to talk.

"This sort of thing seems more to us than it would be to a French family," Hugh remarked, standing on the hearthrug.

"Yes," agreed Mr. Britling. "Their minds would be better prepared.... They'd have their appropriate things to say. They have been educated by the tradition of service--and '71."

Then he spoke--almost resentfully.

"The older men ought to go before you boys. Who is to carry on if a lot of you get killed?"

Hugh reflected. "In the stiffest battle that ever can be the odds are against getting killed," he said.

"I suppose they are."

"One in three or four in the very hottest corners."

Mr. Britling expressed no satisfaction.

"Every one is going through something of this sort."

"All the decent people, at any rate," said Mr. Britling....

"It will be an extraordinary experience. Somehow it seems out of

proportion--"

"With what?"

"With life generally. As one has known it."

"It isn't in proportion," Mr. Britling admitted.

"Incommensurables," said Hugh.

He considered his phrasing. "It's not," he said, "as though one was going into another part of the same world, or turning up another side of the world one was used to. It is just as if one had been living in a room and one had been asked to step outside.... It makes me think of a queer little thing that happened when I was in London last winter. I got into Queer Company. I don't think I told you. I went to have supper with some students in Chelsea. I hadn't been to the place before, but they seemed all right--just people like me--and everybody. And after supper they took me on to some people they didn't know very well; people who had to do with some School of Dramatic Art. There were two or three young actresses there and a singer and people of that sort, sitting about smoking cigarettes, and we began talking plays and books and picture shows and all that stuff; and suddenly there was a knocking at the door and some one went out and found a policeman with a warrant on the landing. They took off our host's son.... It had to do with a murder...."

Hugh paused. "It was the Bedford Mansions mystery. I don't suppose you remember about it or read about it at the time. He'd killed a man.... It doesn't matter about the particulars anyhow, but what I mean is the effect. The effect of a comfortable well-lit orderly room and the sense of harmless people--and then the door opening and the policeman and the cold draught flowing in. Murder! A girl who seemed to know the people well explained to me in whispers what was happening. It was like the opening of a trap-door going down into some pit you have always known was there, but never really believed in."

"I know," said Mr. Britling. "I know."

"That's just how I feel about this war business. There's no real death over here. It's laid out and boxed up. And accidents are all padded about. If one got a toss from a horse here, you'd be in bed and comfortable in no time.... And there; it's like another planet. It's outside.... I'm going outside.... Instead of there being no death anywhere, it is death everywhere, outside there. We shall be using our utmost wits to kill each other. A kind of reverse to this world."

Mr. Britling nodded.

"I've never seen a dead body yet. In Dower-House land there aren't dead bodies."

"We've kept things from you--horrid things of that sort."

"I'm not complaining," said Hugh.... "But--Master Hugh--the Master Hugh you kept things from--will never come back."

He went on quickly as his father raised distressed eyes to him. "I mean that anyhow this Hugh will never come back. Another one may. But I shall have been outside, and it will all be different...."

He paused. Never had Mr. Britling been so little disposed to take up the discourse.

"Like a man," he said, seeking an image and doing no more than imitate his son's; "who goes out of a busy lighted room through a trap-door into a blizzard, to mend the roof...."

For some moments neither father nor son said anything more. They had a queer sense of insurmountable insufficiency. Neither was saying what he had wanted to say to the other, but it was not clear to them now what they had to say to one another....

"It's wonderful," said Mr. Britling.

Hugh could only manage: "The world has turned right over...."

"The job has to be done," said Mr. Britling.

"The job has to be done," said Hugh.

The pause lengthened.

"You'll be getting up early to-morrow," said Mr. Britling....

Section 8

When Mr. Britling was alone in his own room all the thoughts and feelings that had been held up downstairs began to run more and more rapidly and abundantly through his mind.

He had a feeling--every now and again in the last few years he had had the same feeling--as though he was only just beginning to discover Hugh. This perpetual rediscovery of one's children is the experience of every observant parent. He had always considered Hugh as a youth, and now a man stood over him and talked, as one man to another. And this man, this very new man, mint new and clean and clear, filled Mr. Britling with surprise and admiration.

It was as if he perceived the beauty of youth for the first time in Hugh's slender, well balanced, khaki-clad body. There was infinite delicacy in his clear complexion, his clear eyes; the delicately pencilled eyebrow that was so exactly like his mother's. And this thing

of brightness and bravery talked as gravely and as wisely as any weather-worn, shop-soiled, old fellow....

The boy was wise.

Hugh thought for himself; he thought round and through his position, not egotistically but with a quality of responsibility. He wasn't just hero-worshipping and imitating, just spinning some self-centred romance. If he was a fair sample of his generation then it was a better generation than Mr. Britling's had been....

At that Mr. Britling's mind went off at a tangent to the grievance of the rejected volunteer. It was acutely shameful to him that all these fine lads should be going off to death and wounds while the men of forty and over lay snug at home. How stupid it was to fix things like that! Here were the fathers, who had done their work, shot their bolts, returned some value for the costs of their education, unable to get training, unable to be of any service, shamefully safe, doing April fool work as special constables; while their young innocents, untried, all their gathering possibilities of service unbroached, went down into the deadly trenches.... The war would leave the world a world of cripples and old men and children....

He felt himself as a cowardly brute, fat, wheezy, out of training, sheltering behind this dear one branch of Mary's life.

He writhed with impotent humiliation....

How stupidly the world is managed.

He began to fret and rage. He could not lie in peace in his bed; he got up and prowled about his room, blundering against chairs and tables in the darkness.... We were too stupid to do the most obvious things; we were sending all these boys into hardship and pitiless danger; we were sending them ill-equipped, insufficiently supported, we were sending our children through the fires to Moloch, because essentially we English were a world of indolent, pampered, sham good-humoured, old and middle-aged men. (So he distributed the intolerable load of self-accusation.) Why was he doing nothing to change things, to get them better? What was the good of an assumed modesty, an effort at tolerance for and confidence in these boozy old lawyers, these ranting platform men, these stiff-witted officers and hide-bound officials? They were butchering the youth of England. Old men sat out of danger contriving death for the lads in the trenches. That was the reality of the thing. "My son!" he cried sharply in the darkness. His sense of our national deficiencies became tormentingly, fantastically acute. It was as if all his cherished delusions had fallen from the scheme of things.... What was the good of making believe that up there they were planning some great counter-stroke that would end in victory? It was as plain as daylight that they had neither the power of imagination nor the collective intelligence even to conceive of a counter-stroke. Any dull mass may resist, but only imagination can strike. Imagination! To the

end we should not strike. We might strike through the air. We might strike across the sea. We might strike hard at Gallipoli instead of dribbling inadequate armies thither as our fathers dribbled men at the Redan.... But the old men would sit at their tables, replete and sleepy, and shake their cunning old heads. The press would chatter and make odd ambiguous sounds like a shipload of monkeys in a storm. The political harridans would get the wrong men appointed, would attack every possible leader with scandal and abuse and falsehood....

The spirit and honour and drama had gone out of this war.

Our only hope now was exhaustion. Our only strategy was to barter blood for blood--trusting that our tank would prove the deeper....

While into this tank stepped Hugh, young and smiling....

The war became a nightmare vision....

Section 9

In the morning Mr. Britling's face was white from his overnight brain storm, and Hugh's was fresh from wholesome sleep. They walked about the lawn, and Mr. Britling talked hopefully of the general outlook until it was time for them to start to the station....

The little old station-master grasped the situation at once, and presided over their last hand-clasp.

"Good luck, Hugh!" cried Mr. Britling.

"Good luck!" cried the little old station-master.

"It's not easy a-parting," he said to Mr. Britling as the train slipped down the line. "There's been many a parting hea' since this here old war began. Many. And some as won't come back again neether."

Section 10

For some days Mr. Britling could think of nothing but Hugh, and always with a dull pain at his heart. He felt as he had felt long ago while he had waited downstairs and Hugh upstairs had been under the knife of a surgeon. But this time the operation went on and still went on. At the worst his boy had but one chance in five of death or serious injury, but for a time he could think of nothing but that one chance. He felt it pressing upon his mind, pressing him down....

Then instead of breaking under that pressure, he was released by the trick of the sanguine temperament. His mind turned over, abruptly, to the four chances out of five. It was like a dislocated joint slipping back into place. It was as sudden as that. He found he had adapted

himself to the prospect of Hugh in mortal danger. It had become a fact established, a usual thing. He could bear with it and go about his affairs.

He went up to London, and met other men at the club in the same emotional predicament. He realised that it was neither very wonderful nor exceptionally tragic now to have a son at the front.

"My boy is in Gallipoli," said one. "It's tough work there."

"My lad's in Flanders," said Mr. Britling. "Nothing would satisfy him but the front. He's three months short of eighteen. He misstated his age."

And they went on to talk newspaper just as if the world was where it had always been.

But until a post card came from Hugh Mr. Britling watched the postman like a lovesick girl.

Hugh wrote more frequently than his father had dared to hope, pencilled letters for the most part. It was as if he was beginning to feel an inherited need for talk, and was a little at a loss for a sympathetic ear. Park, his schoolmate, who had enlisted with him, wasn't, it seemed, a theoriser. "Park becomes a martinet," Hugh wrote. "Also he is a sergeant now, and this makes rather a gulf between us." Mr. Britling had

the greatest difficulty in writing back. There were many grave deep things he wanted to say, and never did. Instead he gave elaborate details of the small affairs of the Dower House. Once or twice, with a half-unconscious imitation of his boy's style, he took a shot at the theological and philosophical hares that Hugh had started. But the exemplary letters that he composed of nights from a Father to a Son at War were never written down. It was just as well, for there are many things of that sort that are good to think and bad to say....

Hugh was not very explicit about his position or daily duties. What he wrote now had to pass through the hands of a Censor, and any sort of definite information might cause the suppression of his letter. Mr. Britling conceived him for the most part as quartered some way behind the front, but in a flat, desolated country and within hearing of great guns. He assisted his imagination with the illustrated papers. Sometimes he put him farther back into pleasant old towns after the fashion of Beauvais, and imagined loitering groups in the front of cafés; sometimes he filled in the obvious suggestions of the phrase that all the Pas de Calais was now one vast British camp. Then he crowded the picture with tethered horses and tents and grey-painted wagons, and Hugh in the foreground--bare-armed, with a bucket....

Hugh's letters divided themselves pretty fairly between two main topics; the first was the interest of the art of war, the second the reaction against warfare. "After one has got over the emotion of it," he wrote, "and when one's mind has just accepted and forgotten (as it does) the

horrors and waste of it all, then I begin to perceive that war is absolutely the best game in the world. That is the real strength of war, I submit. Not as you put it in that early pamphlet of yours; ambition, cruelty, and all those things. Those things give an excuse for war, they rush timid and base people into war, but the essential matter is the hold of the thing itself upon an active imagination. It's such a big game. Instead of being fenced into a field and tied down to one set of tools as you are in almost every other game, you have all the world to play and you may use whatever you can use. You can use every scrap of imagination and invention that is in you. And it's wonderful.... But real soldiers aren't cruel. And war isn't cruel in its essence. Only in its consequences. Over here one gets hold of scraps of talk that light up things. Most of the barbarities were done--it is quite clear--by an excited civilian sort of men, men in a kind of inflamed state. The great part of the German army in the early stage of the war was really an army of demented civilians. Trained civilians no doubt, but civilians in soul. They were nice orderly clean law-abiding men suddenly torn up by the roots and flung into quite shocking conditions. They felt they were rushing at death, and that decency was at an end. They thought every Belgian had a gun behind the hedge and a knife in his trouser leg. They saw villages burning and dead people, and men smashed to bits. They lived in a kind of nightmare. They didn't know what they were doing. They did horrible things just as one does them sometimes in dreams...."

He flung out his conclusion with just his mother's leaping consecutiveness. "Conscript soldiers are the ruin of war.... Half the

Germans and a lot of the French ought never to have been brought within ten miles of a battlefield.

"What makes all this so plain are the diaries the French and English have been finding on the dead. You know at the early state of the war every German soldier was expected to keep a diary. He was ordered to do it. The idea was to keep him interested in the war. Consequently, from the dead and wounded our people have got thousands.... It helps one to realise that the Germans aren't really soldiers at all. Not as our men are. They are obedient, law-abiding, intelligent people, who have been shoved into this. They have to see the war as something romantic and melodramatic, or as something moral, or as tragic fate. They have to bellow songs about 'Deutschland,' or drag in 'Gott.' They don't take to the game as our men take to the game....

"I confess I'm taking to the game. I wish at times I had gone into the O.T.C. with Teddy, and got a better hold of it. I was too high-browed about this war business. I dream now of getting a commission....

"That diary-hunting strategy is just the sort of thing that makes this war intellectually fascinating. Everything is being thought out and then tried over that can possibly make victory. The Germans go in for psychology much more than we do, just as they go in for war more than we do, but they don't seem to be really clever about it. So they set out to make all their men understand the war, while our chaps are singing 'Tipperary.' But what the men put down aren't the beautiful things they

ought to put down; most of them shove down lists of their meals, some of the diaries are all just lists of things eaten, and a lot of them have written the most damning stuff about outrages and looting. Which the French are translating and publishing. The Germans would give anything now to get back these silly diaries. And now they have made an order that no one shall go into battle with any written papers at all.... Our people got so keen on documenting and the value of chance writings that one of the principal things to do after a German attack had failed had been to hook in the documentary dead, and find out what they had on them.... It's a curious sport, this body fishing. You have a sort of triple hook on a rope, and you throw it and drag. They do the same. The other day one body near Hooghe was hooked by both sides, and they had a tug-of-war. With a sharpshooter or so cutting in whenever our men got too excited. Several men were hit. The Irish--it was an Irish regiment--got him--or at least they got the better part of him....

"Now that I am a sergeant, Park talks to me again about all these things, and we have a first lieutenant too keen to resist such technical details. They are purely technical details. You must take them as that. One does not think of the dead body as a man recently deceased, who had perhaps a wife and business connections and a weakness for oysters or pale brandy. Or as something that laughed and cried and didn't like getting hurt. That would spoil everything. One thinks of him merely as a uniform with marks upon it that will tell us what kind of stuff we have against us, and possibly with papers that will give us a hint of how far he and his lot are getting sick of the whole affair....

"There's a kind of hardening not only of the body but of the mind through all this life out here. One is living on a different level. You know--just before I came away--you talked of Dower-House-land--and outside. This is outside. It's different. Our men here are kind enough still to little things--kittens or birds or flowers. Behind the front, for example, everywhere there are Tommy gardens. Some are quite bright little patches. But it's just nonsense to suppose we are tender to the wounded up here--and, putting it plainly, there isn't a scrap of pity left for the enemy. Not a scrap. Not a trace of such feeling. They were tender about the wounded in the early days--men tell me--and reverent about the dead. It's all gone now. There have been atrocities, gas, unforgettable things. Everything is harder. Our people are inclined now to laugh at a man who gets hit, and to be annoyed at a man with a troublesome wound. The other day, they say, there was a big dead German outside the Essex trenches. He became a nuisance, and he was dragged in and taken behind the line and buried. After he was buried, a kindly soul was putting a board over him with 'Somebody's Fritz' on it, when a shell burst close by. It blew the man with the board a dozen yards and wounded him, and it restored Fritz to the open air. He was lifted clean out. He flew head over heels like a windmill. This was regarded as a tremendous joke against the men who had been at the pains of burying him. For a time nobody else would touch Fritz, who was now some yards behind his original grave. Then as he got worse and worse he was buried again by some devoted sanitarians, and this time the inscription was 'Somebody's Fritz. R.I.P.' And as luck would have it, he was spun up again. In

pieces. The trench howled with laughter and cries of 'Good old Fritz!' 'This isn't the Resurrection, Fritz.'...

"Another thing that appeals to the sunny humour of the trenches as a really delicious practical joke is the trick of the fuses. We have two kinds of fuse, a slow-burning fuse such as is used for hand-grenades and such-like things, a sort of yard-a-minute fuse, and a rapid fuse that goes a hundred yards a second--for firing mines and so on. The latter is carefully distinguished from the former by a conspicuous red thread. Also, as you know, it is the habit of the enemy and ourselves when the trenches are near enough, to enliven each other by the casting of homely but effective hand-grenades made out of tins. When a grenade drops in a British trench somebody seizes it instantly and throws it back. To hoist the German with his own petard is particularly sweet to the British mind. When a grenade drops into a German trench everybody runs. (At least that is what I am told happens by the men from our trenches; though possibly each side has its exceptions.) If the bomb explodes, it explodes. If it doesn't, Hans and Fritz presently come creeping back to see what has happened. Sometimes the fuse hasn't caught properly, it has been thrown by a nervous man; or it hasn't burnt properly. Then Hans or Fritz puts in a new fuse and sends it back with loving care. To hoist the Briton with his own petard is particularly sweet to the German mind.... But here it is that military genius comes in. Some gifted spirit on our side procured (probably by larceny) a length of mine fuse, the rapid sort, and spent a laborious day removing the red thread and making it into the likeness of its slow brother. Then bits of it were

attached to tin-bombs and shied--unlit of course--into the German trenches. A long but happy pause followed. I can see the chaps holding themselves in. Hans and Fritz were understood to be creeping back, to be examining the unlit fuse, to be applying a light thereunto, in order to restore it to its maker after their custom....

"A loud bang in the German trenches indicated the moment of lighting, and the exit of Hans and Fritz to worlds less humorous.

"The genius in the British trenches went on with the preparation of the next surprise bomb--against the arrival of Kurt and Karl....

"Hans, Fritz, Kurt, Karl, Michael and Wilhelm; it went for quite a long time before they grew suspicious....

"You once wrote that all fighting ought to be done nowadays by metal soldiers. I perceive, my dear Daddy, that all real fighting is...."

Section 11

Not all Hugh's letters were concerned with these grim technicalities. It was not always that news and gossip came along; it was rare that a young man with a commission would condescend to talk shop to two young men without one; there were few newspapers and fewer maps, and even in France and within sound of guns, Hugh could presently find warfare

almost as much a bore as it had been at times in England. But his criticism of military methods died away. "Things are done better out here," he remarked, and "We're nearer reality here. I begin to respect my Captain. Who is developing a sense of locality. Happily for our prospects." And in another place he speculated in an oddly characteristic manner whether he was getting used to the army way, whether he was beginning to see the sense of the army way, or whether it really was that the army way braced up nearer and nearer to efficiency as it got nearer to the enemy. "And here one hasn't the haunting feeling that war is after all an hallucination. It's already common sense and the business of life....

"In England I always had a sneaking idea that I had 'dressed up' in my uniform....

"I never dreamt before I came here how much war is a business of waiting about and going through duties and exercises that were only too obviously a means of preventing our discovering just how much waiting about we were doing. I suppose there is no great harm in describing the place I am in here; it's a kind of scenery that is somehow all of a piece with the life we lead day by day. It is a village that has been only partly smashed up; it has never been fought through, indeed the Germans were never within two miles of it, but it was shelled intermittently for months before we made our advance. Almost all the houses are still standing, but there is not a window left with a square foot of glass in the place. One or two houses have been burnt out, and

one or two are just as though they had been kicked to pieces by a lunatic giant. We sleep in batches of four or five on the floors of the rooms; there are very few inhabitants about, but the village inn still goes on. It has one poor weary billiard-table, very small with very big balls, and the cues are without tops; it is The Amusement of the place. Ortheris does miracles at it. When he leaves the army he says he's going to be a marker, 'a b----y marker.' The country about us is flat--featureless--desolate. How I long for hills, even for Essex mud hills. Then the road runs on towards the front, a brick road frightfully worn, lined with poplars. Just at the end of the village mechanical transport ends and there is a kind of depot from which all the stuff goes up by mules or men or bicycles to the trenches. It is the only movement in the place, and I have spent hours watching men shift grub or ammunition or lending them a hand. All day one hears guns, a kind of thud at the stomach, and now and then one sees an aeroplane, very high and small. Just beyond this point there is a group of poplars which have been punished by a German shell. They are broken off and splintered in the most astonishing way; all split and ravelled out like the end of a cane that has been broken and twisted to get the ends apart. The choice of one's leisure is to watch the A.S.C. or play football, twenty a side, or sit about indoors, or stand in the doorway, or walk down to the Estaminet and wait five or six deep for the billiard-table. Ultimately one sits. And so you get these unconscionable letters."

"Unconscionable," said Mr. Britling. "Of course--he will grow out of that sort of thing.

"And he'll write some day, sure enough. He'll write."

He went on reading the letter.

"We read, of course. But there never could be a library here big enough to keep us going. We can do with all sorts of books, but I don't think the ordinary sensational novel is quite the catch it was for a lot of them in peace time. Some break towards serious reading in the oddest fashion. Old Park, for example, says he wants books you can chew; he is reading a cheap edition of 'The Origin of Species.' He used to regard Florence Warden and William le Queux as the supreme delights of print. I wish you could send him Metchnikoff's 'Nature of Man' or Pearson's 'Ethics of Freethought.' I feel I am building up his tender mind. Not for me though, Daddy. Nothing of that sort for me. These things take people differently. What I want here is literary opium. I want something about fauns and nymphs in broad low glades. I would like to read Spenser's 'Faerie Queen.' I don't think I have read it, and yet I have a very distinct impression of knights and dragons and sorcerers and wicked magic ladies moving through a sort of Pre-Raphaelite tapestry scenery--only with a light on them. I could do with some Hewlett of the 'Forest Lovers' kind. Or with Joseph Conrad in his Kew Palm-house mood. And there is a book, I once looked into it at a man's room in London; I don't know the title, but it was by Richard Garnett, and it was all about gods who were in reduced circumstances but amidst sunny picturesque scenery. Scenery without steel or poles or wire. A thing

after the manner of Heine's 'Florentine Nights.' Any book about Greek gods would be welcome, anything about temples of ivory-coloured stone and purple seas, red caps, chests of jewels, and lizards in the sun. I wish there was another 'Thais.' The men here are getting a kind of newspaper sheet of literature scraps called The Times Broadsheets. Snippets, but mostly from good stuff. They're small enough to stir the appetite, but not to satisfy it. Rather an irritant--and one wants no irritant.... I used to imagine reading was meant to be a stimulant. Out here it has to be an anodyne....

"Have you heard of a book called 'Tom Cringle's Log'?

"War is an exciting game--that I never wanted to play. It excites once in a couple of months. And the rest of it is dirt and muddle and boredom, and smashed houses and spoilt roads and muddy scenery and boredom, and the lumbering along of supplies and the lumbering back of the wounded and weary--and boredom, and continual vague guessing of how it will end and boredom and boredom and boredom, and thinking of the work you were going to do and the travel you were going to have, and the waste of life and the waste of days and boredom, and splintered poplars and stink, everywhere stink and dirt and boredom.... And all because these accursed Prussians were too stupid to understand what a boredom they were getting ready when they pranced and stuck their chests out and earnt the praises of Mr. Thomas Carlyle.... Gott strafe Deutschland.... So send me some books, books of dreams, books about China and the willow-pattern plate and the golden age and fairyland. And

send them soon and address them very carefully...."

Section 12

Teddy's misadventure happened while figs were still ripening on Mr. Britling's big tree. It was Cissie brought the news to Mr. Britling. She came up to the Dower House with a white, scared face.

"I've come up for the letters," she said. "There's bad news of Teddy, and Letty's rather in a state."

"He's not--?" Mr. Britling left the word unsaid.

"He's wounded and missing," said Cissie.

"A prisoner!" said Mr. Britling.

"And wounded. How, we don't know."

She added: "Letty has gone to telegraph."

"Telegraph to whom?"

"To the War Office, to know what sort of wound he has. They tell nothing. It's disgraceful."

"It doesn't say severely?"

"It says just nothing. Wounded and missing! Surely they ought to give us particulars."

Mr. Britling thought. His first thought was that now news might come at any time that Hugh was wounded and missing. Then he set himself to persuade Cissie that the absence of "seriously" meant that Teddy was only quite bearably wounded, and that if he was also "missing" it might be difficult for the War Office to ascertain at once just exactly what she wanted to know. But Cissie said merely that "Letty was in an awful state," and after Mr. Britling had given her a few instructions for his typing, he went down to the cottage to repeat these mitigatory considerations to Letty. He found her much whiter than her sister, and in a state of cold indignation with the War Office. It was clear she thought that organisation ought to have taken better care of Teddy. She had a curious effect of feeling that something was being kept back from her. It was manifest too that she was disposed to regard Mr. Britling as biased in favour of the authorities.

"At any rate," she said, "they could have answered my telegram promptly. I sent it at eight. Two hours of scornful silence."

This fierce, strained, unjust Letty was a new aspect to Mr. Britling. Her treatment of his proffered consolations made him feel slightly

henpecked.

"And just fancy!" she said. "They have no means of knowing if he has arrived safely on the German side. How can they know he is a prisoner without knowing that?"

"But the word is 'missing.'"

"That means a prisoner," said Letty uncivilly....

Section 13

Mr. Britling returned to the Dower House perplexed and profoundly disturbed. He had a distressful sense that things were far more serious with Teddy than he had tried to persuade Letty they were; that "wounded and missing" meant indeed a man abandoned to very sinister probabilities. He was distressed for Teddy, and still more acutely distressed for Mrs. Teddy, whose every note and gesture betrayed suppositions even more sinister than his own. And that preposterous sense of liability, because he had helped Teddy to get his commission, was more distressful than it had ever been. He was surprised that Letty had not assailed him with railing accusations.

And this event had wiped off at one sweep all the protective scab of habituation that had gathered over the wound of Hugh's departure. He was

back face to face with the one evil chance in five....

In the hall there was lying a letter from Hugh that had come by the second post. It was a relief even to see it....

Hugh had had his first spell in the trenches.

Before his departure he had promised his half brothers a long and circumstantial account of what the trenches were really like. Here he redeemed his promise. He had evidently written with the idea that the letter would be handed over to them.

"Tell the bruddykinses I'm glad they're going to Brinsmead school. Later on, I suppose, they will go on to Statesminster. I suppose that you don't care to send them so far in these troubled times....

"And now about those trenches--as I promised. The great thing to grasp is that they are narrow. They are a sort of negative wall. They are more like giant cracks in the ground than anything else.... But perhaps I had better begin by telling how we got there. We started about one in the morning ladened up with everything you can possibly imagine on a soldier, and in addition I had a kettle--filled with water--most of the chaps had bundles of firewood, and some had extra bread. We marched out of our quarters along the road for a mile or more, and then we took the fields, and presently came to a crest and dropped into a sort of maze of zigzag trenches going up to the front trench. These trenches, you know,

are much deeper than one's height; you don't see anything. It's like walking along a mud-walled passage. You just trudge along them in single file. Every now and then some one stumbles into a soakaway for rainwater or swears at a soft place, or somebody blunders into the man in front of him. This seems to go on for hours and hours. It certainly went on for an hour; so I suppose we did two or three miles of it. At one place we crossed a dip in the ground and a ditch, and the trench was built up with sandbags up to the ditch and there was a plank. Overhead there were stars, and now and then a sort of blaze thing they send up lit up the edges of the trench and gave one a glimpse of a treetop or a factory roof far away. Then for a time it was more difficult to go on because you were blinded. Suddenly just when you were believing that this sort of trudge was going on forever, we were in the support trenches behind the firing line, and found the men we were relieving ready to come back.

"And the firing line itself? Just the same sort of ditch with a parapet of sandbags, but with dug-outs, queer big holes helped out with sleepers from a nearby railway track, opening into it from behind. Dug-outs vary a good deal. Many are rather like the cubby-house we made at the end of the orchard last summer; only the walls are thick enough to stand a high explosive shell. The best dug-out in our company's bit of front was quite a dressy affair with some woodwork and a door got from the ruins of a house twenty or thirty yards behind us. It had a stove in it too, and a chimbley, and pans to keep water in. It was the best dug-out for miles. This house had a well, and there was a special trench ran back to

that, and all day long there was a coming and going for water. There had once been a pump over the well, but a shell had smashed that....

"And now you expect me to tell of Germans and the fight and shelling and all sorts of things. I haven't seen a live German; I haven't been within two hundred yards of a shell burst, there has been no attack and I haven't got the V.C. I have made myself muddy beyond describing; I've been working all the time, but I've not fired a shot or fought a ha'porth. We were busy all the time--just at work, repairing the parapet, which had to be done gingerly because of snipers, bringing our food in from the rear in big carriers, getting water, pushing our trench out from an angle slantingways forward. Getting meals, clearing up and so on takes a lot of time. We make tea in big kettles in the big dug-out, which two whole companies use for their cooking, and carry them with a pole through the handles to our platoons. We wash up and wash and shave. Dinner preparation (and consumption) takes two or three hours. Tea too uses up time. It's like camping out and picnicking in the park. This first time (and next too) we have been mixed with some Sussex men who have been here longer and know the business.... It works out that we do most of the fatigue. Afterwards we shall go up alone to a pitch of our own....

"But all the time you want to know about the Germans. They are a quarter of a mile away at this part, or nearly a quarter of a mile. When you snatch a peep at them it is like a low parti-coloured stone wall--only the stones are sandbags. The Germans have them black and white, so that

you cannot tell which are loopholes and which are black bags. Our people haven't been so clever--and the War Office love of uniformity has given us only white bags. No doubt it looks neater. But it makes our loopholes plain. For a time black sandbags were refused. The Germans sniped at us, but not very much. Only one of our lot was hit, by a chance shot that came through the sandbag at the top of the parapet. He just had a cut in the neck which didn't prevent his walking back. They shelled the trenches half a mile to the left of us though, and it looked pretty hot. The sandbags flew about. But the men lie low, and it looks worse than it is. The weather was fine and pleasant, as General French always says. And after three days and nights of cramped existence and petty chores, one in the foremost trench and two a little way back, and then two days in support, we came back--and here we are again waiting for our second Go.

"The night time is perhaps a little more nervy than the day. You get your head up and look about, and see the flat dim country with its ruined houses and its lumps of stuff that are dead bodies and its long vague lines of sandbags, and the searchlights going like white windmill arms and an occasional flare or star shell. And you have a nasty feeling of people creeping and creeping all night between the trenches....

"Some of us went out to strengthen a place in the parapet that was only one sandbag thick, where a man had been hit during the day. We made it four bags thick right up to the top. All the while you were doing it, you dreaded to find yourself in the white glare of a searchlight, and

you had a feeling that something would hit you suddenly from behind. I had to make up my mind not to look round, or I should have kept on looking round.... Also our chaps kept shooting over us, within a foot of one's head. Just to persuade the Germans that we were not out of the trench....

"Nothing happened to us. We got back all right. It was silly to have left that parapet only one bag thick. There's the truth, and all of my first time in the trenches.

"And the Germans?

"I tell you there was no actual fighting at all. I never saw the head of one.

"But now see what a good bruddykins I am. I have seen a fight, a real exciting fight, and I have kept it to the last to tell you about.... It was a fight in the air. And the British won. It began with a German machine appearing, very minute and high, sailing towards our lines a long way to the left. We could tell it was a German because of the black cross; they decorate every aeroplane with a black Iron Cross on its wings and tail; that our officer could see with his glasses. (He let me look.) Suddenly whack, whack, whack, came a line of little puffs of smoke behind it, and then one in front of it, which meant that our anti-aircraft guns were having a go at it. Then, as suddenly, Archibald stopped, and we could see the British machine buzzing across the path of

the German. It was just like two birds circling in the air. Or wasps. They buzzed like wasps. There was a little crackling--like brushing your hair in frosty weather. They were shooting at each other. Then our lieutenant called out, 'Hit, by Jove!' and handed the glasses to Park and instantly wanted them back. He says he saw bits of the machine flying off.

"When he said that you could fancy you saw it too, up there in the blue.

"Anyhow the little machine cocked itself up on end. Rather slowly.... Then down it came like dropping a knife....

"It made you say 'Ooooo!' to see that dive. It came down, seemed to get a little bit under control, and then dive down again. You could hear the engine roar louder and louder as it came down. I never saw anything fall so fast. We saw it hit the ground among a lot of smashed-up buildings on the crest behind us. It went right over and flew to pieces, all to smithereens....

"It hurt your nose to see it hit the ground....

"Somehow--I was sort of overcome by the thought of the men in that dive. I was trying to imagine how they felt it. From the moment when they realised they were going.

"What on earth must it have seemed like at last?

"They fell seven thousand feet, the men say; some say nine thousand feet. A mile and a half!

"But all the chaps were cheering.... And there was our machine hanging in the sky. You wanted to reach up and pat it on the back. It went up higher and away towards the German lines, as though it was looking for another German. It seemed to go now quite slowly. It was an English machine, though for a time we weren't sure; our machines are done in tri-colour just as though they were French. But everybody says it was English. It was one of our crack fighting machines, and from first to last it has put down seven Germans.... And that's really all the fighting there was. There has been fighting here; a month ago. There are perhaps a dozen dead Germans lying out still in front of the lines. Little twisted figures, like overthrown scarecrows, about a hundred yards away. But that is all.

"No, the trenches have disappointed me. They are a scene of tiresome domesticity. They aren't a patch on our quarters in the rear. There isn't the traffic. I've not found a single excuse for firing my rifle. I don't believe I shall ever fire my rifle at an enemy--ever....

"You've seen Rendezvous' fresh promotion, I suppose? He's one of the men the young officers talk about. Everybody believes in him. Do you remember how Manning used to hide from him?..."

Section 14

Mr. Britling read this through, and then his thoughts went back to Teddy's disappearance and then returned to Hugh. The youngster was right in the front now, and one had to steel oneself to the possibilities of the case. Somehow Mr. Britling had not expected to find Hugh so speedily in the firing line, though he would have been puzzled to find a reason why this should not have happened. But he found he had to begin the lesson of stoicism all over again.

He read the letter twice, and then he searched for some indication of its date. He suspected that letters were sometimes held back....

Four days later this suspicion was confirmed by the arrival of another letter from Hugh in which he told of his second spell in the trenches. This time things had been much more lively. They had been heavily shelled and there had been a German attack. And this time he was writing to his father, and wrote more freely. He had scribbled in pencil.

"Things are much livelier here than they were. Our guns are getting to work. They are firing in spells of an hour or so, three or four times a day, and just when they seem to be leaving off they begin again. The Germans suddenly got the range of our trenches the day before yesterday, and begun to pound us with high explosive.... Well, it's trying. You never seem quite to know when the next bang is coming, and that keeps

your nerves hung up; it seems to tighten your muscles and tire you. We've done nothing but lie low all day, and I feel as weary as if I had marched twenty miles. Then 'whop,' one's near you, and there is a flash and everything flies. It's a mad sort of smash-about. One came much too close to be pleasant; as near as the old oil jars are from the barn court door. It bowled me clean over and sent a lot of gravel over me. When I got up there was twenty yards of trench smashed into a mere hole, and men lying about, and some of them groaning and one three-quarters buried. We had to turn to and get them out as well as we could....

"I felt stunned and insensitive; it was well to have something to do....

"Our guns behind felt for the German guns. It was the damnest racket. Like giant lunatics smashing about amidst colossal pots and pans. They fired different sorts of shells; stink shells as well as Jack Johnsons, and though we didn't get much of that at our corner there was a sting of chlorine in the air all through the afternoon. Most of the stink shells fell short. We hadn't masks, but we rigged up a sort of protection with our handkerchiefs. And it didn't amount to very much. It was rather like the chemistry room after Heinrich and the kids had been mixing things. Most of the time I was busy helping with the men who had got hurt. Suddenly there came a lull. Then some one said the Germans were coming, and I had a glimpse of them.

"You don't look at anything steadily while the guns are going. When a big gun goes off or a shell bursts anywhere near you, you seem neither

to see nor hear for a moment. You keep on being intermittently stunned. One sees in a kind of flicker in between the impacts....

"Well, there they were. This time I saw them. They were coming out and running a little way and dropping, and our shell was bursting among them and behind them. A lot of it was going too far. I watched what our men were doing, and poured out a lot of cartridges ready to my hand and began to blaze away. Half the German attack never came out of their trench. If they really intended business against us, which I doubt, they were half-hearted in carrying it out. They didn't show for five minutes, and they left two or three score men on the ground. Whenever we saw a man wriggle we were told to fire at him; it might be an unwounded man trying to crawl back. For a time our guns gave them beans. Then it was practically over, but about sunset their guns got back at us again, and the artillery fight went on until it was moonlight. The chaps in our third company caught it rather badly, and then our guns seemed to find something and get the upper hand....

"In the night some of our men went out to repair the wire entanglements, and one man crawled halfway to the enemy trenches to listen. But I had done my bit for the day, and I was supposed to sleep in the dug-out. I was far too excited to sleep. All my nerves were jumping about, and my mind was like a lot of flying fragments flying about very fast....

"They shelled us again next day and our tea dixy was hit; so that we didn't get any tea....

"I slept thirty hours after I got back here. And now I am slowly digesting these experiences. Most of our fellows are. My mind and nerves have been rather bumped and bruised by the shelling, but not so much as you might think. I feel as though I'd presently not think very much of it. Some of our men have got the stun of it a lot more than I have. It gets at the older men more. Everybody says that. The men of over thirty-five don't recover from a shelling for weeks. They go about--sort of hesitatingly....

"Life is very primitive here--which doesn't mean that one is getting down to anything fundamental, but only going back to something immediate and simple. It's fetching and carrying and getting water and getting food and going up to the firing line and coming back. One goes on for weeks, and then one day one finds oneself crying out, 'What is all this for? When is it to end?' I seemed to have something ahead of me before this war began, education, science, work, discoveries; all sorts of things; but it is hard to feel that there is anything ahead of us here....

"Somehow the last spell in the fire trench has shaken up my mind a lot. I was getting used to the war before, but now I've got back to my original amazement at the whole business. I find myself wondering what we are really up to, why the war began, why we were caught into this amazing routine. It looks, it feels orderly, methodical, purposeful. Our officers give us orders and get their orders, and the men back there get

their orders. Everybody is getting orders. Back, I suppose, to Lord Kitchener. It goes on for weeks with the effect of being quite sane and intended and the right thing, and then, then suddenly it comes whacking into one's head, 'But this--this is utterly mad!' This going to and fro and to and fro and to and fro; this monotony which breaks ever and again into violence--violence that never gets anywhere--is exactly the life that a lunatic leads. Melancholia and mania.... It's just a collective obsession--by war. The world is really quite mad. I happen to be having just one gleam of sanity, that won't last after I have finished this letter. I suppose when an individual man goes mad and gets out of the window because he imagines the door is magically impossible, and dances about in the street without his trousers jabbing at passers-by with a toasting-fork, he has just the same sombre sense of unavoidable necessity that we have, all of us, when we go off with our packs into the trenches....

"It's only by an effort that I can recall how life felt in the spring of 1914. Do you remember Heinrich and his attempt to make a table chart of the roses, so that we could sit outside the barn and read the names of all the roses in the barn court? Like the mountain charts they have on tables in Switzerland. What an inconceivable thing that is now! For all I know I shot Heinrich the other night. For all I know he is one of the lumps that we counted after the attack went back.

"It's a queer thing, Daddy, but I have a sort of seditious feeling in writing things like this. One gets to feel that it is wrong to think.

It's the effect of discipline. Of being part of a machine. Still, I doubt if I ought to think. If one really looks into things in this spirit, where is it going to take us? Ortheris--his real name by the by is Arthur Jewell--hasn't any of these troubles. 'The b----y Germans butted into Belgium,' he says. 'We've got to 'oof 'em out again. That's all abart it. Leastways it's all I know.... I don't know nothing about Serbia, I don't know nothing about anything, except that the Germans got to stop this sort of gime for Everlasting, Amen.'...

"Sometimes I think he's righter than I am. Sometimes I think he is only madder."

Section 15

These letters weighed heavily upon Mr. Britling's mind. He perceived that this precociously wise, subtle youngster of his was now close up to the line of injury and death, going to and fro from it, in a perpetual, fluctuating danger. At any time now in the day or night the evil thing might wing its way to him. If Mr. Britling could have prayed, he would have prayed for Hugh. He began and never finished some ineffectual prayers.

He tried to persuade himself of a Roman stoicism; that he would be sternly proud, sternly satisfied, if this last sacrifice for his country was demanded from him. He perceived he was merely humbugging himself....

This war had no longer the simple greatness that would make any such stern happiness possible....

The disaster to Teddy and Mrs. Teddy hit him hard. He winced at the thought of Mrs. Teddy's white face; the unspoken accusation in her eyes. He felt he could never bring himself to say his one excuse to her: "I did not keep Hugh back. If I had done that, then you might have the right to blame."

If he had overcome every other difficulty in the way to an heroic pose there was still Hugh's unconquerable lucidity of outlook. War was a madness....

But what else was to be done? What else could be done? We could not give in to Germany. If a lunatic struggles, sane men must struggle too....

Mr. Britling had ceased to write about the war at all. All his later writings about it had been abandoned unfinished. He could not imagine them counting, affecting any one, producing any effect. Indeed he was writing now very intermittently. His contributions to The Times had fallen away. He was perpetually thinking now about the war, about life and death, about the religious problems that had seemed so remote in the days of the peace; but none of his thinking would become clear and definite enough for writing. All the clear stars of his mind were hidden by the stormy clouds of excitement that the daily newspaper perpetually

renewed and by the daily developments of life. And just as his professional income shrank before his mental confusion and impotence, the private income that came from his and his wife's investments became uncertain. She had had two thousand pounds in the Constantinople loan, seven hundred in debentures of the Ottoman railway; he had held similar sums in two Hungarian and one Bulgarian loan, in a linoleum factory at Rouen and in a Swiss Hotel company. All these stopped payments, and the dividends from their other investments shrank. There seemed no limit set to the possibilities of shrinkage of capital and income. Income tax had leapt to colossal dimensions, the cost of most things had risen, and the tangle of life was now increased by the need for retrenchments and economies. He decided that Gladys, the facetiously named automobile, was a luxury, and sold her for a couple of hundred pounds. He lost his gardener, who had gone to higher priced work with a miller, and he had great trouble to replace him, so that the garden became disagreeably unkempt and unsatisfactory. He had to give up his frequent trips to London. He was obliged to defer Statesminster for the boys. For a time at any rate they must go as day boys to Brinsmead. At every point he met this uncongenial consideration of ways and means. For years now he had gone easy, lived with a certain self-indulgence. It was extraordinarily vexatious to have one's greater troubles for one's country and one's son and one's faith crossed and complicated by these little troubles of the extra sixpence and the untimely bill.

What worried his mind perhaps more than anything else was his gradual loss of touch with the essential issues of the war. At first the

militarism, the aggression of Germany, had seemed so bad that he could not see the action of Britain and her allies as anything but entirely righteous. He had seen the war plainly and simply in the phrase, "Now this militarism must end." He had seen Germany as a system, as imperialism and junkerism, as a callous materialist aggression, as the spirit that makes war, and the Allies as the protest of humanity against all these evil things.

Insensibly, in spite of himself, this first version of the war was giving place to another. The tawdry, rhetorical German Emperor, who had been the great antagonist at the outset, the last upholder of Cæsarism, God's anointed with the withered arm and the mailed fist, had receded from the foreground of the picture; that truer Germany which is thought and system, which is the will to do things thoroughly, the Germany of Ostwald and the once rejected Hindenburg, was coming to the fore. It made no apology for the errors and crimes that had been imposed upon it by its Hohenzollern leadership, but it fought now to save itself from the destruction and division that would be its inevitable lot if it accepted defeat too easily; fought to hold out, fought for a second chance, with discipline, with skill and patience, with a steadfast will. It fought with science, it fought with economy, with machines and thought against all too human antagonists. It necessitated an implacable resistance, but also it commanded respect. Against it fought three great peoples with as fine a will; but they had neither the unity, the habitual discipline, nor the science of Germany, and it was the latter defect that became more and more the distressful matter of Mr.

Britling's thoughts. France after her initial experiences, after her first reeling month, had risen from the very verge of defeat to a steely splendour of resolution, but England and Russia, those twin slack giants, still wasted force, were careless, negligent, uncertain. Everywhere up and down the scale, from the stupidity of the uniform sandbags and Hugh's young officer who would not use a map, to the general conception and direction of the war, Mr. Britling's inflamed and oversensitised intelligence perceived the same bad qualities for which he had so often railed upon his countrymen in the days of the peace, that impatience, that indolence, that wastefulness and inconclusiveness, that failure to grip issues and do obviously necessary things. The same lax qualities that had brought England so close to the supreme imbecility of a civil war in Ireland in July, 1914, were now muddling and prolonging the war, and postponing, it might be for ever, the victory that had seemed so certain only a year ago. The politician still intrigued, the ineffectives still directed. Against brains used to the utmost their fight was a stupid thrusting forth of men and men and yet more men, men badly trained, under-equipped, stupidly led. A press clamour for invention and scientific initiative was stifled under a committee of elderly celebrities and eminent dufferdom; from the outset, the Ministry of Munitions seemed under the influence of the "business man."...

It is true that righteousness should triumph over the tyrant and the robber, but have carelessness and incapacity any right to triumph over capacity and foresight? Men were coming now to dark questionings

between this intricate choice. And, indeed, was our cause all righteousness?

There surely is the worst doubt of all for a man whose son is facing death.

Were we indeed standing against tyranny for freedom?

There came drifting to Mr. Britling's ears a confusion of voices, voices that told of reaction, of the schemes of employers to best the trade unions, of greedy shippers and greedy house landlords reaping their harvest, of waste and treason in the very households of the Ministry, of religious cant and intolerance at large, of self-advertisement written in letters of blood, of forestalling and jobbery, of irrational and exasperating oppressions in India and Egypt.... It came with a shock to him, too, that Hugh should see so little else than madness in the war, and have so pitiless a realisation of its essential futility. The boy forced his father to see--what indeed all along he had been seeing more and more clearly. The war, even by the standards of adventure and conquest, had long since become a monstrous absurdity. Some way there must be out of this bloody entanglement that was yielding victory to neither side, that was yielding nothing but waste and death beyond all precedent. The vast majority of people everywhere must be desiring peace, willing to buy peace at any reasonable price, and in all the world it seemed there was insufficient capacity to end the daily butchery and achieve the peace that was so universally desired, the

peace that would be anything better than a breathing space for further warfare.... Every day came the papers with the balanced story of battles, losses, destructions, ships sunk, towns smashed. And never a decision, never a sign of decision.

One Saturday afternoon Mr. Britling found himself with Mrs. Britling at Claverings. Lady Homartyn was in mourning for her two nephews, the Glassington boys, who had both been killed, one in Flanders, the other in Gallipoli. Raeburn was there too, despondent and tired-looking. There were three young men in khaki, one with the red of a staff officer; there were two or three women whom Mr. Britling had not met before, and Miss Sharsper the novelist, fresh from nursing experience among the convalescents in the south of France. But he was disgusted to find that the gathering was dominated by his old antagonist, Lady Frensham, unsubdued, unaltered, rampant over them all, arrogant, impudent, insulting. She was in mourning, she had the most splendid black furs Mr. Britling had ever seen; her large triumphant profile came out of them like the head of a vulture out of its ruff; her elder brother was a wounded prisoner in Germany, her second was dead; it would seem that hers were the only sacrifices the war had yet extorted from any one. She spoke as though it gave her the sole right to criticise the war or claim compensation for the war.

Her incurable propensity to split the country, to make mischievous accusations against classes and districts and public servants, was having full play. She did her best to provoke Mr. Britling into a

dispute, and throw some sort of imputation upon his patriotism as distinguished from her own noisy and intolerant conceptions of "loyalty."

She tried him first with conscription. She threw out insults at the shirkers and the "funk classes." All the middle-class people clung on to their wretched little businesses, made any sort of excuse....

Mr. Britling was stung to defend them. "A business," he said acidly, "isn't like land, which waits and grows rich for its owner. And these people can't leave ferrety little agents behind them when they go off to serve. Tens of thousands of middle-class men have ruined themselves and flung away every prospect they had in the world to go to this war."

"And scores of thousands haven't!" said Lady Frensham. "They are the men I'm thinking of."...

Mr. Britling ran through a little list of aristocratic stay-at-homes that began with a duke.

"And not a soul speaks to them in consequence," she said.

She shifted her attack to the Labour people. They would rather see the country defeated than submit to a little discipline.

"Because they have no faith in the house of lawyers or the house of

landlords," said Mr. Britling. "Who can blame them?"

She proceeded to tell everybody what she would do with strikers. She would give them "short shrift." She would give them a taste of the Prussian way--homoeopathic treatment. "But of course old vote-catching Asquith daren't--he daren't!" Mr. Britling opened his mouth and said nothing; he was silenced. The men in khaki listened respectfully but ambiguously; one of the younger ladies it seemed was entirely of Lady Frensham's way of thinking, and anxious to show it. The good lady having now got her hands upon the Cabinet proceeded to deal faithfully with its two-and-twenty members. Winston Churchill had overridden Lord Fisher upon the question of Gallipoli, and incurred terrible responsibilities. Lord Haldane--she called him "Tubby Haldane"--was a convicted traitor. "The man's a German out and out. Oh! what if he hasn't a drop of German blood in his veins? He's a German by choice--which is worse."

"I thought he had a certain capacity for organisation," said Mr. Britling.

"We don't want his organisation, and we don't want him," said Lady Frensham.

Mr. Britling pleaded for particulars of the late Lord Chancellor's treasons. There were no particulars. It was just an idea the good lady had got into her head, that had got into a number of accessible heads. There was only one strong man in all the country now, Lady Frensham

insisted. That was Sir Edward Carson.

Mr. Britling jumped in his chair.

"But has he ever done anything?" he cried, "except embitter Ireland?"

Lady Frensham did not hear that question. She pursued her glorious theme. Lloyd George, who had once been worthy only of the gallows, was now the sole minister fit to put beside her hero. He had won her heart by his condemnation of the working man. He was the one man who was not afraid to speak out, to tell them they drank, to tell them they shirked and loafed, to tell them plainly that if defeat came to this country the blame would fall upon them!

"No!" cried Mr. Britling.

"Yes," said Lady Frensham. "Upon them and those who have flattered and misled them...."

And so on....

It presently became necessary for Lady Homartyn to rescue Mr. Britling from the great lady's patriotic tramplings. He found himself drifting into the autumnal garden--the show of dahlias had never been so wonderful--in the company of Raeburn and the staff officer and a small woman who was presently discovered to be remarkably well-informed. They

were all despondent. "I think all this promiscuous blaming of people is quite the worst--and most ominous--thing about us just now," said Mr. Britling after the restful pause that followed the departure from the presence of Lady Frensham.

"It goes on everywhere," said the staff officer.

"Is it really--honest?" said Mr. Britling.

Raeburn, after reflection, decided to answer. "As far as it is stupid, yes. There's a lot of blame coming; there's bound to be a day of reckoning, and I suppose we've all got an instinctive disposition to find a scapegoat for our common sins. The Tory press is pretty rotten, and there's a strong element of mere personal spite--in the Churchill attacks for example. Personal jealousy probably. Our 'old families' seem to have got vulgar-spirited imperceptibly--in a generation or so. They quarrel and shirk and lay blame exactly as bad servants do--and things are still far too much in their hands. Things are getting muffed, there can be no doubt about that--not fatally, but still rather seriously. And the government--it was human before the war, and we've added no archangels. There's muddle. There's mutual suspicion. You never know what newspaper office Lloyd George won't be in touch with next. He's honest and patriotic and energetic, but he's mortally afraid of old women and class intrigues. He doesn't know where to get his backing. He's got all a labour member's terror of the dagger at his back. There's a lack of nerve, too, in getting rid of prominent officers--who have

friends."

The staff officer nodded.

"Northcliffe seems to me to have a case," said Mr. Britling. "Every one abuses him."

"I'd stop his Daily Mail," said Raeburn. "I'd leave The Times, but I'd stop the Daily Mail on the score of its placards alone. It overdoes Northcliffe. It translates him into the shrieks and yells of underlings. The plain fact is that Northcliffe is scared out of his wits by German efficiency--and in war time when a man is scared out of his wits, whether he is honest or not, you put his head in a bag or hold a pistol to it to calm him.... What is the good of all this clamouring for a change of government? We haven't a change of government. It's like telling a tramp to get a change of linen. Our men, all our public men, are second-rate men, with the habits of advocates. There is nothing masterful in their minds. How can you expect the system to produce anything else? But they are doing as well as they can, and there is no way of putting in any one else now, and there you are."

"Meanwhile," said Mr. Britling, "our boys--get killed."

"They'd get killed all the more if you had--let us say--Carson and Lloyd George and Northcliffe and Lady Frensham, with, I suppose, Austin Harrison and Horatio Bottomley thrown in--as a Strong Silent

Government.... I'd rather have Northcliffe as dictator than that.... We can't suddenly go back on the past and alter our type. We didn't listen to Matthew Arnold. We've never thoroughly turned out and cleaned up our higher schools. We've resisted instruction. We've preferred to maintain our national luxuries of a bench of bishops and party politics. And compulsory Greek and the university sneer. And Lady Frensham. And all that sort of thing. And here we are!... Well, damn it, we're in for it now; we've got to plough through with it--with what we have--as what we are."

The young staff officer nodded. He thought that was "about it."

"You've got no sons," said Mr. Britling.

"I'm not even married," said Raeburn, as though he thanked God.

The little well-informed lady remarked abruptly that she had two sons; one was just home wounded from Suvla Bay. What her son told her made her feel very grave. She said that the public was still quite in the dark about the battle of Anafarta. It had been a hideous muddle, and we had been badly beaten. The staff work had been awful. Nothing joined up, nothing was on the spot and in time. The water supply, for example, had gone wrong; the men had been mad with thirst. One regiment which she named had not been supported by another; when at last the first came back the two battalions fought in the trenches regardless of the enemy. There had been no leading, no correlation, no plan. Some of the guns,

she declared, had been left behind in Egypt. Some of the train was untraceable to this day. It was mislaid somewhere in the Levant. At the beginning Sir Ian Hamilton had not even been present. He had failed to get there in time. It had been the reckless throwing away of an army. And so hopeful an army! Her son declared it meant the complete failure of the Dardanelles project....

"And when one hears how near we came to victory!" she cried, and left it at that.

"Three times this year," said Raeburn, "we have missed victories because of the badness of our staff work. It's no good picking out scapegoats. It's a question of national habit. It's because the sort of man we turn out from our public schools has never learnt how to catch trains, get to an office on the minute, pack a knapsack properly, or do anything smartly and quickly--anything whatever that he can possibly get done for him. You can't expect men who are habitually easy-going to keep bucked up to a high pitch of efficiency for any length of time. All their training is against it. All their tradition. They hate being prigs. An Englishman will be any sort of stupid failure rather than appear a prig. That's why we've lost three good fights that we ought to have won--and thousands and thousands of men--and material and time, precious beyond reckoning. We've lost a year. We've dashed the spirit of our people."

"My boy in Flanders," said Mr. Britling, "says about the same thing. He says our officers have never learnt to count beyond ten, and that they

are scared at the sight of a map...."

"And the war goes on," said the little woman.

"How long, oh Lord! how long?" cried Mr. Britling.

"I'd give them another year," said the staff officer. "Just going as we are going. Then something must give way. There will be no money anywhere. There'll be no more men.... I suppose they'll feel that shortage first anyhow. Russia alone has over twenty millions."

"That's about the size of it," said Raeburn....

"Do you think, sir, there'll be civil war?" asked the young staff officer abruptly after a pause.

There was a little interval before any one answered this surprising question.

"After the peace, I mean," said the young officer.

"There'll be just the devil to pay," said Raeburn.

"One thing after another in the country is being pulled up by its roots," reflected Mr. Britling.

"We've never produced a plan for the war, and it isn't likely we shall have one for the peace," said Raeburn, and added: "and Lady Frensham's little lot will be doing their level best to sit on the safety-valve.... They'll rake up Ireland and Ulster from the very start. But I doubt if Ulster will save 'em."

"We shall squabble. What else do we ever do?"

No one seemed able to see more than that. A silence fell on the little party.

"Well, thank heaven for these dahlias," said Raeburn, affecting the philosopher.

The young staff officer regarded the dahlias without enthusiasm....

Section 16

Mr. Britling sat one September afternoon with Captain Lawrence Carmine in the sunshine of the barn court, and smoked with him and sometimes talked and sometimes sat still.

"When it began I did not believe that this war could be like other wars," he said. "I did not dream it. I thought that we had grown wiser at last. It seemed to me like the dawn of a great clearing up. I thought

the common sense of mankind would break out like a flame, an indignant flame, and consume all this obsolete foolery of empires and banners and militarism directly it made its attack upon human happiness. A score of things that I see now were preposterous, I thought must happen--naturally. I thought America would declare herself against the Belgian outrage; that she would not tolerate the smashing of the great sister republic--if only for the memory of Lafayette. Well--I gather America is chiefly concerned about our making cotton contraband. I thought the Balkan States were capable of a reasonable give and take; of a common care for their common freedom. I see now three German royalties trading in peasants, and no men in their lands to gainsay them. I saw this war, as so many Frenchmen have seen it, as something that might legitimately command a splendid enthusiasm of indignation.... It was all a dream, the dream of a prosperous comfortable man who had never come to the cutting edge of life. Everywhere cunning, everywhere small feuds and hatreds, distrusts, dishonesties, timidities, feebleness of purpose, dwarfish imaginations, swarm over the great and simple issues.... It is a war now like any other of the mobbing, many-aimed cataclysms that have shattered empires and devastated the world; it is a war without point, a war that has lost its soul, it has become mere incoherent fighting and destruction, a demonstration in vast and tragic forms of the stupidity and ineffectiveness of our species...."

He stopped, and there was a little interval of silence.

Captain Carmine tossed the fag end of his cigar very neatly into a tub

of hydrangeas. "Three thousand years ago in China," he said, "there were men as sad as we are, for the same cause."

"Three thousand years ahead perhaps," said Mr. Britling, "there will still be men with the same sadness.... And yet--and yet.... No. Just now I have no elasticity. It is not in my nature to despair, but things are pressing me down. I don't recover as I used to recover. I tell myself still that though the way is long and hard the spirit of hope, the spirit of creation, the generosities and gallantries in the heart of man, must end in victory. But I say that over as one repeats a worn-out prayer. The light is out of the sky for me. Sometimes I doubt if it will ever come back. Let younger men take heart and go on with the world. If I could die for the right thing now--instead of just having to live on in this world of ineffective struggle--I would be glad to die now, Carmine...."

Section 17

In these days also Mr. Direck was very unhappy.

For Cissie, at any rate, had not lost touch with the essential issues of the war. She was as clear as ever that German militarism and the German attack on Belgium and France was the primary subject of the war. And she dismissed all secondary issues. She continued to demand why America did not fight. "We fight for Belgium. Won't you fight for the Dutch and

Norwegian ships? Won't you even fight for your own ships that the Germans are sinking?"

Mr. Direck attempted explanations that were ill received.

"You were ready enough to fight the Spaniards when they blew up the Maine. But the Germans can sink the Lusitania! That's--as you say--a different proposition."

His mind was shot by an extraordinary suspicion that she thought the Lusitania an American vessel. But Mr. Direck was learning his Cissie, and he did not dare to challenge her on this score.

"You haven't got hold of the American proposition," he said. "We're thinking beyond wars."

"That's what we have been trying to do," said Cissie. "Do you think we came into it for the fun of the thing?"

"Haven't I shown in a hundred ways that I sympathise?"

"Oh--sympathy!..."

He fared little better at Mr. Britling's hands. Mr. Britling talked darkly, but pointed all the time only too plainly at America. "There's two sorts of liberalism," said Mr. Britling, "that pretend to be the

same thing; there's the liberalism of great aims and the liberalism of defective moral energy...."

Section 18

It was not until Teddy had been missing for three weeks that Hugh wrote about him. The two Essex battalions on the Flanders front were apparently wide apart, and it was only from home that Hugh learnt what had happened.

"You can't imagine how things narrow down when one is close up against them. One does not know what is happening even within a few miles of us, until we get the newspapers. Then, with a little reading between the lines and some bold guessing, we fit our little bit of experience with a general shape. Of course I've wondered at times about Teddy. But oddly enough I've never thought of him very much as being out here. It's queer, I know, but I haven't. I can't imagine why....

"I don't know about 'missing.' We've had nothing going on here that has led to any missing. All our men have been accounted for. But every few miles along the front conditions alter. His lot may have been closer up to the enemy, and there may have been a rush and a fight for a bit of trench either way. In some parts the German trenches are not thirty yards away, and there is mining, bomb throwing, and perpetual creeping up and give and take. Here we've been getting a bit forward. But I'll

tell you about that presently. And, anyhow, I don't understand about 'missing.' There's very few prisoners taken now. But don't tell Letty that. I try to imagine old Teddy in it....

"Missing's a queer thing. It isn't tragic--or pitiful. Or partly reassuring like 'prisoner.' It just sends one speculating and speculating. I can't find any one who knows where the 14th Essex are. Things move about here so mysteriously that for all I know we may find them in the next trench next time we go up. But there is a chance for Teddy. It's worth while bucking Letty all you can. And at the same time there's odds against him. There plainly and unfeelingly is how things stand in my mind. I think chiefly of Letty. I'm glad Cissie is with her, and I'm glad she's got the boy. Keep her busy. She was frightfully fond of him. I've seen all sorts of things between them, and I know that.... I'll try and write to her soon, and I'll find something hopeful to tell her.

"Meanwhile I've got something to tell you. I've been through a fight, a big fight, and I haven't got a scratch. I've taken two prisoners with my lily hand. Men were shot close to me. I didn't mind that a bit. It was as exciting as one of those bitter fights we used to have round the hockey goal. I didn't mind anything till afterwards. Then when I was in the trench in the evening I trod on something slippery--pah! And after it was all over one of my chums got it--sort of unfairly. And I keep on thinking of those two things so much that all the early part is just dreamlike. It's more like something I've read in a book, or seen in the

Illustrated London News than actually been through. One had been thinking so often, how will it feel? how shall I behave? that when it came it had an effect of being flat and ordinary.

"They say we hadn't got enough guns in the spring or enough ammunition. That's all right now--anyhow. They started in plastering the Germans overnight, and right on until it was just daylight. I never heard such a row, and their trenches--we could stand up and look at them without getting a single shot at us--were flying about like the crater of a volcano. We were not in our firing trench. We had gone back into some new trenches, at the rear--I think to get out of the way of the counter fire. But this morning they weren't doing very much. For once our guns were on top. There was a feeling of anticipation--very like waiting for an examination paper to be given out; then we were at it. Getting out of a trench to attack gives you an odd feeling of being just hatched. Suddenly the world is big. I don't remember our gun fire stopping. And then you rush. 'Come on! Come on!' say the officers. Everybody gives a sort of howl and rushes. When you see men dropping, you rush the faster. The only thing that checks you at all is the wire twisted about everywhere. You don't want to trip over that. The frightening thing is the exposure. After being in the trenches so long you feel naked. You run like a scared child for the German trench ahead. I can't understand the iron nerve of a man who can expose his back by turning to run away. And there's a thirsty feeling with one's bayonet. But they didn't wait. They dropped rifles and ran. But we ran so fast after them that we caught one or two in the second trench. I got down into that, heard a

voice behind me, and found my two prisoners lying artful in a dug-out. They held up their hands as I turned. If they hadn't I doubt if I should have done anything to them. I didn't feel like it. I felt friendly.

"Not all the Germans ran. Three or four stuck to their machine-guns until they got bayoneted. Both the trenches were frightfully smashed about, and in the first one there were little knots and groups of dead. We got to work at once shying the sandbags over from the old front of the trench to the parados. Our guns had never stopped all the time; they were now plastering the third line trenches. And almost at once the German shells began dropping into us. Of course they had the range to an inch. One didn't have any time to feel and think; one just set oneself with all one's energy to turn the trench over....

"I don't remember that I helped or cared for a wounded man all the time, or felt anything about the dead except to step over them and not on them. I was just possessed by the idea that we had to get the trench into a sheltering state before they tried to come back. And then stick there. I just wanted to win, and there was nothing else in my mind....

"They did try to come back, but not very much....

"Then when I began to feel sure of having got hold of the trench for good, I began to realise just how tired I was and how high the sun had got. I began to look about me, and found most of the other men working just as hard as I had been doing. 'We've done it!' I said, and that was

the first word I'd spoken since I told my two Germans to come out of it, and stuck a man with a wounded leg to watch them. 'It's a bit of All Right,' said Ortheris, knocking off also, and lighting a half-consumed cigarette. He had been wearing it behind his ear, I believe, ever since the charge. Against this occasion. He'd kept close up to me all the time, I realised. And then old Park turned up very cheerful with a weak bayonet jab in his forearm that he wanted me to rebandage. It was good to see him practically all right too.

"'I took two prisoners,' I said, and everybody I spoke to I told that. I was fearfully proud of it.

"I thought that if I could take two prisoners in my first charge I was going to be some soldier.

"I had stood it all admirably. I didn't feel a bit shaken. I was as tough as anything. I'd seen death and killing, and it was all just hockey.

"And then that confounded Ortheris must needs go and get killed.

"The shell knocked me over, and didn't hurt me a bit. I was a little stunned, and some dirt was thrown over me, and when I got up on my knees I saw Jewell lying about six yards off--and his legs were all smashed about. Ugh! Pulped!

"He looked amazed. 'Bloody,' he said, 'bloody.' He fixed his eyes on me, and suddenly grinned. You know we'd once had two fights about his saying 'bloody,' I think I told you at the time, a fight and a return match, he couldn't box for nuts, but he stood up like a Briton, and it appealed now to his sense of humour that I should be standing there too dazed to protest at the old offence. 'I thought you was done in,' he said. 'I'm in a mess--a bloody mess, ain't I? Like a stuck pig. Bloody--right enough. Bloody! I didn't know I 'ad it in me.'

"He looked at me and grinned with a sort of pale satisfaction in keeping up to the last--dying good Ortheris to the finish. I just stood up helpless in front of him, still rather dazed.

"He said something about having a thundering thirst on him.

"I really don't believe he felt any pain. He would have done if he had lived.

"And then while I was fumbling with my water-bottle, he collapsed. He forgot all about Ortheris. Suddenly he said something that cut me all to ribbons. His face puckered up just like the face of a fretful child which refuses to go to bed. 'I didn't want to be aut of it,' he said petulantly. 'And I'm done!' And then--then he just looked discontented and miserable and died--right off. Turned his head a little way over. As if he was impatient at everything. Fainted--and fluttered out.

"For a time I kept trying to get him to drink....

"I couldn't believe he was dead....

"And suddenly it was all different. I began to cry. Like a baby. I kept on with the water-bottle at his teeth long after I was convinced he was dead. I didn't want him to be aut of it! God knows how I didn't. I wanted my dear little Cockney cad back. Oh! most frightfully I wanted him back.

"I shook him. I was like a scared child. I blubbered and howled things.... It's all different since he died.

"My dear, dear Father, I am grieving and grieving--and it's altogether nonsense. And it's all mixed up in my mind with the mess I trod on. And it gets worse and worse. So that I don't seem to feel anything really, even for Teddy.

"It's been just the last straw of all this hellish foolery....

"If ever there was a bigger lie, my dear Daddy, than any other, it is that man is a reasonable creature....

"War is just foolery--lunatic foolery--hell's foolery....

"But, anyhow, your son is sound and well--if sorrowful and angry. We

were relieved that night. And there are rumours that very soon we are to have a holiday and a refit. We lost rather heavily. We have been praised. But all along, Essex has done well. I can't reckon to get back yet, but there are such things as leave for eight-and-forty hours or so in England....

"I shall be glad of that sort of turning round....

"I'm tired. Oh! I'm tired....

"I wanted to write all about Jewell to his mother or his sweetheart or some one; I wanted to wallow in his praises, to say all the things I really find now that I thought about him, but I haven't even had that satisfaction. He was a Poor Law child; he was raised in one of those awful places between Sutton and Banstead in Surrey. I've told you of all the sweethearting he had. 'Soldiers Three' was his Bible; he was always singing 'Tipperary,' and he never got the tune right nor learnt more than three lines of it. He laced all his talk with 'b----y'; it was his jewel, his ruby. But he had the pluck of a robin or a squirrel; I never knew him scared or anything but cheerful. Misfortunes, humiliations, only made him chatty. And he'd starve to have something to give away.

"Well, well, this is the way of war, Daddy. This is what war is. Damn the Kaiser! Damn all fools.... Give my love to the Mother and the bruddykins and every one...."

Section 19

It was just a day or so over three weeks after this last letter from Hugh that Mr. Direck reappeared at Matching's Easy. He had had a trip to Holland--a trip that was as much a flight from Cissie's reproaches as a mission of inquiry. He had intended to go on into Belgium, where he had already been doing useful relief work under Mr. Hoover, but the confusion of his own feelings had checked him and brought him back.

Mr. Direck's mind was in a perplexity only too common during the stresses of that tragic year. He was entangled in a paradox; like a large majority of Americans at that time his feelings were quite definitely pro-Ally, and like so many in that majority he had a very clear conviction that it would be wrong and impossible for the United States to take part in the war. His sympathies were intensely with the Dower House and its dependent cottage; he would have wept with generous emotion to see the Stars and Stripes interwoven with the three other great banners of red, white and blue that led the world against German imperialism and militarism, but for all that his mind would not march to that tune. Against all these impulses fought something very fundamental in Mr. Direck's composition, a preconception of America that had grown almost insensibly in his mind, the idea of America as a polity aloof from the Old World system, as a fresh start for humanity, as something altogether too fine and precious to be dragged into even the noblest of European conflicts. America was to be the beginning of the fusion of

mankind, neither German nor British nor French nor in any way national. She was to be the great experiment in peace and reasonableness. She had to hold civilisation and social order out of this fray, to be a refuge for all those finer things that die under stress and turmoil; it was her task to maintain the standards of life and the claims of humanitarianism in the conquered province and the prisoners' compound, she had to be the healer and arbitrator, the remonstrance and not the smiting hand. Surely there were enough smiting hands.

But this idea of an America judicial, remonstrating, and aloof, led him to a conclusion that scandalised him. If America will not, and should not use force in the ends of justice, he argued, then America has no right to make and export munitions of war. She must not trade in what she disavows. He had a quite exaggerated idea of the amount of munitions that America was sending to the Allies, he was inclined to believe that they were entirely dependent upon their transatlantic supplies, and so he found himself persuaded that the victory of the Allies and the honour of America were incompatible things. And--in spite of his ethical aloofness--he loved the Allies. He wanted them to win, and he wanted America to abandon a course that he believed was vitally necessary to their victory. It was an intellectual dilemma. He hid this self-contradiction from Matching's Easy with much the same feelings that a curate might hide a poisoned dagger at a tea-party....

It was entirely against his habits of mind to hide anything--more particularly an entanglement with a difficult proposition--but he

perceived quite clearly that neither Cecily nor Mr. Britling were really to be trusted to listen calmly to what, under happier circumstances, might be a profoundly interesting moral complication. Yet it was not in his nature to conceal; it was in his nature to state.

And Cecily made things much more difficult. She was pitiless with him. She kept him aloof. "How can I let you make love to me," she said, "when our English men are all going to the war, when Teddy is a prisoner and Hugh is in the trenches. If I were a man--!"

She couldn't be induced to see any case for America. England was fighting for freedom, and America ought to be beside her. "All the world ought to unite against this German wickedness," she said.

"I'm doing all I can to help in Belgium," he protested. "Aren't I working? We've fed four million people."

He had backbone, and he would not let her, he was resolved, bully him into a falsehood about his country. America was aloof. She was right to be aloof.... At the same time, Cecily's reproaches were unendurable. And he could feel he was drifting apart from her....

He couldn't make America go to war.

In the quiet of his London hotel he thought it all out. He sat at a writing-table making notes of a perfectly lucid statement of the

reasonable, balanced liberal American opinion. An instinct of caution determined him to test it first on Mr. Britling.

But Mr. Britling realised his worst expectations. He was beyond listening.

"I've not heard from my boy for more than three weeks," said Mr. Britling in the place of any salutation. "This morning makes three-and-twenty days without a letter."

It seemed to Mr. Direck that Mr. Britling had suddenly grown ten years older. His face was more deeply lined; the colour and texture of his complexion had gone grey. He moved restlessly and badly; his nerves were manifestly unstrung.

"It's intolerable that one should be subjected to this ghastly suspense. The boy isn't three hundred miles away."

Mr. Direck made obvious inquiries.

"Always before he's written--generally once a fortnight."

They talked of Hugh for a time, but Mr. Britling was fitful and irritable and quite prepared to hold Mr. Direck accountable for the laxity of the War Office, the treachery of Bulgaria, the ambiguity of Roumania or any other barb that chanced to be sticking into his

sensibilities. They lunched precariously. Then they went into the study to smoke.

There Mr. Direck was unfortunate enough to notice a copy of that innocent American publication The New Republic, lying close to two or three numbers of The Fatherland, a pro-German periodical which at that time inflicted itself upon English writers with the utmost determination. Mr. Direck remarked that The New Republic was an interesting effort on the part of "la Jeunesse Américaine." Mr. Britling regarded the interesting effort with a jaded, unloving eye.

"You Americans," he said, "are the most extraordinary people in the world."

"Our conditions are exceptional," said Mr. Direck.

"You think they are," said Mr. Britling, and paused, and then began to deliver his soul about America in a discourse of accumulating bitterness. At first he reasoned and explained, but as he went on he lost self-control; he became dogmatic, he became denunciatory, he became abusive. He identified Mr. Direck more and more with his subject; he thrust the uncivil "You" more and more directly at him. He let his cigar go out, and flung it impatiently into the fire. As though America was responsible for its going out....

Like many Britons Mr. Britling had that touch of patriotic feeling

towards America which takes the form of impatient criticism. No one in Britain ever calls an American a foreigner. To see faults in Germany or Spain is to tap boundless fountains of charity; but the faults of America rankle in an English mind almost as much as the faults of England. Mr. Britling could explain away the faults of England readily enough; our Hanoverian monarchy, our Established Church and its deadening effect on education, our imperial obligations and the strain they made upon our supplies of administrative talent were all very serviceable for that purpose. But there in America was the old race, without Crown or Church or international embarrassment, and it was still falling short of splendid. His speech to Mr. Direck had the rancour of a family quarrel. Let me only give a few sentences that were to stick in Mr. Direck's memory.

"You think you are out of it for good and all. So did we think. We were as smug as you are when France went down in '71.... Yours is only one further degree of insularity. You think this vacuous aloofness of yours is some sort of moral superiority. So did we, so did we....

"It won't last you ten years if we go down....

"Do you think that our disaster will leave the Atlantic for you? Do you fancy there is any Freedom of the Seas possible beyond such freedom as we maintain, except the freedom to attack you? For forty years the British fleet has guarded all America from European attack. Your Monroe doctrine skulks behind it now....

"I'm sick of this high thin talk of yours about the war.... You are a nation of ungenerous onlookers--watching us throttle or be throttled. You gamble on our winning. And we shall win; we shall win. And you will profit. And when we have won a victory only one shade less terrible than defeat, then you think you will come in and tinker with our peace. Bleed us a little more to please your hyphenated patriots...."

He came to his last shaft. "You talk of your New Ideals of Peace. You say that you are too proud to fight. But your business men in New York give the show away. There's a little printed card now in half the offices in New York that tells of the real pacificism of America. They're busy, you know. Trade's real good. And so as not to interrupt it they stick up this card: 'Nix on the war!' Think of it!--'Nix on the war!' Here is the whole fate of mankind at stake, and America's contribution is a little grumbling when the Germans sank the Lusitania, and no end of grumbling when we hold up a ship or two and some fool of a harbour-master makes an overcharge. Otherwise--'Nix on the war!'...

"Well, let it be Nix on the war! Don't come here and talk to me! You who were searching registers a year ago to find your Essex kin. Let it be Nix! Explanations! What do I want with explanations? And"--he mocked his guest's accent and his guest's mode of thought--"dif'cult prap'sitions."

He got up and stood irresolute. He knew he was being preposterously

unfair to America, and outrageously uncivil to a trusting guest; he knew he had no business now to end the talk in this violent fashion. But it was an enormous relief. And to mend matters--No! He was glad he'd said these things....

He swung a shoulder to Mr. Direck, and walked out of the room....

Mr. Direck heard him cross the hall and slam the door of the little parlour....

Mr. Direck had been stirred deeply by the tragic indignation of this explosion, and the ring of torment in Mr. Britling's voice. He had stood up also, but he did not follow his host.

"It's his boy," said Mr. Direck at last, confidentially to the writing-desk. "How can one argue with him? It's just hell for him...."

Section 20

Mr. Direck took his leave of Mrs. Britling, and went very slowly towards the little cottage. But he did not go to the cottage. He felt he would only find another soul in torment there.

"What's the good of hanging round talking?" said Mr. Direck.

He stopped at the stile in the lane, and sat thinking deeply. "Only one thing will convince her," he said.

He held out his fingers. "First this," he whispered, "and then that. Yes."

He went on as far as the bend from which one sees the cottage, and stood for a little time regarding it.

He returned still more sorrowfully to the junction, and with every step he took it seemed to him that he would rather see Cecily angry and insulting than not see her at all.

At the post office he stopped and wrote a letter-card.

"Dear Cissie," he wrote. "I came down to-day to see you--and thought better of it. I'm going right off to find out about Teddy. Somehow I'll get that settled. I'll fly around and do that somehow if I have to go up to the German front to do it. And when I've got that settled I've got something else in my mind--well, it will wipe out all this little trouble that's got so big between us about neutrality. And I love you dearly, Cissie."

That was all the card would hold.

Section 21

And then as if it were something that every one in the Dower House had been waiting for, came the message that Hugh had been killed.

The telegram was brought up by a girl in a pinafore instead of the boy of the old dispensation, for boys now were doing the work of youths and youths the work of the men who had gone to the war.

Mr. Britling was standing at the front door; he had been surveying the late October foliage, touched by the warm light of the afternoon, when the messenger appeared. He opened the telegram, hoping as he had hoped when he opened any telegram since Hugh had gone to the front that it would not contain the exact words he read; that it would say wounded, that at the worst it would say "missing," that perhaps it might even tell of some pleasant surprise, a brief return to home such as the last letter had foreshadowed. He read the final, unqualified statement, the terse regrets. He stood quite still for a moment or so, staring at the words....

It was a mile and a quarter from the post office to the Dower House, and it was always his custom to give telegraph messengers who came to his house twopence, and he wanted very much to get rid of the telegraph girl, who stood expectantly before him holding her red bicycle. He felt now very sick and strained; he had a conviction that if he did not by an effort maintain his bearing cool and dry he would howl aloud. He felt in

his pocket for money; there were some coppers and a shilling. He pulled it all out together and stared at it.

He had an absurd conviction that this ought to be a sixpenny telegram. The thing worried him. He wanted to give the brat sixpence, and he had only threepence and a shilling, and he didn't know what to do and his brain couldn't think. It would be a shocking thing to give her a shilling, and he couldn't somehow give just coppers for so important a thing as Hugh's death. Then all this problem vanished and he handed the child the shilling. She stared at him, inquiring, incredulous. "Is there a reply, Sir, please?"

"No," he said, "that's for you. All of it.... This is a peculiar sort of telegram.... It's news of importance...."

As he said this he met her eyes, and had a sudden persuasion that she knew exactly what it was the telegram had told him, and that she was shocked at this gala-like treatment of such terrible news. He hesitated, feeling that he had to say something else, that he was socially inadequate, and then he decided that at any cost he must get his face away from her staring eyes. She made no movement to turn away. She seemed to be taking him in, recording him, for repetition, greedily, with every fibre of her being.

He stepped past her into the garden, and instantly forgot about her existence....

Section 22

He had been thinking of this possibility for the last few weeks almost continuously, and yet now that it had come to him he felt that he had never thought about it before, that he must go off alone by himself to envisage this monstrous and terrible fact, without distraction or interruption.

He saw his wife coming down the alley between the roses.

He was wrenched by emotions as odd and unaccountable as the emotions of adolescence. He had exactly the same feeling now that he had had when in his boyhood some unpleasant admission had to be made to his parents. He felt he could not go through a scene with her yet, that he could not endure the task of telling her, of being observed. He turned abruptly to his left. He walked away as if he had not seen her, across his lawn towards the little summer-house upon a knoll that commanded the high road. She called to him, but he did not answer....

He would not look towards her, but for a time all his senses were alert to hear whether she followed him. Safe in the summer-house he could glance back.

It was all right. She was going into the house.

He drew the telegram from his pocket again furtively, almost guiltily, and re-read it. He turned it over and read it again....

Killed.

Then his own voice, hoarse and strange to his ears, spoke his thought.

"My God! how unutterably silly.... Why did I let him go? Why did I let him go?"

Section 23

Mrs. Britling did not learn of the blow that had struck them until after dinner that night. She was so accustomed to ignore his incomprehensible moods that she did not perceive that there was anything tragic about him until they sat at table together. He seemed heavy and sulky and disposed to avoid her, but that sort of moodiness was nothing very strange to her. She knew that things that seemed to her utterly trivial, the reading of political speeches in The Times, little comments on life made in the most casual way, mere movements, could so avert him. She had cultivated a certain disregard of such fitful darknesses. But at the dinner-table she looked up, and was stabbed to the heart to see a haggard white face and eyes of deep despair regarding her ambiguously.

"Hugh!" she said, and then with a chill intimation, "What is it?"

They looked at each other. His face softened and winced.

"My Hugh," he whispered, and neither spoke for some seconds.

"Killed," he said, and suddenly stood up whimpering, and fumbled with his pocket.

It seemed he would never find what he sought. It came at last, a crumpled telegram. He threw it down before her, and then thrust his chair back clumsily and went hastily out of the room. She heard him sob. She had not dared to look at his face again.

"Oh!" she cried, realising that an impossible task had been thrust upon her.

"But what can I say to him?" she said, with the telegram in her hand.

The parlourmaid came into the room.

"Clear the dinner away!" said Mrs. Britling, standing at her place. "Master Hugh is killed...." And then wailing: "Oh! what can I say? What can I say?"

Section 24

That night Mrs. Britling made the supreme effort of her life to burst the prison of self-consciousness and inhibition in which she was confined. Never before in all her life had she so desired to be spontaneous and unrestrained; never before had she so felt herself hampered by her timidity, her self-criticism, her deeply ingrained habit of never letting herself go. She was rent by reflected distress. It seemed to her that she would be ready to give her life and the whole world to be able to comfort her husband now. And she could conceive no gesture of comfort. She went out of the dining-room into the hall and listened. She went very softly upstairs until she came to the door of her husband's room. There she stood still. She could hear no sound from within. She put out her hand and turned the handle of the door a little way, and then she was startled by the loudness of the sound it made and at her own boldness. She withdrew her hand, and then with a gesture of despair, with a face of white agony, she flitted along the corridor to her own room.

Her mind was beaten to the ground by this catastrophe, of which to this moment she had never allowed herself to think. She had never allowed herself to think of it. The figure of her husband, like some pitiful beast, wounded and bleeding, filled her mind. She gave scarcely a thought to Hugh. "Oh, what can I do for him?" she asked herself, sitting down before her unlit bedroom fire.... "What can I say or do?"

She brooded until she shivered, and then she lit her fire....

It was late that night and after an eternity of resolutions and doubts and indecisions that Mrs. Britling went to her husband. He was sitting close up to the fire with his chin upon his hands, waiting for her; he felt that she would come to him, and he was thinking meanwhile of Hugh with a slow unprogressive movement of the mind. He showed by a movement that he heard her enter the room, but he did not turn to look at her. He shrank a little from her approach.

She came and stood beside him. She ventured to touch him very softly, and to stroke his head. "My dear," she said. "My poor dear!

"It is so dreadful for you," she said, "it is so dreadful for you. I know how you loved him...."

He spread his hands over his face and became very still.

"My poor dear!" she said, still stroking his hair, "my poor dear!"

And then she went on saying "poor dear," saying it presently because there was nothing more had come into her mind. She desired supremely to be his comfort, and in a little while she was acting comfort so poorly that she perceived her own failure. And that increased her failure, and that increased her paralysing sense of failure....

And suddenly her stroking hand ceased. Suddenly the real woman cried out from her.

"I can't reach you!" she cried aloud. "I can't reach you. I would do anything.... You! You with your heart half broken...."

She turned towards the door. She moved clumsily, she was blinded by her tears.

Mr. Britling uncovered his face. He stood up astonished, and then pity and pitiful understanding came storming across his grief. He made a step and took her in his arms. "My dear," he said, "don't go from me...."

She turned to him weeping, and put her arms about his neck, and he too was weeping.

"My poor wife!" he said, "my dear wife. If it were not for you--I think I could kill myself to-night. Don't cry, my dear. Don't, don't cry. You do not know how you comfort me. You do not know how you help me."

He drew her to him; he put her cheek against his own....

His heart was so sore and wounded that he could not endure that another human being should go wretched. He sat down in his chair and drew her upon his knees, and said everything he could think of to console her and reassure her and make her feel that she was of value to him. He

spoke of every pleasant aspect of their lives, of every aspect, except that he never named that dear pale youth who waited now.... He could wait a little longer....

At last she went from him.

"Good night," said Mr. Britling, and took her to the door. "It was very dear of you to come and comfort me," he said....

Section 25

He closed the door softly behind her.

The door had hardly shut upon her before he forgot her. Instantly he was alone again, utterly alone. He was alone in an empty world....

Loneliness struck him like a blow. He had dependents, he had cares. He had never a soul to whom he might weep....

For a time he stood beside his open window. He looked at the bed--but no sleep he knew would come that night--until the sleep of exhaustion came. He looked at the bureau at which he had so often written. But the writing there was a shrivelled thing....

This room was unendurable. He must go out. He turned to the window, and

outside was a troublesome noise of night-jars and a distant roaring of stags, black trees, blacknesses, the sky clear and remote with a great company of stars.... The stars seemed attentive. They stirred and yet were still. It was as if they were the eyes of watchers. He would go out to them....

Very softly he went towards the passage door, and still more softly felt his way across the landing and down the staircase. Once or twice he paused to listen.

He let himself out with elaborate precautions....

Across the dark he went, and suddenly his boy was all about him, playing, climbing the cedars, twisting miraculously about the lawn on a bicycle, discoursing gravely upon his future, lying on the grass, breathing very hard and drawing preposterous caricatures. Once again they walked side by side up and down--it was athwart this very spot--talking gravely but rather shyly....

And here they had stood a little awkwardly, before the boy went in to say good-bye to his stepmother and go off with his father to the station....

"I will work to-morrow again," whispered Mr. Britling, "but to-night--to-night.... To-night is yours.... Can you hear me, can you hear? Your father ... who had counted on you...."

Section 26

He went into the far corner of the hockey paddock, and there he moved about for a while and then stood for a long time holding the fence with both hands and staring blankly into the darkness. At last he turned away, and went stumbling and blundering towards the rose garden. A spray of creeper tore his face and distressed him. He thrust it aside fretfully, and it scratched his hand. He made his way to the seat in the arbour, and sat down and whispered a little to himself, and then became very still with his arm upon the back of the seat and his head upon his arm.

BOOK III

THE TESTAMENT OF MATCHING'S EASY