



Towards "The Good Soldier": Discovery of a Sexual Theme

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THOMAS MOSER

Towards *The Good Soldier*—
Discovery of A Sexual Theme

IMPRESSIONISTIC NOVELISTS like James, Conrad, and Ford aim, in Conrad's familiar phrase, "above all, to make you *see*." The reader is to see things through the eyes of one of the characters—through Lambert Strether, or Marlow, or Dowell—rather than from the author's omniscient viewpoint. This "impersonal" method of narration has contributed, time and again, to modern fiction's finest achievement: the intense involvement of the reader with the moral and emotional life of the characters. Yet seeing through a character sometimes means not seeing at all clearly. The reader may find himself saying, "Yes, the narrator views things this way, but how are they *really*?" Even those of us who think that to torment a reader about the nature of reality is, in itself, a worthy purpose must grant that the use of impersonal narration raises special problems.

No novel better dramatizes these problems than Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier* (1915). Careful readers of good will, in utter disagreement as to the reliability of its narrator, seem not to be discussing the same book. Is it the tragic story of a good soldier destroyed by his passionate involvement with three women, a story told sympathetically and accurately by the hero's best friend? Or is it instead a story of five immoral fools, told by the greatest fool of them all? Is it really what Ford first entitled it, "the saddest story," or is it a masterpiece of bitterly comic irony?¹

Such differing responses to the same work suggest the need to supplement the exegetical method. In the case of *The Good Soldier*, several approaches seem potentially useful. An examination, for instance, of the biographical material—Ford's "nervous breakdown" in 1904, his marital and extramarital difficulties of 1909 and after—might provide clues to the novel. So, too, would a study of Ford's

reading, particularly of his two masters, James and Conrad: James's novels of innocence in conflict with illicit passion, *What Maisie Knew* and *The Wings of the Dove*; Conrad's novels of the flawed romantic hero, *Lord Jim*, and of repressed passion, *Chance*. Again, one might approach *The Good Soldier* through similar novels in which the author's intention and what he created appear to conflict and in which sexual passion is, at least, an implied subject. One thinks here of James's *Turn of the Screw* and of Glenway Wescott's *The Pilgrim Hawk*.

The avenue that this essay will follow, however, is that of Ford's earlier fiction. A novelist, we know, may deal again and again with similar characters, situations, and subjects. Sometimes a recurring character evokes the writer's deepest understanding; sometimes a character ceases to engage the author's interest and subsides into a minor role. The reader may therefore detect in earlier works prefigurations of the novel in question or may see a trend evolving, and thus he may make an educated guess about what the artist "really meant."

The quest for sources and analogues, in fact, has often led literary sleuths wildly astray. Although the study of Ford's earlier male characters tends to confirm my view of Dowell as primarily a reliable narrator, despite ironic overtones, and of Ashburnham as a sympathetic, if sentimental and banal, hero, I recognize that Ford could have suddenly reversed his attitude toward these types. Conrad, after years of sympathetically, if unconsciously, dramatizing sexual reticence, became aware at last of the inhibitions of his romantic hero and attacked them in *Chance*,² published only two years before *The Good Soldier*. Again, the patterns in Ford's early works may point only to his initial intention in *The Good Soldier* rather than to what the novel actually conveys. Even though Ford may have thought he admired Ashburnham and sympathized with Dowell, a more censorious creative instinct may have dramatized them as fools. Whether or not this pursuit of prefigurations in minor Ford novels ultimately answers the question of *The Good Soldier*, it should at least lead us back to the major work with a richer sense of its hidden sources. Finally, of course, the text itself must yield its essence, must reveal that authentic "quality of the mind of the producer" which James calls the novel's "deepest quality."

In 1927, looking back twelve years to *The Good Soldier*, Ford saw it not only as one of his best works—the first into which he had put "all that I know about writing"—but also as a culmination of

over twenty years of creativity: "as the Great Auk I considered that, having reached my allotted, I had lain my one egg and might as well die." Certainly a reading of the previous novels supports Ford's own evaluation: they are relatively worthless (only four historical novels, *The Fifth Queen* trilogy and *A Portrait*, merit reading for themselves). Yet their male characters strikingly anticipate *The Good Soldier*. Dowell is simply one of many sensitive, passive heroes. Early versions of this type, Ford depicts as wholly admirable: they are gentle, idealistic, talented, intellectually superior, and attractive to women. Nancy's father, Colonel Rufford, a very minor figure in *The Good Soldier*, represents a remnant of another important early type—the father-ogre: a physically and sexually powerful person with a harsh, brutal voice, who often, deliberately or inadvertently, opposes the passive hero. Finally, Ashburnham belongs to a type that emerges later than the other two: the bluff, physically active, non-intellectual hero, frequently of "county" aristocracy, often attractive to women but of uncertain sexual power.

If *The Good Soldier* represents Ford's first successful treatment of recurrent character types, it also reveals his first effective control of attitudes toward sexual passion previously in disastrous conflict. Repeatedly in the early novels, a desirable young woman presents herself to the hero, even as Florence makes herself available to Dowell on the night of their elopement and as Nancy appears "suddenly to Edward, rising up at the foot of his bed, with her long hair falling, like a split cone of shadow . . . a silent, a no doubt agonized figure, like a spectre, suddenly offering herself to him. . . ." And the early hero, like Dowell and Ashburnham, usually refuses the girl. But whereas Ford understands Dowell's reason (he is psychically impotent) and Ashburnham's reason (he would die rather than defile his ward), Ford does not understand why his early heroes fail to respond to proffers of love. He asserts that the hero refuses for some high ideal, and the tone is obviously sympathetic. In certain works of non-fiction of the period, he further suggests that English "delicacy," English repression of feelings, the "ferocious lack of imagination" of the English can cause such personal disasters.³ In *The Good Soldier*, Dowell implies the same idea in his ironic account of the two couples as "good people" whose life together looks as decorous as a minuet, yet is in reality a "prison full of screaming hysterics."

Yet the motive for refusal that Ford actually dramatizes in the early novels is simply sexual fear, sometimes the result of an Oedipal

situation. Presumably, if Ford had understood that his heroes were paralyzed by fear of their sexual partners, he would have pitied rather than admired them and would have treated ironically their idealistic rationalizations. These early novels show instead how crippling to his artistry was Ford's lack of insight into the nature of his subject. Of nineteen novels published before 1915, five deal more obviously than the others with Ford's chief theme, modern man caught in the toils of passion: *The Shifting of the Fire* (1892), *The Benefactor* (1905), *An English Girl* (1907), *A Call* (1910), and *The Panel* (1912).

At twenty, Ford Madox Hueffer, young genius of the pre-Raphaelite circle, with two book-length fairy tales already in print, published his first novel, *The Shifting of the Fire*. Grossly inept, it is nevertheless instructive. It reveals Ford's sympathy for his passive hero, his hatred and fear of the older male generation, and his hero's unconscious anxiety in implicitly sexual situations. The novel's ostensible subject is a natural one for a beginning novelist: the pardonable human folly of youthful idealism. It tells how a pair of lovers, out of exaggerated concern for each other's feelings, raise almost insurmountable barriers to their marriage. After Clem Hollebone, a sensitive medical scientist, has impoverished himself in order to save the creditors of his firm, he refuses to let Edith marry a pauper and vows never to see her again. Determined not to lose her beloved, Edith sacrifices herself by secretly marrying the eighty-year-old Kasker-Ryves, in the hope of soon being a wealthy widow. Clem discovers the marriage and at first hates Edith. But at last, after he has recovered his own fortune and Kasker-Ryves has died, Clem comes to realize that his original rejection of Edith was selfish and that her marriage, though foolish, was a noble gesture. The novel ends with Clem and Edith happily embarked on their honeymoon.

Ford's depiction of the conflict between generations gives *The Shifting of the Fire* the little energy and interest it possesses. Ford instinctively contrasts Kasker-Ryves' vigor and appalling sexual prowess with the weakness of his son and Clem. A blatantly Oedipal situation emerges that obtains in many of Ford's subsequent novels: a violent old man, intimately involved either as husband or father with a lovely young girl, inhibits the gentle, idealistic young hero.

In three similar scenes involving Kasker-Ryves, his fainting bride, and a young man, Ford dramatizes, no doubt unconsciously, the old man's sexual superiority to the youth. In the first scene Kasker-Ryves describes to his son within Edith's hearing the sexual exploits of his

salad days. So vivid is the account that his son, "a mere tyro in vice," positively gasps for breath. In his revulsion, he cries out within himself, "Good God! are all men in the world such villains? Is it possible that I am the only person in all the world that struggles against my passions?" When Edith faints at the sound of her husband's voice, Kasker-Ryves symbolically acts out his lust before his frightened son: he "flung himself in his eagerness on her body, and . . . fell to kissing her clay-cold face."

In the other two fainting scenes, Clem plays the role of the passive youth. In the first, he finds himself, under Kasker-Ryves' interested gaze, physically unable to pick up the unconscious Edith. Only on the third try can he lift her, "and he closed his eyes as he staggered with her to the sofa." The action here suggests that Clem finds it difficult to handle his beloved in the old man's presence and that he cannot bear to look upon her, either because of gentlemanly reticence or, more likely, because of fear of his own inadequacy. The other scene shows Kasker-Ryves again symbolically triumphant, even in death. Clem, witnessing the grotesque action, feels "a sudden sense of incongruous horror" as Edith embraces her dead husband and, fainting of course, pulls his body to the ground: the corpse "lay, stiff and unnatural like an artist's figure, across Edith."

So thoroughly amateurish is *The Shifting of the Fire* that one can scarcely confine the blame for its ineptitude to Ford's unawareness of Clem's sexual anxiety. Moreover, the sentimental account of Kasker-Ryves' deathbed reformation and the picture of Clem, ultimately and serenely, at one with his beloved are no more implausible than everything else that happens. Yet this little apprentice piece, with its unconscious portrait of a passive and disabled young hero, contains the seed of future failures. In the next three novels to be considered, Ford's interests are much more deeply engaged; hence the failures are more radical—and more interesting.

After writing *The Shifting of the Fire*, Ford collaborated with Conrad on two novels, but published none of his own until *The Benefactor* (1905). Although Ford occasionally satirizes George Moffatt gently, this sensitive, kind, self-sacrificing, talented writer clearly belongs to the same type of passive hero as Clem Hollebone. George's sacrifices, including a handsome separation settlement on his wife, have left him virtually a pauper. When he and Clara Brede, the daughter of a neighboring clergyman, fall in love, George finds himself in Clem's situation, and *The Benefactor* falls into the pattern of *The Shifting of the Fire*. The barriers facing George are, however,

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even more numerous. He is penniless and tied to another woman; his beloved's father has decreed that Clara must never leave home. While he is certainly not an evil man, Mr. Brede recalls Kasker-Ryves in his "magnificent" physique, his "fierce energy," and in his "impressive harshness of temper." Moreover, like Kasker-Ryves, Brede has caused his wife's death. A heart-patient, she has a fatal spasm upon hearing her husband's "tremendous voice . . . blowing up a stable-boy." Guilt over this accident so unhinges Brede's mind that Clara's constant presence is required.

By part four, "The Bankrupt Jeweler," George has plunged to the same depths as did Clem when he was an impoverished country doctor; he has reached the classic stage in the career of the Fordian hero: financially ruined, physically exhausted, mentally depressed almost to the point of suicide, and deprived, apparently forever, of the only woman he really loves. At this point, just as in *The Shifting of the Fire*, a great reversal occurs: George's fortunes are restored when one of his books miraculously becomes a best seller and Brede, having suffered a relapse, is permanently institutionalized. George realizes that there is "no one now between himself and Clara Brede."

When, at the end of James's *The Ambassadors*, Lambert Strether can have Maria Gostrey but instead chooses to return to America, his reasons are complex, arguable, but certainly *there*. And when, at the end of *The Wings of the Dove*, Kate Croy's lover Merton Densher, whom James modeled upon Ford, imposes impossible conditions on their marriage, the reasons for that rejection are completely clear and unarguable. But since the explicit motivations of *The Benefactor* point clearly to the union of George and Clara, his rejection of her not only violates the logic of the novel but directs the reader's attention to the hero's unconscious reasons.

The language of the last scene between the lovers suggests powerfully that Clara longs to have George take her and that he fears to. Awaiting his arrival, she thinks: "her father was gone now . . . it would be easy." George's first impulse is to ask her to go to Italy with him but that would be "too brusque." As they talk, her heart starts "to beat rapidly." Yet she wants him not to speak "too soon . . . she was not ready; it would spoil everything." Presently she lies back in her chair.

He stepped towards her recumbent figure. It was as if already he held her in his arms; as if she had said, "Ah!" as if her head had fallen back. Suddenly it slipped into his mind, like an odd thought that he regarded contemptuously, "This is seduction."

She wondered for one swift moment what it felt like to be dishonored. Was it like a pain? She had looked coldly at other women. He was coming: she shut her eyes. . . . She felt in herself no dishonor, but the glory of sacrificing herself to him—But he was coming, and she shivered. Outside the darkness of her closed lids something paralysing, something terrible and blissful was coming towards her.

Instead Clara hears George say: “But it’s too—” At the very moment of her complete surrender, George finds his masculine aggressiveness dissipated by the memory of Brede: “The black and tremendous figure of her father had risen before George’s eyes once more.” Almost immediately George rationalizes; he seems to hear men’s voices saying, “Oh, Brede. He’s in a lunatic asylum, and his daughter ran away with a married man.” George, and probably Ford, believes that his honor prevents him from seducing the daughter of his helpless friend. But “black and tremendous figure” describes not senility but a powerful masculinity before which George must quail. And so *The Benefactor* ends with Clara and George apart—an improbable conclusion in artistic terms, but striking evidence of the passive hero’s *malaise* and of Ford’s unconsciousness of it.

His next novel of love in the modern world, *An English Girl* (1907), closely resembles its predecessor. Once again the hero fails to marry the desirable young woman, and once again the memory of a powerful old man exercises a fatal inhibition. Yet the novel represents a new departure in two important ways. First, *An English Girl* contains the earliest example of the vigorous, conventional hero, the type to which Ashburnham belongs. In *The Benefactor* a rival of George appears only briefly in the person of Clara’s cousin Carew, of “large attractions and stock-whip mannerisms.” Second, Ford attempts, in the epilogue, an explicit justification of his passive hero’s improbable failure.

The barriers to the marriage of Don Kelleg, an expatriate young American artist, and Eleanor Greville, a handsome English girl, appear minor. Don merely wishes, before the marriage, to return briefly to America to try to repair some of the damage done by the dishonest business practices of his late, fabulously wealthy father. Eleanor agrees enthusiastically to accompany Don to America, with her father as chaperone and her cousin Augustus as legal advisor to Don. Eleanor and Don view the expedition as merely a minor delay to their nuptials: “our excursion to the new world is just going down into the basement to borrow a hammer.” A potential complication to their ultimate plans is Augustus’ passion for Eleanor. Although she

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repeatedly rejects his pleas to break off her engagement with Don, that "tamest sort of cat," and although, on the boat, she repels Augustus' violent advances, Eleanor does not forget the "hungry warmth" of his kisses.

Don's mission to America proves much more complicated and disillusioning than he had ever dreamed. Don's failure to right his father's wrongs, and his inferiority to Augustus as a lover, merge in a climactic and unintentionally amusing scene in a New York hotel. To "re-act against his father," Don has deliberately chosen the suite that he and his parents occupied during much of his wretched childhood. The rooms are full of memories of that powerful, ironic father who finally left mother and son in order to take a mistress. One evening, Don receives a telephone call from Augustus about his father's will. Sensing something sinister in Augustus' tone, Don summons Eleanor for moral support. Although the situation is ideal for seduction, nothing is further from Don's mind when, legs trembling, he walks to the hotel telephone to call Eleanor. Everything in the room

affected him deeply with a sense of solitude, a sense of smallness, a sense of impotence that he hadn't felt since he had been a small child. And the repeated mention of his father's name had brought a tense sense of his father again before him. His father had sat on those very chairs, had looked at those very pictures with his twinkling badger grey eyes of a man used to baffle and outwit. He suddenly felt as if his father were once more saying: "Not this time, sonny!"

And so it turns out. Kelleg, Sr., has willed his son the income but barred him from interfering with the business. In Augustus' malicious words, Don is "absolutely impotent." At this news he faints dead away while Eleanor rages at her cousin's brutality.

Although the couple returns to England in defeat without having "so much as got the hammer," there is nothing to prevent their marriage. In fact, they do buy a modest house and begin to furnish it. But suddenly Don decides that he must return to America: "I *can't* funk it." Whereupon Eleanor, who has been the soul of patience for three hundred pages, makes the classic rejoinder, "Then you know it means good-bye?"

In the light of George Moffatt's last minute rejection of Clara, and of Dowell's failure both to consummate his marriage to Florence and to propose to Nancy, this conclusion is certainly not surprising. What is unusual is the epilogue, a letter from a friend of Don's to Eleanor, justifying Don's vacillation and blaming Eleanor for her lack of faith: "Your duty was to be good, to be kind, to be dear to the

noblest and best man you've ever seen." The letter continues to assert, preposterously, that Eleanor is afraid of her own emotions. She should have seen that Don is a "noble and unique invalid whom you might have nursed to health." Such statements suggest the extent of Ford's personal commitment to his passive heroes and his blindness to the character he has actually created. Although Don is an invalid, his problem is not frustrated idealism but fear of sexual experience. Intending to portray a noble hero, Ford has dramatized a ludicrous one. But the tone of comic irony which would suggest awareness is totally missing from the epilogue.⁴

Although *A Call* (1910) resembles all three of the earlier novels of passion, its particular affinity is with *An English Girl*. In both works the passive hero of Dowell's type has a rival in his own generation, an active character prefiguring Ashburnham. As a matter of fact, *A Call* distinctly anticipates *The Good Soldier* and differs from the earlier novels in that it contains no important, inhibiting figure from the older generation. *A Call* resembles *An English Girl* in still another respect: both novels have epilogues proposing a revised interpretation of the passive hero.

The rivals in *A Call*, like those in *An English Girl*, are of apparently very different temperaments. Robert Grimshaw, gentle, benevolent, articulate, and acutely sensitive to the feelings of others, bears the familiar attributes of the passive hero. Without profession, he is essentially a spectator, content to lounge through life looking rather like a "brown seal on the watch." Dudley Leicester, on the other hand, is big, blond, moustached, conventional, and utterly oblivious to psychological subtleties. He has the tradition of public service in his blood and shows promise of becoming a good landlord and a member of Parliament. Still, despite their apparent differences, the two exhibit almost identical attitudes toward passion: when confronted by a desirable and willing woman, they retreat, giving as reason for the withdrawal a respect for society's laws. Although the language describing these scenes suggests sexual anxiety, Ford clearly, if unconvincingly, accepts his characters' rationalizations.

Robert Grimshaw loves two women but demonstrates that he does not really want either. Dark, passionate, unstable Katya Lascarides is eager to live with him as his wife, but has private scruples against a legalized union. And although Robert firmly believes he wants "physical possession" of Katya, he refuses her in their most passionate scene. Katya makes all the advances, pulling Robert's face down on hers, rising to embrace him, whispering, "Oh, take me!

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Take me! Now!” Despite the “silent nirvana of passion” that falls, according to Ford, on Robert, he reiterates his demand for a wedding ceremony first and to her soft “I’ll give you myself,” responds, wearily: “No! No! . . . It’s no good.”

Having once proposed to Katya, he feels bound to her, resists his other love—the young, pretty, quaint Pauline—and matches her with his best friend, Dudley Leicester. Asked why he gave her up when he “wanted that child so dreadfully,” Robert lays the blame on custom: “in our day and class” we have “to do what seems proper and expedient. . . . It’s the sort of thing that’s got to happen to make us the civilized people that we are.” Still, the quality of Robert’s passion for Pauline, as he himself describes it, does not inspire confidence: “I don’t want to touch her . . . I want to watch her . . . I should like to cry over her. . . . I should like to kneel down and put my face in her lap and cry, and cry, and cry.” The context of this speech suggests that Ford sees here only admirable sensitivity rather than neurotic regression.

Ford intends Dudley Leicester to be very different from Robert, to be a perfectly normal Englishman, “essentially monogamous,” yet capable of “ardent passion.” Nevertheless, in Dudley’s one explicitly passionate scene, he proves as diffident and inept as Robert, and a good deal more frightened. The scene involves Dudley with a flame of his youth, Etta Stackpole. They had not married because Dudley deplored Etta’s outrageous flirtations with everyone, even with Moddle, the third footman. Now, with Pauline away in the country, he finds himself seated unprotected at a dinner party beside Etta. Her old charms are only too apparent: she is “red-lipped, deep-voiced, black-haired, large, scented and utterly uncontrollable.” During their conversation, Dudley fears that she will lay her head on his black shoulder and rest her white breasts on the table. Of course, she maneuvers him into taking her home.

The episode concludes in Etta’s house in an unintentionally hilarious scene, which echoes the climax of *An English Girl* and gives *A Call* its name. After Etta has literally pushed Dudley into the dark hallway, she orders him to answer the insistently ringing telephone. The language employed here is implicitly sexual. Leaning over the banister, her hair dishevelled, shoulders gleaming, Etta calls out: “Don’t fumble so ridiculously. Don’t you know how to take the thing off the hook?” She further unnerves Dudley by instructing him to mimic, over the phone, the voice of his old rival, Moddle the third footman. And when Dudley, having stupidly revealed his identity

to the mysterious caller, worries that Pauline will discover all, Etta laughs at him, her hard little laugh. A few days later Dudley simply goes mad. No doubt the explicit reasons for Dudley's collapse—excessive concern over Pauline's feelings and over public opinion—are partly valid. Yet an even more important cause is the terrorizing presence of the massive, passionate Etta. It is important, however, to note that in this scene Ford clearly recognizes how foolish Dudley is, just as he will recognize Ashburnham's foolishness in the early portions of *The Good Soldier*.

Because he felt that the first readers of *A Call*, in its serial version, had misunderstood his attitude toward his passive hero, Ford added an epilogue. It is of some interest because it shows that Ford realized that he was not fulfilling his conscious intentions. The epilogue to *A Call* differs markedly from that to *An English Girl*. Whereas, in the earlier work, Ford asserts his passive hero's nobility, he here calls his hero a "meddlesome and inwardly conceited fool" who ought to have left Katya and married Pauline. These statements, although accurate so far as the implicit content of the novel is concerned, come as a shock because his presentation of Robert has been generally sympathetic, even admiring. Still, even though the epilogue is unconvincing, it bodes well for Ford's artistry that he should, however belatedly, become aware of his hero's limitations.

The Panel (1912), the last of these pre-1915 novels of passion, is much less seriously intended than *A Call*. Sub-titled "A Sheer Comedy," it borrows heavily from Congreve, Sheridan, and especially from Ford's favorite modern comedy, *The Playboy of the Western World*. *The Panel* does not conform closely to the pattern of the previous novels; no father-figure and no rival rise to threaten the hero. Nevertheless, *The Panel* is important not only because its hero, Major Edward Brent Foster, prefigures Major Edward Ashburnham in many ways but also because Ford sees Brent as a human being: although his ineptitude often merits laughter, he is capable of the passion Ford attributes to him. Brent anticipates Ashburnham, obviously, by name, profession, and rank. Moreover, Brent's four loves, albeit explicitly platonic, resemble those of *The Good Soldier*. While serving in India, he has tender moments first with Mrs. Kerr Howe, married to a "brutish" husband (the Mrs. Basil of *The Good Soldier*) and then with a "half-starved sort of little rat," Flossie Delamare (the "poor little rat," Maisie Maidan). Mustered out of military service, he is unhappily engaged to a wealthy Boston bluestocking, Olympia Peabody (Florence Dowell, graduate of Vassar); but Brent's only

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serious love is for Mary Saville, alias "Nancy" (Nancy Rufford).

More important than these resemblances are two comic episodes, the first of which shows Ford's capacity for amused detachment from his hero's anxieties about social conventions and about passion, the second his ability to dramatize his hero's sexual involvement with his beloved. The first episode, covering five chapters, represents the best comic writing in this slight novel. It makes Brent into a Joseph Andrews defending his virtue against four eager women. Moreover, the imagery suggests that Brent resists not only out of respect for convention and fear of Miss Peabody's wrath but also out of anxiety about the mechanics of sexual relations. Ford maintains, of course, proper decorum: the women merely ask for a kiss and Brent invariably replies no.

The funniest portion of this episode describes Brent's frantic efforts to get Flossie, who is clad in a pink peignoir, out of his room through a secret sliding panel that, unfortunately, refuses to open. Much of the dialogue and action points to the major's nervous ineptitude. Brent first begs Flossie to lend one of her candles to help him find "that blessed knob." When Flossie says that it is the "thistle thing" in the picture frame that does the trick, he implores her to "do the trick and get back to your room." Having tried "wriggling the button thing" and clicking it "up and down like a switch," Flossie gives up, sits down, kicks off her shoes, and extends her stocking feet to the fire. Then, like Etta Stackpole with Dudley, she makes mockery of Brent: "Oh, go on wiggling, I can wait." She reminds him of their tender moments together in Simla and invites him to kiss her. Meanwhile, Brent, pressing and pulling, the sweat running off his forehead, resorts to his penknife and even fumbles "in his kit bag for a little oil can he always carried with him." At last, Flossie takes pity, agrees to steal out another way, and offers him a good-night kiss: "I don't *really* think I want to, Flossie. . . . I don't—I don't believe I *can* be very well." At the end of the evening, Brent remarks wryly to himself: "four women have asked me to kiss them this night, and not once have I brought it off."

The hero's refusal of all these offers recalls, of course, the previous passive heroes and even Dudley, the "ardent" hero. Moreover, the imagery of knobs, tools and panels, and Brent's amusing incompetence resemble the unconscious dramatizations of impotence in the telephone scenes of *An English Girl* and *A Call*. But the point is that even Ford finds his hero occasionally laughable (though Ford probably intended no Freudian symbolism) and, more important,

also knows that the hero really can at the appropriate time experience passion.

Although much bad writing separates this episode from the final scene, at the end Ford is able to bring together Brent and Mary Saville, the girl he really loves. Appropriately enough, Ford describes their union in terms of the situation and the imagery so well managed previously. Mary steals into Brent's room through the sliding panel, closes it behind her, and stands "with her hand still on the knob, . . . panting slightly," looking "at the little secret door of escape." Elusive throughout the novel, she now resists the impulse to flight and instead calls to Brent. He responds warmly, as the comic hero should and as none of the earlier heroes has been able to; he kisses "her repeatedly upon every one of her features that his lips could be expected to reach. 'I've brought it off at last,' he gasped. 'I've kissed somebody at last.'"⁵

Three years later Ford brought off *The Good Soldier*, his greatest novel. How he really did it must remain a mystery. But surely his trials with earlier heroes helped make Dowell and Ashburnham possible. From the beginning, Ford is intensely sympathetic with his heroes, the passive and the active ones, who, caught up in passion, all suffer far more than they deserve to. What is lacking is artistic distance, the capacity to see these characters as flawed, even disabled, human beings, whose sufferings sometimes demand not admiration but pity and even irony. *A Call* and *The Panel* especially hint at the beginnings of detachment: Dudley Leicester receives mildly ironic treatment; Major Edward Brent is frankly a comic hero; Robert Grimshaw, the passive hero, elicits criticism in the epilogue if not in the novel.

Ford seems finally to have sensed the need to separate his two character-types more distinctly than he was able to in *A Call*. By frankly making Dowell into something of a eunuch, a male nurse, he was merely accepting what is implicit in the characters of Clem, George, Don and Robert. At the same time, Ford can, in Dowell, use the passive hero's explicit virtue of sensitivity, awareness of others if not always of self, to achieve an effective, complex narrator. In contrast, Ford makes his active hero truly ardent: if Ashburnham is not exactly a stallion forever neighing after his neighbor's wife, he is at least a man of passion. Even though he does not touch Maisie or Nancy and can do without his wife for years, he is nevertheless a man; when he looks at Florence, he thinks, "It might just be done," and, moreover, does it. Ford insists on Ashburnham as suffering, like

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all the heroes in his serious novels of passion, yet now sees him at the same time as imperfect. Just as "Miss Lonelyhearts," in Nathaniel West's wonderful novel, comes to discover that utter banality, utter sentimentality, can accompany true suffering, so Ashburnham while nobly enduring pain as great as if he were being flayed can mutter bad verse under his breath. "It was like his sentimentality," comments Dowell, "to quote Swinburne."

The gradual evolution of characters in *The Good Soldier* may, of course, be viewed as simply the salutary result of constant practice in the craft of fiction. But since Ford had written excellent historical fiction much earlier, one suspects that the thinness and ineptitude of his novels of modern love arose in part from terrifyingly personal subject-matter which he had long feared to understand. If this is the case, *The Good Soldier* represents a triumph not merely of literary skill but of knowledge, self-acceptance and, even, of courage.

REFERENCES

1. For differing interpretations of *The Good Soldier* see the following: John A. Meixner, "The Saddest Story," *Kenyon Review*, XXII (Spring 1960), 234-264; and Mark Schorer, "An Interpretation," *The Good Soldier*, New York, 1957, pp. v-xv.
2. See Thomas Moser, *Joseph Conrad: Achievement and Decline*, Cambridge, Mass., 1957, Chapter II; and Albert J. Guerard, *Conrad the Novelist*, Cambridge, Mass., 1958, pp. 261 ff. I should like here to acknowledge a considerable debt to Mr. Guerard and to my omniscient Fordian friend, Dr. Richard Herndon, for suggestions concerning this paper.
3. Ford Madox Ford, *England and the English*, New York, 1907, pp. 253, 337.
4. For the relations between *An English Girl* and the later Ford, see R. W. Lid, "Tietjens in Disguise," *Kenyon Review*, XXII (Spring 1960), 265-276.
5. In several of the historical novels of the period just before *The Good Soldier*, Ford succeeds in uniting hero and heroine either in actuality or in fantasy. See *The Portrait* (1910), *Ladies Whose Bright Eyes* (1911), and *The Young Lovell* (1913).