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*The Good Soldier*



## *Dedicatory Letter to Stella Ford\**

My Dear Stella,

I have always regarded this as my best book – at any rate as the best book of mine of a pre-war period, and between its writing and the appearance of my next novel nearly ten years must have elapsed, so that whatever I may have since written may be regarded as the work of a different man – as the work of *your* man. For it is certain that without the incentive to live that you offered me I should scarcely have survived the War period and it is more certain still that without your spurring me again to write I should never have written again. And it happens that, by a queer chance, *The Good Soldier* is almost alone amongst my books in being dedicated to no one: Fate must have elected to let it wait the ten years that it waited – for this dedication.

What I am now I owe to you: what I was when I wrote *The Good Soldier* I owed to the concatenation of circumstances of a rather purposeless and wayward life. Until I sat down to write this book – on the 17th of December 1913 – I had never attempted to extend myself, to use a phrase of racehorse training. Partly because I had always entertained very fixedly the idea that – whatever may be the case with other writers – I at least should not be able to write a novel by which I should care to stand before reaching the age of forty; partly because I very definitely did not want to come into competition with other writers whose claim or whose need for recognition and what recognitions bring were greater than my own. I had never really tried to put into any novel of mine *all* that I knew about writing. I had written rather desultorily a number of books – a great number – but they had all been in the nature of pastiches, of pieces of rather precious writing, or of tours de force. But I have always been mad about writing – about the way writing should be done – and partly alone, partly with the companionship of Conrad,\* I had even at that date made exhaustive studies into how words should be handled and novels constructed.

So, on the day I was forty, I sat down to show what I could do – and *The Good Soldier* resulted. I fully intended it to be my last book. I used

to think – and I do not know that I do not think the same now – that one book was enough for any man to write, and, at the date when *The Good Soldier* was finished, London at least and possibly the world appeared to be passing under the dominion of writers newer and much more vivid. Those were the passionate days of the literary Cubists, Vorticists, Imagistes and the rest of the *tapageux* and riotous *Jeunes*\* of that young decade. So I regarded myself as the eel which, having reached the deep sea, brings forth its young and dies – or as the great auk I considered that, having reached my allotted, I had laid my one egg and might as well die. So I took a formal farewell of Literature in the columns of a magazine called the *Thrush* – which also, poor little auk that it was, died of the effort. Then I prepared to stand aside in favour of our good friends – yours and mine – Ezra, Eliot, Wyndham Lewis, H.D.,\* and the rest of the clamorous young writers who were then knocking at the door.

But greater clamours beset London and the world, which till then had seemed to lie at the proud feet of those conquerors; Cubism, Vorticism, Imagism and the rest never had their fair chance amid the voices of the cannon, and so I have come out of my hole again and beside your strong, delicate and beautiful works have taken heart to lay some work of my own.

*The Good Soldier*, however, remains my great auk's egg for me as being something of a race that will have no successors, and as it was written so long ago I may not seem over-vain if I consider it for a moment or two. No author, I think, is deserving of much censure for vanity if, taking down one of his ten-year-old books, he exclaims: "Great heavens, did I write as well as that then?" for the implication always is that one does not any longer write so well and few are so envious as to censure the complacencies of an extinct volcano.

Be that as it may, I was lately forced into the rather close examination of this book, for I had to translate it into French, that forcing me to give it much closer attention than would be the case in any reading, however minute. And I will permit myself to say that I was astounded at the work I must have put into the construction of the book, at the intricate tangle of references and cross-references. Nor is that to be wondered at, for, though I wrote it with comparative rapidity, I had it hatching within myself for fully another decade. That was because the story is a true story and because I had it from Edward Ashburnham

himself and I could not write it till all the others were dead. So I carried it about with me all those years, thinking about it from time to time.

I had in those days an ambition: that was to do for the English novel what, in *Fort comme la mort*, Maupassant\* had done for the French. One day I had my reward, for I happened to be in a company where a fervent young admirer exclaimed: "By Jove, *The Good Soldier* is the finest novel in the English language!" whereupon my friend Mr John Rodker,\* who has always had a properly tempered admiration for my work, remarked in his clear, slow drawl: "Ah yes. It is, but you have left out a word. It is the finest French novel in the English language!"

With that – which is my tribute to my masters and betters of France – I will leave the book to the reader. But I should like to say a word about the title. This book was originally called by me *The Saddest Story*, but since it did not appear till the darkest days of the war were upon us, Mr Lane\* importuned me with letters and telegrams – I was by that time engaged in other pursuits! – to change the title, which he said would at that date render the book unsaleable. One day, when I was on parade, I received a final wire of appeal from Mr Lane, and the telegraph being reply-paid I seized the reply form and wrote in hasty irony: "Dear Lane, Why not *The Good Soldier*?" ...To my horror, six months later, the book appeared under that title.

I have never ceased to regret it but, since the War, I have received so much evidence that the book has been read under that name that I hesitate to make a change for fear of causing confusion. Had the chance occurred during the War, I should not have hesitated to make the change, for I had only two evidences that anyone had ever heard of it. On one occasion I met the adjutant of my regiment just come off leave and looking extremely sick. I said: "Great heavens, man, what is the matter with you?" He replied: "Well, the day before yesterday I got engaged to be married and today I have been reading *The Good Soldier*."

On the other occasion I was on parade again, being examined in drill, on the Guards' Square at Chelsea. And since I was petrified with nervousness, having to do it before a half-dozen elderly gentlemen with red hatbands,\* I got my men about as hopelessly boxed as it is possible to do with the gentlemen privates of H.M. Coldstream Guards. Whilst I stood stiffly at attention, one of the elderly red hatbands walked close behind by back and said distinctly in my ear, "Did you say *The Good*



*Soldier?*” So no doubt Mr Lane was avenged. At any rate I have learnt that irony may be a two-edged sword.

You, my dear Stella, will have heard me tell these stories a great many times. But the seas now divide us and I put them in this, your letter, which you will read before you see me in the hope that they may give you some pleasure with the illusion that you are hearing familiar – and very devoted – tones. And so I subscribe myself in all truth and in the hope that you will accept at once the particular dedication of this book and the general dedication of the edition.

Your

F. M. F.

New York,  
9th January 1927

*The Good Soldier*

*A Tale of Passion*

*“Beati Immaculati”\**



## PART ONE

### 1

THIS IS THE SADDEST STORY I have ever heard. We had known the Ashburnhams for nine seasons of the town of Nauheim with an extreme intimacy – or rather with an acquaintanceship as loose and easy and yet as close as a good glove’s with your hand. My wife and I knew Captain and Mrs Ashburnham as well as it was possible to know anybody, and yet, in another sense, we knew nothing at all about them. This is, I believe, a state of things only possible with English people, of whom, till today, when I sit down to puzzle out what I know of this sad affair, I knew nothing whatever. Six months ago I had never been to England, and certainly I had never sounded the depths of an English heart. I had known the shallows.

I don’t mean to say that we were not acquainted with many English people. Living, as we perforce lived, in Europe, and being, as we perforce were, leisured Americans, which is as much as to say that we were un-American, we were thrown very much into the society of the nicer English. Paris, you see, was our home. Somewhere between Nice and Bordighera provided yearly winter quarters for us, and Nauheim always received us from July to September. You will gather from this statement that one of us had, as the saying is, a “heart”, and, from the statement that my wife is dead, that she was the sufferer.

Captain Ashburnham also had a heart. But whereas a yearly month or so at Nauheim tuned him up to exactly the right pitch for the rest of the twelvemonth, the two months or so were only just enough to keep poor Florence alive from year to year. The reason for his heart was, approximately, polo, or too much hard sportsmanship in his youth. The reason for poor Florence’s broken years was a storm at sea upon our first crossing to Europe, and the immediate reasons for our imprisonment in that continent were doctor’s orders. They said that even the short Channel crossing might well kill the poor thing.

When we all first met, Captain Ashburnham, home on sick leave from an India to which he was never to return, was thirty-three; Mrs Ashburnham – Leonora – was thirty-one. I was thirty-six and poor

Florence thirty. Thus today Florence would have been thirty-nine and Captain Ashburnham forty-two; whereas I am forty-five and Leonora forty. You will perceive, therefore, that our friendship has been a young-middle-aged affair, since we were all of us of quite quiet dispositions, the Ashburnhams being more particularly what in England it is the custom to call "quite good people".

They were descended, as you will probably expect, from the Ashburnham who accompanied Charles I to the scaffold,\* and, as you must also expect with this class of English people, you would never have noticed it. Mrs Ashburnham was a Powys; Florence was a Hurlbird of Stamford, Connecticut, where, as you know, they are more old-fashioned than even the inhabitants of Cranford,\* England, could have been. I myself am a Dowell of Philadelphia, Pa., where, it is historically true, there are more old English families than you would find in any six English counties taken together. I carry about with me, indeed – as if it were the only thing that invisibly anchored me to any spot upon the globe – the title deeds of my farm, which once covered several blocks between Chestnut and Walnut Streets. These title deeds are of wampum, the grant of an Indian chief to the first Dowell, who left Farnham in Surrey in company with William Penn.\* Florence's people, as is so often the case with the inhabitants of Connecticut, came from the neighbourhood of Fordingbridge, where the Ashburnhams' place is. From there, at this moment, I am actually writing.

You may well ask why I write. And yet my reasons are quite many. For it is not unusual in human beings who have witnessed the sack of a city or the falling to pieces of a people to desire to set down what they have witnessed for the benefit of unknown heirs or of generations infinitely remote, or, if you please, just to get the sight out of their heads.

Someone has said that the death of a mouse from cancer is the whole sack of Rome by the Goths, and I swear to you that the breaking up of our little four-square coterie was such another unthinkable event. Supposing that you should come upon us sitting together at one of the little tables in front of the club house, let us say, at Homburg, taking tea of an afternoon and watching the miniature golf, you would have said that, as human affairs go, we were an extraordinarily safe castle. We were, if you will, one of those tall ships with the white sails upon a blue sea, one of those things that seem the proudest and the safest

of all the beautiful and safe things that God has permitted the mind of men to frame. Where better could one take refuge? Where better?

Permanence? Stability? I can't believe it's gone. I can't believe that that long, tranquil life, which was just stepping a minuet, vanished in four crashing days at the end of nine years and six weeks. Upon my word, yes, our intimacy was like a minuet, simply because on every possible occasion and in every possible circumstance we knew where to go, where to sit, which table we unanimously should choose, and we could rise and go, all four together, without a signal from any one of us, always to the music of the *Kur* orchestra, always in the temperate sunshine, or, if it rained, in discreet shelters. No, indeed, it can't be gone. You can't kill a *minuet de la cour*.<sup>\*</sup> You may shut up the music book, close the harpsichord; in the cupboard and presses the rats may destroy the white satin favours. The mob may sack Versailles; the Trianon may fall, but surely the minuet – the minuet itself is dancing itself away into the furthest stars, even as our minuet of the Hessian bathing places must be stepping itself still. Isn't there any heaven where old beautiful dances, old beautiful intimacies prolong themselves? Isn't there any nirvana pervaded by the faint thrilling of instruments that have fallen into the dust of wormwood, but that yet had frail, tremulous and everlasting souls?

No, by God, it is false! It wasn't a minuet that we stepped; it was a prison – a prison full of screaming hysterics, tied down so that they might not outsound the rolling of our carriage wheels as we went along the shaded avenues of the Taunus Wald.

And yet I swear by the sacred name of my creator that it was true. It was true sunshine; the true music; the true splash of the fountains from the mouth of stone dolphins. For if for me we were four people with the same tastes, with the same desires, acting – or, no, not acting – sitting here and there unanimously, isn't that the truth? If for nine years I have possessed a goodly apple that is rotten at the core and discover its rottenness only in nine years and six months less four days, isn't it true to say that for nine years I possessed a goodly apple? So it may well be with Edward Ashburnham, with Leonora his wife and with poor dear Florence. And if you come to think of it, isn't it a little odd that the physical rottenness of at least two pillars of our four-square house never presented itself to my mind as a menace to its security? It doesn't so present itself now, though the two of them are actually dead. I don't know...

I know nothing – nothing in the world – of the hearts of men. I only know that I am alone – horribly alone. No hearthstone will ever again witness, for me, friendly intercourse. No smoking room will ever be other than peopled with incalculable simulacra amidst smoke wreaths. Yet, in the name of God, what should I know if I don't know the life of the hearth and of the smoking room, since my whole life has been passed in those places? The warm hearthside! Well, there was Florence: I believe that for the twelve years her life lasted, after the storm that seemed irretrievably to have weakened her heart – I don't believe that for one minute she was out of my sight, except when she was safely tucked up in bed and I should be downstairs, talking to some good fellow or other in some lounge or smoking room or taking my final turn with a cigar before going to bed. I don't, you understand, blame Florence. But how can she have known what she knew? How could she have got to know it? To know it so fully. Heavens! There doesn't seem to have been the actual time. It must have been when I was taking my baths, and my Swedish exercises, being manicured. Leading the life I did, of the sedulous, strained nurse, I had to do something to keep myself fit. It must have been then! Yet even that can't have been enough time to get the tremendously long conversations full of worldly wisdom that Leonora has reported to me since their deaths. And is it possible to imagine that during our prescribed walks in Nauheim and the neighbourhood she found time to carry on the protracted negotiations which she did carry on between Edward Ashburnham and his wife? And isn't it incredible that during all that time Edward and Leonora never spoke a word to each other in private? What is one to think of humanity?

For I swear to you that they were the model couple. He was as devoted as it was possible to be without appearing fatuous. So well set up, with such honest blue eyes, such a touch of stupidity, such a warm good-heartedness! And she – so tall, so splendid in the saddle, so fair! Yes, Leonora was extraordinarily fair and so extraordinarily the real thing that she seemed too good to be true. You don't, I mean, as a rule, get it all so superlatively together. To be the county family, to look the county family, to be so appropriately and perfectly wealthy; to be so perfect in manner – even just to the saving touch of insolence that seems to be necessary. To have all that and to be all that! No, it was too good to be true. And yet, only this afternoon, talking over the whole

matter, she said to me: “Once I tried to have a lover, but I was so sick at the heart, so utterly worn out that I had to send him away.” That struck me as the most amazing thing I had ever heard. She said, “I was actually in a man’s arms. Such a nice chap! Such a dear fellow! And I was saying to myself fiercely, hissing it between my teeth, as they say in novels – and really clenching them together: I was saying to myself: ‘Now I’m in for it, and I’ll really have a good time for once in my life – for once in my life!’ It was in the dark, in a carriage, coming back from a hunt ball. Eleven miles we had to drive! And then suddenly the bitterness of the endless poverty, of the endless acting – it fell on me like a blight, it spoiled everything. Yes, I had to realize that I had been spoiled even for the good time when it came. And I burst out crying and I cried and I cried for the whole eleven miles. Just imagine *me* crying! And just imagine me making a fool of the poor dear chap like that. It certainly wasn’t playing the game, was it now?”

I don’t know; I don’t know; was that last remark of hers the remark of a harlot, or is it what every decent woman – county family or not county family – thinks at the bottom of her heart? Or thinks all the time for the matter of that? Who knows?

Yet if one doesn’t know that at this hour and day, at this pitch of civilization to which we have attained, after all the preachings of all the moralists, and all the teachings of all the mothers to all the daughters *in saecula saeculorum*...\* but perhaps that is what all mothers teach all daughters, not with lips but with the eyes, or with heart whispering to heart. And if one doesn’t know as much as that about the first thing in the world, what does one know and why is one here?

I asked Mrs Ashburnham whether she had told Florence that, and what Florence had said, and she answered: “Florence didn’t offer any comment at all. What could she say? There wasn’t anything to be said. With the grinding poverty we had to put up with to keep up appearances, and the way the poverty came about – *you* know what I mean – any woman would have been justified in taking a lover and presents too. Florence once said about a very similar position – she was a little too well-bred, too American, to talk about mine – that it was a case of perfectly open riding and the woman could just act on the spur of the moment. She said it in American of course, but that was the sense of it. I think her actual words were: ‘That it was up to her to take it or leave it...’”



I don't want you to think that I am writing Teddy Ashburnham down a brute. I don't believe he was. God knows, perhaps all men are like that. For, as I've said, what do I know even of the smoking room? Fellows come in and tell the most extraordinarily gross stories – so gross that they will positively give you a pain. And yet they'd be offended if you suggested that they weren't the sort of person you could trust your wife alone with. And very likely they'd be quite properly offended – that is if you can trust anybody alone with anybody. But that sort of fellow obviously takes more delight in listening to or in telling gross stories – more delight than in anything else in the world. They'll hunt languidly and dress languidly and dine languidly and work without enthusiasm and find it a bore to carry on three minutes' conversation about anything whatever, and yet, when the other sort of conversation begins, they'll laugh and wake up and throw themselves about in their chairs. Then, if they so delight in the narration, how is it possible that they can be offended – and properly offended – at the suggestion that they might make attempts upon your wife's honour? Or again: Edward Ashburnham was the cleanest-looking sort of chap – an excellent magistrate, a first-rate soldier, one of the best landlords, so they said, in Hampshire, England. To the poor and to hopeless drunkards, as I myself have witnessed, he was like a painstaking guardian. And he never told a story that couldn't have gone into the columns of the *Field* more than once or twice in all the nine years of my knowing him. He didn't even like hearing them; he would fidget and get up and go out to buy a cigar or something of that sort. You would have said that he was just exactly the sort of chap that you could have trusted your wife with. And I trusted mine, and it was madness.

And yet again you have me. If poor Edward was dangerous because of the chastity of his expressions – and they say that is always the hallmark of a libertine – what about myself? For I solemnly avow that not only have I never so much as hinted at an impropriety in my conversation in the whole of my days, and more than that, I will vouch for the cleanness of my thoughts and the absolute chastity of my life. At what, then, does it all work out? Is the whole thing a folly and a mockery? Am I no better than a eunuch or is the proper man – the man with the right to existence – a raging stallion forever neighing after his neighbour's womankind?

I don't know. And there is nothing to guide us. And if everything is so nebulous about a matter so elementary as the morals of sex, what is there to guide us in the more subtle morality of all other personal contacts, associations and activities? Or are we meant to act on impulse alone? It is all a darkness.

## 2

**I** DON'T KNOW HOW it is best to put this thing down – whether it would be better to try and tell the story from the beginning, as if it were a story, or whether to tell it from this distance of time, as it reached me from the lips of Leonora or from those of Edward himself.

So I shall just imagine myself for a fortnight or so at one side of the fireplace of a country cottage, with a sympathetic soul opposite me. And I shall go on talking in a low voice while the sea sounds in the distance and overhead the great black flood of wind polishes the bright stars. From time to time we shall get up and go to the door and look out at the great moon and say: “Why, it is nearly as bright as in Provence!” And then we shall come back to the fireside, with just the touch of a sigh because we are not in that Provence where even the saddest stories are gay. Consider the lamentable history of Peire Vidal.\* Two years ago Florence and I motored from Biarritz to Las Tours, which is in the Black Mountains. In the middle of a tortuous valley there rises up an immense pinnacle and on the pinnacle are four castles – Las Tours, the Towers. And the immense mistral blew down that valley which was the way from France into Provence so that the silver-grey olive leaves appeared like hair flying in the wind, and the tufts of rosemary crept into the iron rocks that they might not be torn up by the roots.

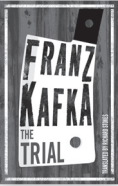
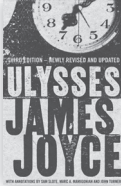
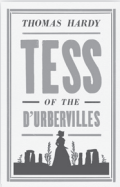
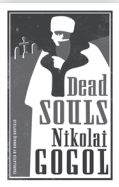
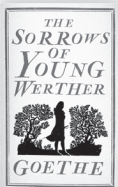
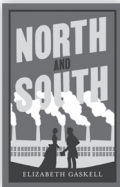
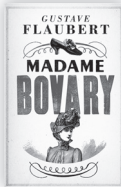
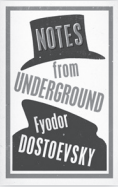
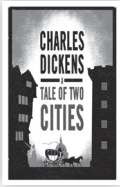
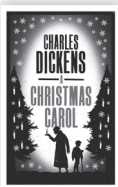
It was, of course, poor dear Florence who wanted to go to Las Tours. You are to imagine that, however much her bright personality came from Stamford, Connecticut, she was yet a graduate of Poughkeepsie. I never could imagine how she did it – the queer, chattering person that she was. With the faraway look in her eyes – which wasn't, however, in the least romantic – I mean that she didn't look as if she were seeing poetic dreams, or looking through you, for she hardly ever did look at you! – holding up one hand as if she wished to silence any objection – or any comment for the matter of that – she would talk. She would talk about

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