CHAPTER THE SECOND

MR. BRITLING WRITES UNTIL SUNRISE

Section 1

It was some weeks later. It was now the middle of November, and Mr. Britling, very warmly wrapped in his thick dressing-gown and his thick llama wool pyjamas, was sitting at his night desk, and working ever and again at an essay, an essay of preposterous ambitions, for the title of it was "The Better Government of the World."

Latterly he had had much sleepless misery. In the day life was tolerable, but in the night--unless he defended himself by working, the losses and cruelties of the war came and grimaced at him, insufferably. Now he would be haunted by long processions of refugees, now he would think of the dead lying stiff and twisted in a thousand dreadful attitudes. Then again he would be overwhelmed with anticipations of the frightful economic and social dissolution that might lie ahead.... At other times he thought of wounds and the deformities of body and spirit produced by injuries. And sometimes he would think of the triumph of evil. Stupid and triumphant persons went about a world that stupidity had desolated, with swaggering gestures, with a smiling consciousness of enhanced importance, with their scornful hatred of all measured and temperate and kindly things turned now to scornful contempt. And

mingling with the soil they walked on lay the dead body of Hugh, face downward. At the back of the boy's head, rimmed by blood-stiffened hair--the hair that had once been "as soft as the down of a bird"--was a big red hole. That hole was always pitilessly distinct. They stepped on him--heedlessly. They heeled the scattered stuff of his exquisite brain into the clay....

From all such moods of horror Mr. Britling's circle of lamplight was his sole refuge. His work could conjure up visions, like opium visions, of a world of order and justice. Amidst the gloom of world bankruptcy he stuck to the prospectus of a braver enterprise--reckless of his chances of subscribers....

Section 2

But this night even this circle of lamplight would not hold his mind. Doubt had crept into this last fastness. He pulled the papers towards him, and turned over the portion he had planned.

His purpose in the book he was beginning to write was to reason out the possible methods of government that would give a stabler, saner control to the world. He believed still in democracy, but he was realising more and more that democracy had yet to discover its method. It had to take hold of the consciences of men, it had to equip itself with still unformed organisations. Endless years of patient thinking, of

experimenting, of discussion lay before mankind ere this great idea could become reality, and right, the proven right thing, could rule the earth.

Meanwhile the world must still remain a scene of blood-stained melodrama, of deafening noise, contagious follies, vast irrational destructions. One fine life after another went down from study and university and laboratory to be slain and silenced....

Was it conceivable that this mad monster of mankind would ever be caught and held in the thin-spun webs of thought?

Was it, after all, anything but pretension and folly for a man to work out plans for the better government of the world?--was it any better than the ambitious scheming of some fly upon the wheel of the romantic gods?

Man has come, floundering and wounding and suffering, out of the breeding darknesses of Time, that will presently crush and consume him again. Why not flounder with the rest, why not eat, drink, fight, scream, weep and pray, forget Hugh, stop brooding upon Hugh, banish all these priggish dreams of "The Better Government of the World," and turn to the brighter aspects, the funny and adventurous aspects of the war, the Chestertonian jolliness, Punch side of things? Think you because your sons are dead that there will be no more cakes and ale? Let mankind blunder out of the mud and blood as mankind has blundered in....

Let us at any rate keep our precious Sense of Humour....

He pulled his manuscript towards him. For a time he sat decorating the lettering of his title, "The Better Government of the World," with little grinning gnomes' heads and waggish tails....

Section 3

On the top of Mr. Britling's desk, beside the clock, lay a letter, written in clumsy English and with its envelope resealed by a label which testified that it had been "OPENED BY CENSOR."

The friendly go-between in Norway had written to tell Mr. Britling that Herr Heinrich also was dead; he had died a wounded prisoner in Russia some months ago. He had been wounded and captured, after undergoing great hardships, during the great Russian attack upon the passes of the Carpathians in the early spring, and his wound had mortified. He had recovered partially for a time, and then he had been beaten and injured again in some struggle between German and Croatian prisoners, and he had sickened and died. Before he died he had written to his parents, and once again he had asked that the fiddle he had left in Mr. Britling's care should if possible be returned to them. It was manifest that both for him and them now it had become a symbol with many associations.

The substance of this letter invaded the orange circle of the lamp; it would have to be answered, and the potentialities of the answer were running through Mr. Britling's brain to the exclusion of any impersonal composition. He thought of the old parents away there in Pomerania--he believed but he was not quite sure, that Heinrich had been an only son--and of the pleasant spectacled figure that had now become a broken and decaying thing in a prisoner's shallow grave....

Another son had gone--all the world was losing its sons....

He found himself thinking of young Heinrich in the very manner, if with a lesser intensity, in which he thought about his own son, as of hopes senselessly destroyed. His mind took no note of the fact that Heinrich was an enemy, that by the reckoning of a "war of attrition" his death was balance and compensation for the death of Hugh. He went straight to the root fact that they had been gallant and kindly beings, and that the same thing had killed them both....

By no conceivable mental gymnastics could he think of the two as antagonists. Between them there was no imaginable issue. They had both very much the same scientific disposition; with perhaps more dash and inspiration in the quality of Hugh; more docility and method in the case of Karl. Until war had smashed them one against the other....

He recalled his first sight of Heinrich at the junction, and how he had laughed at the sight of his excessive Teutonism. The close-cropped

shining fair head surmounted by a yellowish-white corps cap had appeared dodging about among the people upon the platform, and manifestly asking questions. The face had been very pink with the effort of an unaccustomed tongue. The young man had been clad in a suit of white flannel refined by a purple line; his boots were of that greenish yellow leather that only a German student could esteem "chic"; his rucksack was upon his back, and the precious fiddle in its case was carried very carefully in one hand; this same dead fiddle. The other hand held a stick with a carved knob and a pointed end. He had been too German for belief. "Herr Heinrich!" Mr. Britling had said, and straightway the heels had clashed together for a bow, a bow from the waist, a bow that a heedless old lady much burthened with garden produce had greatly disarranged. From first to last amidst our off-hand English ways Herr Heinrich had kept his bow--and always it had been getting disarranged.

That had been his constant effect; a little stiff, a little absurd, and always clean and pink and methodical. The boys had liked him without reserve, Mrs. Britling had liked him; everybody had found him a likeable creature. He never complained of anything except picnics. But he did object to picnics; to the sudden departure of the family to wild surroundings for the consumption of cold, knifeless and forkless meals in the serious middle hours of the day. He protested to Mr. Britling, respectfully but very firmly. It was, he held, implicit in their understanding that he should have a cooked meal in the middle of the day. Otherwise his Magen was perplexed and disordered. In the evening he could not eat with any gravity or profit....

Their disposition towards under-feeding and a certain lack of fine sentiment were the only flaws in the English scheme that Herr Heinrich admitted. He certainly found the English unfeeling. His heart went even less satisfied than his Magen. He was a being of expressive affections; he wanted great friendships, mysterious relationships, love. He tried very bravely to revere and to understand and be occultly understood by Mr. Britling; he sought long walks and deep talks with Hugh and the small boys; he tried to fill his heart with Cissie; he found at last marvels of innocence and sweetness in the Hickson girl. She wore her hair in a pigtail when first he met her, and it made her almost Marguerite. This young man had cried aloud for love, warm and filling, like the Mittagsessen that was implicit in their understanding. And all these Essex people failed to satisfy him; they were silent, they were subtle, they slipped through the fat yet eager fingers of his heart, so that he fell back at last upon himself and his German correspondents and the idealisation of Maud Hickson and the moral education of Billy. Billy. Mr. Britling's memories came back at last to the figure of young Heinrich with the squirrel on his shoulder, that had so often stood in the way of the utter condemnation of Germany. That, seen closely, was the stuff of one brutal Prussian. What quarrel had we with him?...

Other memories of Heinrich flitted across Mr. Britling's reverie. Heinrich at hockey, running with extreme swiftness and little skill, tricked and baffled by Letty, dodged by Hugh, going headlong forward and headlong back, and then with a cry flinging himself flat on the ground

exhausted.... Or again Heinrich very grave and very pink, peering through his glasses at his cards at Skat.... Or Heinrich in the boats upon the great pond, or Heinrich swimming, or Heinrich hiding very, very artfully from the boys about the garden on a theory of his own, or Heinrich in strange postures, stalking the deer in Claverings Park. For a time he had had a great ambition to creep quite close to a deer and touch it.... Or Heinrich indexing. He had a passion for listing and indexing books, music, any loose classifiable thing. His favourite amusement was devising schemes for the indentation of dictionary leaves, so that one could turn instantly to the needed word. He had bought and cut the edges of three dictionaries; each in succession improved upon the other; he had had great hopes of patents and wealth arising therefrom.... And his room had been a source of strange sounds; his search for music upon the violin. He had hoped when he came to Matching's Easy to join "some string quartette." But Matching's Easy produced no string quartette. He had to fall back upon the pianola, and try to play duets with that. Only the pianola did all the duet itself, and in the hands of a small Britling was apt to betray a facetious moodiness; sudden alternations between extreme haste and extreme lassitude....

Then there came a memory of Heinrich talking very seriously; his glasses magnifying his round blue eyes, talking of his ideas about life, of his beliefs and disbeliefs, of his ambitions and prospects in life.

He confessed two principal ambitions. They varied perhaps in their

absolute dimensions, but they were of equal importance in his mind. The first of these was, so soon as he had taken his doctorate in philology, to give himself to the perfecting of an International Language; it was to combine all the virtues of Esperanto and Ido. "And then," said Herr Heinrich, "I do not think there will be any more wars--ever." The second ambition, which was important first because Herr Heinrich found much delight in working at it, and secondly because he thought it would give him great wealth and opportunity for propagating the perfect speech, was the elaboration of his system of marginal indentations for dictionaries and alphabetical books of reference of all sorts. It was to be so complete that one would just stand over the book to be consulted, run hand and eye over its edges and open the book--"at the very exact spot." He proposed to follow this business up with a quite Germanic thoroughness. "Presently," he said, "I must study the machinery by which the edges of books are cut. It is possible I may have to invent these also." This was the double-barrelled scheme of Herr Heinrich's career. And along it he was to go, and incidentally develop his large vague heart that was at present so manifestly unsatisfied....

Such was the brief story of Herr Heinrich.

That story was over--just as Hugh's story was over. That first volume would never now have a second and a third. It ended in some hasty grave in Russia. The great scheme for marginal indices would never be patented, the duets with the pianola would never be played again.

Imagination glimpsed a little figure toiling manfully through the slush and snow of the Carpathians; saw it staggering under its first experience of shell fire; set it amidst attacks and flights and fatigue and hunger and a rush perhaps in the darkness; guessed at the wounding blow. Then came the pitiful pilgrimage of the prisoners into captivity, captivity in a land desolated, impoverished and embittered. Came wounds wrapped in filthy rags, pain and want of occupation, and a poor little bent and broken Heinrich sitting aloof in a crowded compound nursing a mortifying wound....

He used always to sit in a peculiar attitude with his arms crossed on his crossed legs, looking slantingly through his glasses....

So he must have sat, and presently he lay on some rough bedding and suffered, untended, in infinite discomfort; lay motionless and thought at times, it may be, of Matching's Easy and wondered what Hugh and Teddy were doing. Then he became fevered, and the world grew bright-coloured and fantastic and ugly for him. Until one day an infinite weakness laid hold of him, and his pain grew faint and all his thoughts and memories grew faint--and still fainter....

The violin had been brought into Mr. Britling's study that afternoon, and lay upon the further window-seat. Poor little broken sherd, poor little fragment of a shattered life! It looked in its case like a baby in a coffin.

"I must write a letter to the old father and mother," Mr. Britling thought. "I can't just send the poor little fiddle--without a word. In all this pitiful storm of witless hate--surely there may be one greeting--not hateful.

"From my blackness to yours," said Mr. Britling aloud. He would have to write it in English. But even if they knew no English some one would be found to translate it to them. He would have to write very plainly.

Section 4

He pushed aside the manuscript of "The Better Government of the World," and began to write rather slowly, shaping his letters roundly and distinctly:

> Dear Sir,
>
> I am writing this letter to you to tell you I am sending back the few little things I had kept for your son at his request when the war broke out. I am sending them--

Mr. Britling left that blank for the time until he could arrange the method of sending to the Norwegian intermediary.

Especially I am sending his violin, which he had asked me thrice to convey to you. Either it is a gift from you or it symbolised many things for him that he connected with home and you. I will have it packed with particular care, and I will do all in my power to ensure its safe arrival.

I want to tell you that all the stress and passion of this war has not made us here in Matching's Easy forget our friend your son. He was one of us, he had our affection, he had friends here who are still his friends. We found him honourable and companionable, and we share something of your loss. I have got together for you a few snapshots I chance to possess in which you will see him in the sunshine, and which will enable you perhaps to picture a little more definitely than you would otherwise do the life he led here. There is one particularly that I have marked. Our family is lunching out-of-doors, and you will see that next to your son is a youngster, a year or so his junior, who is touching glasses with him. I have put a cross over his head. He is my eldest son, he was very dear to me, and he too has been, killed in this war. They are, you see, smiling very pleasantly at each other.

While writing this Mr. Britling had been struck by the thought of the photographs, and he had taken them out of the little drawer into which he was accustomed to thrust them. He picked out the ones that showed the young German, but there were others, bright with sunshine, that were now charged with acquired significances; there were two showing the children

and Teddy and Hugh and Cissie and Letty doing the goose step, and there was one of Mr. Van der Pant, smiling at the front door, in Heinrich's abandoned slippers. There were endless pictures of Teddy also. It is the happy instinct of the Kodak to refuse those days that are overcast, and the photographic record of a life is a chain of all its kindlier aspects. In the drawer above these snapshots there were Hugh's letters and a miscellany of trivial documents touching on his life.

Mr. Britling discontinued writing and turned these papers over and mused. Heinrich's letters and postcards had got in among them, and so had a letter of Teddy's....

The letters reinforced the photographs in their reminder how kind and pleasant a race mankind can be. Until the wild asses of nationalism came kicking and slaying amidst them, until suspicion and jostling greed and malignity poison their minds, until the fools with the high explosives blow that elemental goodness into shrieks of hate and splashes of blood. How kindly men are--up to the very instant of their cruelties! His mind teemed suddenly with little anecdotes and histories of the goodwill of men breaking through the ill-will of war, of the mutual help of sorely wounded Germans and English lying together in the mud and darkness between the trenches, of the fellowship of captors and prisoners, of the Saxons at Christmas fraternising with the English.... Of that he had seen photographs in one of the daily papers....

His mind came back presently from these wanderings to the task before

him.

He tried to picture these Heinrich parents. He supposed they were kindly, civilised people. It was manifest the youngster had come to him from a well-ordered and gentle-spirited home. But he imagined them--he could not tell why--as people much older than himself. Perhaps young Heinrich had on some occasion said they were old people--he could not remember. And he had a curious impulse too to write to them in phrases of consolation; as if their loss was more pitiable than his own. He doubted whether they had the consolation of his sanguine temperament, whether they could resort as readily as he could to his faith, whether in Pomerania there was the same consoling possibility of an essay on the Better Government of the World. He did not think this very clearly, but that was what was at the back of his mind. He went on writing.

> If you think that these two boys have both perished, not in some noble common cause but one against the other in a struggle of dynasties and boundaries and trade routes and tyrannous ascendancies, then it seems to me that you must feel as I feel that this war is the most tragic and dreadful thing that has ever happened to mankind.

He sat thinking for some minutes after he had written that, and when presently he resumed his writing, a fresh strain of thought was traceable even in his opening sentence.

If you count dead and wounds this is the most dreadful war in history; for you as for me, it has been almost the extremity of personal tragedy.... Black sorrow.... But is it the most dreadful war?

I do not think it is. I can write to you and tell you that I do indeed believe that our two sons have died not altogether in vain. Our pain and anguish may not be wasted--may be necessary. Indeed they may be necessary. Here am I bereaved and wretched--and I hope. Never was the fabric of war so black; that I admit. But never was the black fabric of war so threadbare. At a thousand points the light is shining through.

Mr. Britling's pen stopped.

There was perfect stillness in the study bedroom.

"The tinpot style," said Mr. Britling at last in a voice of extreme bitterness.

He fell into an extraordinary quarrel with his style. He forgot about those Pomeranian parents altogether in his exasperation at his own inexpressiveness, at his incomplete control of these rebel words and phrases that came trailing each its own associations and suggestions to hamper his purpose with it. He read over the offending sentence.

"The point is that it is true," he whispered. "It is exactly what I want to say."...

Exactly?...

His mind stuck on that "exactly."... When one has much to say style is troublesome. It is as if one fussed with one's uniform before a battle.... But that is just what one ought to do before a battle.... One ought to have everything in order....

He took a fresh sheet and made three trial beginnings.

"War is like a black fabric."...

"War is a curtain of black fabric across the pathway."

"War is a curtain of dense black fabric across all the hopes and kindliness of mankind. Yet always it has let through some gleams of light, and now--I am not dreaming--it grows threadbare, and here and there and at a thousand points the light is breaking through. We owe it to all these dear youths--"

His pen stopped again.

"I must work on a rough draft," said Mr. Britling.

Section 5

Three hours later Mr. Britling was working by daylight, though his study lamp was still burning, and his letter to old Heinrich was still no better than a collection of material for a letter. But the material was falling roughly into shape, and Mr. Britling's intentions were finding themselves. It was clear to him now that he was no longer writing as his limited personal self to those two personal selves grieving, in the old, large, high-walled, steep-roofed household amidst pine woods, of which Heinrich had once shown him a picture. He knew them too little for any such personal address. He was writing, he perceived, not as Mr. Britling but as an Englishman--that was all he could be to them--and he was writing to them as Germans; he could apprehend them as nothing more. He was just England bereaved to Germany bereaved....

He was no longer writing to the particular parents of one particular boy, but to all that mass of suffering, regret, bitterness and fatigue that lay behind the veil of the "front." Slowly, steadily, the manhood of Germany was being wiped out. As he sat there in the stillness he could think that at least two million men of the Central Powers were dead, and an equal number maimed and disabled. Compared with that our British losses, immense and universal as they were by the standard of any previous experience, were still slight; our larger armies had still to suffer, and we had lost irrevocably not very much more than a quarter of a million. But the tragedy gathered against us. We knew enough

already to know what must be the reality of the German homes to which those dead men would nevermore return....

If England had still the longer account to pay, the French had paid already nearly to the limits of endurance. They must have lost well over a million of their mankind, and still they bled and bled. Russia too in the East had paid far more than man for man in this vast swapping off of lives. In a little while no Censorship would hold the voice of the peoples. There would be no more talk of honour and annexations, hegemonies and trade routes, but only Europe lamenting for her dead....

The Germany to which he wrote would be a nation of widows and children, rather pinched boys and girls, crippled men, old men, deprived men, men who had lost brothers and cousins and friends and ambitions. No triumph now on land or sea could save Germany from becoming that. France too would be that, Russia, and lastly Britain, each in their degree. Before the war there had been no Germany to which an Englishman could appeal; Germany had been a threat, a menace, a terrible trampling of armed men. It was as little possible then to think of talking to Germany as it would have been to have stopped the Kaiser in mid career in his hooting car down the Unter den Linden and demand a quiet talk with him. But the Germany that had watched those rushes with a slightly doubting pride had her eyes now full of tears and blood. She had believed, she had obeyed, and no real victory had come. Still she fought on, bleeding, agonising, wasting her substance and the substance of the whole world, to no conceivable end but exhaustion, so capable she was, so devoted, so proud

and utterly foolish. And the mind of Germany, whatever it was before the war, would now be something residual, something left over and sitting beside a reading-lamp as he was sitting beside a reading-lamp, thinking, sorrowing, counting the cost, looking into the dark future....

And to that he wrote, to that dimly apprehended figure outside a circle of the light like his own circle of light--which was the father of Heinrich, which was great Germany, Germany which lived before and which will yet outlive the flapping of the eagles....

> Our boys, he wrote, have died, fighting one against the other. They have been fighting upon an issue so obscure that your German press is still busy discussing what it was. For us it was that Belgium was invaded and France in danger of destruction. Nothing else could have brought the English into the field against you. But why you invaded Belgium and France and whether that might have been averted we do not know to this day. And still this war goes on and still more boys die, and these men who do not fight, these men in the newspaper offices and in the ministries plan campaigns and strokes and counter-strokes that belong to no conceivable plan at all. Except that now for them there is something more terrible than war. And that is the day of reckoning with their own people.
>
> What have we been fighting for? What are we fighting for? Do you know? Does any one know? Why am I spending what is left of my substance and you what is left of yours to keep on this war against

each other? What have we to gain from hurting one another still further? Why should we be puppets any longer in the hands of crowned fools and witless diplomatists? Even if we were dumb and acquiescent before, does not the blood of our sons now cry out to us that this foolery should cease? We have let these people send our sons to death.

It is you and I who must stop these wars, these massacres of boys.

Massacres of boys! That indeed is the essence of modern war. The killing off of the young. It is the destruction of the human inheritance, it is the spending of all the life and material of the future upon present-day hate and greed. Fools and knaves, politicians, tricksters, and those who trade on the suspicions and thoughtless, generous angers of men, make wars; the indolence and modesty of the mass of men permit them. Are you and I to suffer such things until the whole fabric of our civilisation, that has been so slowly and so laboriously built up, is altogether destroyed?

When I sat down to write to you I had meant only to write to you of your son and mine. But I feel that what can be said in particular of our loss, need not be said; it can be understood without saying. What needs to be said and written about is this, that war must be put an end to and that nobody else but you and me and all of us can do it. We have to do that for the love of our sons and our race and all that is human. War is no longer human; the chemist and the

metallurgist have changed all that. My boy was shot through the eye; his brain was blown to pieces by some man who never knew what he had done. Think what that means!... It is plain to me, surely it is plain to you and all the world, that war is now a mere putting of the torch to explosives that flare out to universal ruin. There is nothing for one sane man to write to another about in these days but the salvation of mankind from war.

Now I want you to be patient with me and hear me out. There was a time in the earlier part of this war when it was hard to be patient because there hung over us the dread of losses and disaster. Now we need dread no longer. The dreaded thing has happened. Sitting together as we do in spirit beside the mangled bodies of our dead, surely we can be as patient as the hills.

I want to tell you quite plainly and simply that I think that Germany which is chief and central in this war is most to blame for this war. Writing to you as an Englishman to a German and with war still being waged, there must be no mistake between us upon this point. I am persuaded that in the decade that ended with your overthrow of France in 1871, Germany turned her face towards evil, and that her refusal to treat France generously and to make friends with any other great power in the world, is the essential cause of this war. Germany triumphed--and she trampled on the loser. She inflicted intolerable indignities. She set herself to prepare for further aggressions; long before this killing began she was making

war upon land and sea, launching warships, building strategic railways, setting up a vast establishment of war material, threatening, straining all the world to keep pace with her threats.... At last there was no choice before any European nation but submission to the German will, or war. And it was no will to which righteous men could possibly submit. It came as an illiberal and ungracious will. It was the will of Zabern. It is not as if you had set yourselves to be an imperial people and embrace and unify the world. You did not want to unify the world. You wanted to set the foot of an intensely national Germany, a sentimental and illiberal Germany, a Germany that treasured the portraits of your ridiculous Kaiser and his litter of sons, a Germany wearing uniform, reading black letter, and despising every kultur but her own, upon the neck of a divided and humiliated mankind. It was an intolerable prospect. I had rather the whole world died.

Forgive me for writing "you." You are as little responsible for that Germany as I am for--Sir Edward Grey. But this happened over you; you did not do your utmost to prevent it--even as England has happened, and I have let it happen over me....

"It is so dry; so general," whispered Mr. Britling. "And yet--it is this that has killed our sons."

He sat still for a time, and then went on reading a fresh sheet of his manuscript.

> When I bring these charges against Germany I have little disposition to claim any righteousness for Britain. There has been small splendour in this war for either Germany or Britain or Russia; we three have chanced to be the biggest of the combatants, but the glory lies with invincible France. It is France and Belgium and Serbia who shine as the heroic lands. They have fought defensively and beyond all expectation, for dear land and freedom. This war for them has been a war of simple, definite issues, to which they have risen with an entire nobility. Englishman and German alike may well envy them that simplicity. I look to you, as an honest man schooled by the fierce lessons of this war, to meet me in my passionate desire to see France, Belgium and Serbia emerge restored from all this blood and struggle, enlarged to the limits of their nationality, vindicated and secure. Russia I will not write about here; let me go on at once to tell you about my own country; remarking only that between England and Russia there are endless parallelisms. We have similar complexities, kindred difficulties. We have for instance an imported dynasty, we have a soul-destroying State Church which cramps and poisons the education of our ruling class, we have a people out of touch with a secretive government, and the same traditional contempt for science. We have our Irelands and Polands. Even our kings bear a curious likeness....

At this point there was a break in the writing, and Mr. Britling made, as it were, a fresh beginning.

Politically the British Empire is a clumsy collection of strange accidents. It is a thing as little to be proud of as the outline of a flint or the shape of a potato. For the mass of English people India and Egypt and all that side of our system mean less than nothing; our trade is something they do not understand, our imperial wealth something they do not share. Britain has been a group of four democracies caught in the net of a vast yet casual imperialism; the common man here is in a state of political perplexity from the cradle to the grave. None the less there is a great people here even as there is a great people in Russia, a people with a soul and character of its own, a people of unconquerable kindliness and with a peculiar genius, which still struggle towards will and expression. We have been beginning that same great experiment that France and America and Switzerland and China are making, the experiment of democracy. It is the newest form of human association, and we are still but half awake to its needs and necessary conditions. For it is idle to pretend that the little city democracies of ancient times were comparable to the great essays in practical republicanism that mankind is making to-day. This age of the democratic republics that dawn is a new age. It has not yet lasted for a century, not for a paltry hundred years.... All new things are weak things; a rat can kill a man-child with ease; the greater the destiny, the weaker the immediate self-protection may be. And to me it seems that your complete and perfect imperialism, ruled by Germans for Germans, is in its scope and outlook a more antiquated and smaller and less

noble thing than these sprawling emergent giant democracies of the West that struggle so confusedly against it....

But that we do struggle confusedly, with pitiful leaders and infinite waste and endless delay; that it is to our indisciplines and to the dishonesties and tricks our incompleteness provokes, that the prolongation of this war is to be ascribed, I readily admit. At the outbreak of this war I had hoped to see militarism felled within a year....

Section 6

From this point onward Mr. Britling's notes became more fragmentary. They had a consecutiveness, but they were discontinuous. His thought had leapt across gaps that his pen had had no time to fill. And he had begun to realise that his letter to the old people in Pomerania was becoming impossible. It had broken away into dissertation.

"Yet there must be dissertations," he said. "Unless such men as we are take these things in hand, always we shall be misgoverned, always the sons will die...."

Section 7

I do not think you Germans realise how steadily you were conquering the world before this war began. Had you given half the energy and intelligence you have spent upon this war to the peaceful conquest of men's minds and spirits, I believe that you would have taken the leadership of the world tranquilly--no man disputing. Your science was five years, your social and economic organisation was a quarter of a century in front of ours.... Never has it so lain in the power of a great people to lead and direct mankind towards the world republic and universal peace. It needed but a certain generosity of the imagination....

But your Junkers, your Imperial court, your foolish vicious Princes; what were such dreams to them?... With an envious satisfaction they hurled all the accomplishment of Germany into the fires of war....

Section 8

Your boy, as no doubt you know, dreamt constantly of such a world peace as this that I foreshadow; he was more generous than his country. He could envisage war and hostility only as misunderstanding. He thought that a world that could explain itself clearly would surely be at peace. He was scheming always therefore for the perfection and propagation of Esperanto or Ido, or some such universal link. My youngster too was full of a kindred and yet

larger dream, the dream of human science, which knows neither king nor country nor race....

These boys, these hopes, this war has killed....

That fragment ended so. Mr. Britling ceased to read for a time. "But has it killed them?" he whispered....

"If you had lived, my dear, you and your England would have talked with a younger Germany--better than I can ever do...."

He turned the pages back, and read here and there with an accumulating discontent.

Section 9

"Dissertations," said Mr. Britling.

Never had it been so plain to Mr. Britling that he was a weak, silly, ill-informed and hasty-minded writer, and never had he felt so invincible a conviction that the Spirit of God was in him, and that it fell to him to take some part in the establishment of a new order of living upon the earth; it might be the most trivial part by the scale of the task, but for him it was to be now his supreme concern. And it was an almost intolerable grief to him that his services should be, for all

his desire, so poor in quality, so weak in conception. Always he seemed to be on the verge of some illuminating and beautiful statement of his cause; always he was finding his writing inadequate, a thin treachery to the impulse of his heart, always he was finding his effort weak and ineffective. In this instance, at the outset he seemed to see with a golden clearness the message of brotherhood, or forgiveness, of a common call. To whom could such a message be better addressed than to those sorrowing parents; from whom could it come with a better effect than from himself? And now he read what he had made of this message. It seemed to his jaded mind a pitifully jaded effort. It had no light, it had no depth. It was like the disquisition of a debating society.

He was distressed by a fancy of an old German couple, spectacled and peering, puzzled by his letter. Perhaps they would be obscurely hurt by his perplexing generalisations. Why, they would ask, should this Englishman preach to them?

He sat back in his chair wearily, with his chin sunk upon his chest. For a time he did not think, and then, he read again the sentence in front of his eyes.

"These boys, these hopes, this war has killed."

The words hung for a time in his mind.

"No!" said Mr. Britling stoutly. "They live!"

And suddenly it was borne in upon his mind that he was not alone. There were thousands and tens of thousands of men and women like himself, desiring with all their hearts to say, as he desired to say, the reconciling word. It was not only his hand that thrust against the obstacles.... Frenchmen and Russians sat in the same stillness, facing the same perplexities; there were Germans seeking a way through to him. Even as he sat and wrote. And for the first time clearly he felt a Presence of which he had thought very many times in the last few weeks, a Presence so close to him that it was behind his eyes and in his brain and hands. It was no trick of his vision; it was a feeling of immediate reality. And it was Hugh, Hugh that he had thought was dead, it was young Heinrich living also, it was himself, it was those others that sought, it was all these and it was more, it was the Master, the Captain of Mankind, it was God, there present with him, and he knew that it was God. It was as if he had been groping all this time in the darkness, thinking himself alone amidst rocks and pitfalls and pitiless things, and suddenly a hand, a firm strong hand, had touched his own. And a voice within him bade him be of good courage. There was no magic trickery in that moment; he was still weak and weary, a discouraged rhetorician, a good intention ill-equipped; but he was no longer lonely and wretched, no longer in the same world with despair. God was beside him and within him and about him.... It was the crucial moment of Mr. Britling's life. It was a thing as light as the passing of a cloud on an April morning; it was a thing as great as the first day of creation. For some moments he still sat back with his chin upon his chest and his

hands dropping from the arms of his chair. Then he sat up and drew a deep breath....

This had come almost as a matter of course.

For weeks his mind had been playing about this idea. He had talked to Letty of this Finite God, who is the king of man's adventure in space and time. But hitherto God had been for him a thing of the intelligence, a theory, a report, something told about but not realised.... Mr. Britling's thinking about God hitherto had been like some one who has found an empty house, very beautiful and pleasant, full of the promise of a fine personality. And then as the discoverer makes his lonely, curious explorations, he hears downstairs, dear and friendly, the voice of the Master coming in....

There was no need to despair because he himself was one of the feeble folk. God was with him indeed, and he was with God. The King was coming to his own. Amidst the darknesses and confusions, the nightmare cruelties and the hideous stupidities of the great war, God, the Captain of the World Republic, fought his way to empire. So long as one did one's best and utmost in a cause so mighty, did it matter though the thing one did was little and poor?

"I have thought too much of myself," said Mr. Britling, "and of what I would do by myself. I have forgotten that which was with me...."

Section 10

He turned over the rest of the night's writing presently, and read it now as though it was the work of another man.

These later notes were fragmentary, and written in a sprawling hand.

> "Let us make ourselves watchers and guardians of the order of the world....
>
> "If only for love of our dead....
>
> "Let us pledge ourselves to service. Let us set ourselves with all our minds and all our hearts to the perfecting and working out of the methods of democracy and the ending for ever of the kings and emperors and priestcrafts and the bands of adventurers, the traders and owners and forestallers who have betrayed mankind into this morass of hate and blood--in which our sons are lost--in which we flounder still...."

How feeble was this squeak of exhortation! It broke into a scolding note.

"Who have betrayed," read Mr. Britling, and judged the phrase.

"Who have fallen with us," he amended....

"One gets so angry and bitter--because one feels alone, I suppose. Because one feels that for them one's reason is no reason. One is enraged by the sense of their silent and regardless contradiction, and one forgets the Power of which one is a part...."

The sheet that bore the sentence he criticised was otherwise blank except that written across it obliquely in a very careful hand were the words "Hugh," and "Hugh Philip Britling."...

On the next sheet he had written: "Let us set up the peace of the World Republic amidst these ruins. Let it be our religion, our calling."

There he had stopped.

The last sheet of Mr. Britling's manuscript may be more conveniently given in fac-simile than described.

[Handwritten:

Hugh
Hugh
My dear Hugh

Lawyers Princes

Dealers in Contention

Honesty

'Blood Blood …

[Transcriber's Note: illegible] an End to them

]

Section 11

He sighed.

He looked at the scattered papers, and thought of the letter they were to have made.

His fatigue spoke first.

"Perhaps after all I'd better just send the fiddle…."

He rested his cheeks between his hands, and remained so for a long time. His eyes stared unseeingly. His thoughts wandered and spread and faded. At length he recalled his mind to that last idea. "Just send the fiddle--without a word."

"No. I must write to them plainly.

"About God as I have found Him.

"As He has found me...."

He forgot the Pomeranians for a time. He murmured to himself. He turned over the conviction that had suddenly become clear and absolute in his mind.

"Religion is the first thing and the last thing, and until a man has found God and been found by God, he begins at no beginning, he works to no end. He may have his friendships, his partial loyalties, his scraps of honour. But all these things fall into place and life falls into place only with God. Only with God. God, who fights through men against Blind Force and Night and Non-Existence; who is the end, who is the meaning. He is the only King.... Of course I must write about Him. I must tell all my world of Him. And before the coming of the true King, the inevitable King, the King who is present whenever just men foregather, this blood-stained rubbish of the ancient world, these puny kings and tawdry emperors, these wily politicians and artful lawyers, these men who claim and grab and trick and compel, these war makers and oppressors, will presently shrivel and pass--like paper thrust into a flame...."

Then after a time he said:

"Our sons who have shown us God...."

Section 12

He rubbed his open hands over his eyes and forehead.

The night of effort had tired his brain, and he was no longer thinking actively. He had a little interval of blankness, sitting at his desk with his hands pressed over his eyes....

He got up presently, and stood quite motionless at the window, looking out.

His lamp was still burning, but for some time he had not been writing by the light of his lamp. Insensibly the day had come and abolished his need for that individual circle of yellow light. Colour had returned to the world, clean pearly colour, clear and definite like the glance of a child or the voice of a girl, and a golden wisp of cloud hung in the sky over the tower of the church. There was a mist upon the pond, a soft grey mist not a yard high. A covey of partridges ran and halted and ran again in the dewy grass outside his garden railings. The partridges were very numerous this year because there had been so little shooting. Beyond in the meadow a hare sat up as still as a stone. A horse

neighed.... Wave after wave of warmth and light came sweeping before the sunrise across the world of Matching's Easy. It was as if there was nothing but morning and sunrise in the world.

From away towards the church came the sound of some early worker whetting a scythe.

THE END