

MR. BRITLING SEES IT THROUGH

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BOOK I

MATCHING'S EASY AT EASE

MR. BRITLING SEES IT THROUGH

CHAPTER THE FIRST

MR. DIRECK VISITS MR. BRITLING

§ 1

It was the sixth day of Mr. Direck's first visit to England, and he was at his acutest perception of differences. He found England in every way gratifying and satisfactory, and more of a contrast with things American than he had ever dared to hope.

He had promised himself this visit for many years, but being of a sunny rather than energetic temperament — though he firmly believed himself to be a reservoir of clear-sighted American energy — he had allowed all sorts of things, and more particularly the uncertainties of Miss Mamie Nelson, to keep him back. But now there were no more uncertainties about Miss Mamie Nelson, and Mr. Direck had come over to England just to convince himself and everybody else that there were other interests in life for him than Mamie. . . .

And also, he wanted to see the old country from which his maternal grandmother had sprung. Wasn't there even now in his bedroom in New York a water-colour of Market Saffron church, where the dear old lady had been confirmed? And generally he wanted to see Europe. As an interesting side show to the excursion he hoped, in his

capacity of the rather underworked and rather over-salaried secretary of the Massachusetts Society for the Study of Contemporary Thought, to discuss certain agreeable possibilities with Mr. Britling, who lived at Matching's Easy.

Mr. Direck was a type of man not uncommon in America. He was very much after the fashion of that clean and pleasant-looking person one sees in the advertisements in American magazines, that agreeable person who smiles and says, "Good, it's the Fizgig Brand," or "Yes, it's a Wilkins, and that's the Best," or "My shirt-front never rucks; it's a Chesson." But now he was saying, still with the same firm smile, "Good. It's English." He was pleased by every unlikeness to things American, by every item he could hail as characteristic; in the train to London he had laughed aloud with pleasure at the chequer-board of little fields upon the hills of Cheshire, he had chuckled to find himself in a compartment without a corridor; he had tipped the polite yet kindly guard magnificently, after doubting for a moment whether he ought to tip him at all, and he had gone about his hotel in London saying "Lordy! Lordy! My word!" in a kind of ecstasy, verifying the delightful absence of telephone, of steam-heat, of any dependent bathroom. At breakfast the waiter (out of Dickens it seemed) had refused to know what "cereals" were, and had given him his egg in a china egg-cup such as you see in the pictures in *Punch*. The Thames, when he sallied out to see it, had been too good to be true, the smallest thing in rivers he had ever seen, and he had had to restrain himself from affecting a marked accent and accosting some passer-by with the question, "Say! But is this little wet ditch here the Historical River Thames?"

In America, it must be explained, Mr. Direck spoke a very good and careful English indeed, but he now found the utmost difficulty in controlling his impulse to use a high-pitched nasal drone and indulge in dry "American-

isms" and poker metaphors upon all occasions. When people asked him questions he wanted to say "Yep" or "Sure," words he would no more have used in America than he could have used a bowie knife. But he had a sense of rôle. He wanted to be visibly and audibly America eye-witnessing. He wanted to be just exactly what he supposed an Englishman would expect him to be. At any rate, his clothes had been made by a strongly American New York tailor, and upon the strength of them a taxi-man had assumed politely but firmly that the shillings on his taximeter were dollars, an incident that helped greatly to sustain the effect of Mr. Direck, in Mr. Direck's mind, as something standing out with an almost representative clearness against the English scene. . . . So much so that the taxi-man got the dollars. . . .

Because all the time he had been coming over he had dreaded that it wasn't true, that England was a legend, that London would turn out to be just another thundering great New York, and the English exactly like New Englanders. . . .

§ 2

And now here he was on the branch line of the little old Great Eastern Railway, on his way to Matching's Easy in Essex, and he was suddenly in the heart of Washington Irving's England.

Washington Irving's England! Indeed it was. He couldn't sit still and just peep at it, he had to stand up in the little compartment and stick his large, firm-featured, kindly countenance out of the window as if he greeted it. The country under the June sunshine was neat and bright as an old-world garden, with little fields of corn surrounded by dog-rose hedges, and woods and small rushy pastures of an infinite tidiness. He had seen a real deer park, it had rather tumbledown iron gates between its shield-surmounted pillars, and in the distance, beyond all question, was Bracebridge Hall nestling among

great trees. He had seen thatched and timbered cottages, and half-a-dozen inns with creaking signs. He had seen a fat vicar driving himself along a grassy lane in a governess cart drawn by a fat grey pony. It wasn't like any reality he had ever known. It was like travelling in literature.

Mr. Britling's address was the Dower House, and it was, Mr. Britling's note had explained, on the farther edge of the park at Claverings. Claverings! The very name for some stately home of England. . . .

And yet this was only forty-two miles from London. Surely it brought things within the suburban range. If Matching's Easy were in America, commuters would live there. But in supposing that, Mr. Direck displayed his ignorance of a fact of the greatest importance to all who would understand England. There is a gap in the suburbs of London. The suburbs of London stretch west and south and even west by north, but to the north-eastward there are no suburbs; instead there is Essex. Essex is not a suburban county; it is a characteristic and individualised county which wins the heart. Between dear Essex and the centre of things lie two great barriers, the East End of London and Epping Forest. Before a train could get to any villadom with a cargo of season-ticket holders it would have to circle about this rescued woodland and travel for twenty unprofitable miles, and so once you are away from the main Great Eastern lines Essex still lives in the peace of the eighteenth century, and London, the modern Babylon, is, like the stars, just a light in the nocturnal sky. In Matching's Easy, as Mr. Britling presently explained to Mr. Direck, there are half-a-dozen old people who have never set eyes on London in their lives — and do not want to.

"Aye-ya!"

"Fussin' about thea."

"Mr. Robinson, 'e went to Lon', 'e did. That's 'ow 'e 'urt 'is fut."

Mr. Direck had learnt at the main-line junction that

he had to tell the guard to stop the train for Matching's Easy; it only stopped "by request"; the thing was getting better and better; and when Mr. Direck seized his grip and got out of the train there was just one little old Essex station-master and porter and signalman and everything, holding a red flag in his hand and talking to Mr. Britling about the cultivation of the sweet peas which glorified the station. And there was the Mr. Britling who was the only item of business and the greatest expectation in Mr. Direck's European journey, and he was quite unlike the portraits Mr. Direck had seen and quite unmistakably Mr. Britling all the same, since there was nobody else upon the platform, and he was advancing with a gesture of welcome.

"Did you ever see such peas, Mr. Dick?" said Mr. Britling by way of introduction.

"My word," said Mr. Direck in a good old Farmer Hayseed kind of voice.

"Aye-ya!" said the station-master in singularly strident tones. "It be a rare year for sweet peas," and then he slammed the door of the carriage in a leisurely manner and did dismissive things with his flag, while the two gentlemen took stock, as people say, of one another.

§ 3

Except in the doubtful instance of Miss Mamie Nelson, Mr. Direck's habit was good fortune. Pleasant things came to him. Such was his position as the salaried secretary of this society of thoughtful Massachusetts business men to which allusion has been made. Its purpose was to bring itself expeditiously into touch with the best thought of the age.

Too busily occupied with practical realities to follow the thought of the age through all its divagations and into all its recesses, these Massachusetts business men had had to consider methods of access more quintessential and

nuclear. And they had decided not to hunt out the best thought in its merely germinating stages, but to wait until it had emerged and flowered to some trustworthy recognition, and then, rather than toil through recondite and possibly already reconsidered books and writings generally, to offer an impressive fee to the emerged new thinker, and to invite him to come to them and to lecture to them and to have a conference with them, and to tell them simply, competently and completely at first hand just all that he was about. To come, in fact, and be himself — in a highly concentrated form. In this way a number of interesting Europeans had been given very pleasant excursions to America, and the society had been able to form very definite opinions upon their teaching. And Mr. Britling was one of the representative thinkers upon which this society had decided to inform itself. It was to broach this invitation and to offer him the impressive honorarium by which the society honoured not only its guests but itself, that Mr. Direck had now come to Matching's Easy. He had already sent Mr. Britling a letter of introduction, not indeed intimating his precise purpose, but mentioning merely a desire to know him, and the letter had been so happily phrased and its writer had left such a memory of pleasant hospitality on Mr. Britling's mind during Mr. Britling's former visit to New York, that it had immediately produced for Mr. Direck an invitation not merely to come and see him but to come and stay over the week-end.

And here they were shaking hands.

Mr. Britling did not look at all as Mr. Direck had expected him to look. He had expected an Englishman in a country costume of golfing tweeds, like the Englishman in country costume one sees in American illustrated stories. Drooping out of the country costume of golfing tweeds he had expected to see the mildly unhappy face, pensive even to its drooping moustache, with which Mr. Britling's publisher had for some faulty and unfortunate reason fa-

miliarised the American public. Instead of this, Mr. Britling was in a miscellaneous costume, and mildness was the last quality one could attribute to him. His moustache, his hair, his eyebrows bristled; his flaming freckled face seemed about to bristle too. His little hazel eyes came out with a "ping" and looked at Mr. Direck. Mr. Britling was one of a large but still remarkable class of people who seem at the mere approach of photography to change their hair, their clothes, their moral natures. No photographer had ever caught a hint of his essential Britlingness and bristlingness. Only the camera could ever induce Mr. Britling to brush his hair, and for the camera alone did he reserve that expression of submissive martyrdom Mr. Direck knew. And Mr. Direck was altogether unprepared for a certain casualness of costume that sometimes overtook Mr. Britling. He was wearing now a very old blue flannel blazer, no hat, and a pair of knickerbockers, not tweed breeches but tweed knickerbockers of a remarkable bagginess, and made of one of those virtuous socialistic homespun tweeds that drag out into woolly knots and strings wherever there is attrition. His stockings were worsted and wrinkled, and on his feet were those extraordinary slippers of bright-coloured bast-like interwoven material one buys in the north of France. These were purple with a touch of green. He had, in fact, thought of the necessity of meeting Mr. Direck at the station at the very last moment, and had come away from his study in the clothes that had happened to him when he got up. His face wore the amiable expression of a wire-haired terrier disposed to be friendly, and it struck Mr. Direck that for a man of his real intellectual distinction Mr. Britling was unusually short.

For there can be no denying that Mr. Britling was, in a sense, distinguished. The hero and subject of this novel was at its very beginning a distinguished man. He was in the *Who's Who* of two continents. In the last few years he had grown with some rapidity into a writer rec-

ognised and welcomed by the more cultivated sections of the American public, and even known to a select circle of British readers. To his American discoverers he had first appeared as an essayist, a serious essayist who wrote about æsthetics and Oriental thought and national character and poets and painting. He had come through America some years ago as one of those Kahn scholars, those promising writers and intelligent men endowed by Auguste Kahn of Paris, who go about the world nowadays in comfort and consideration as the travelling guests of that original philanthropist — to acquire the international spirit. Previously he had been a critic of art and literature and a writer of thoughtful third leaders in the *London Times*. He had begun with a Pembroke fellowship and a prize poem. He had returned from his world tour to his reflective yet original corner of *The Times* and to the production of books about national relationships and social psychology, that had brought him rapidly into prominence.

His was a naturally irritable mind, which gave him point and passion; and moreover he had a certain obstinate originality and a generous disposition. So that he was always lively, sometimes spacious, and never vile. He loved to write and talk. He talked about everything, he had ideas about everything; he could no more help having ideas about everything than a dog can resist smelling at your heels. He sniffed at the heels of reality. Lots of people found him interesting and stimulating, a few found him seriously exasperating. He had ideas in the utmost profusion about races and empires and social order and political institutions and gardens and automobiles and the future of India and China and æsthetics and America and the education of mankind in general. . . . And all that sort of thing. . . .

Mr. Direck had read a very great deal of all this expressed opiniativeness of Mr. Britling: he found it entertaining and stimulating stuff, and it was with genuine enthusiasm that he had come over to encounter the man

himself. On his way across the Atlantic and during the intervening days, he had rehearsed this meeting in varying keys, but always on the supposition that Mr. Britling was a large, quiet, thoughtful sort of man, a man who would, as it were, sit in attentive rows like a public meeting and listen. So Mr. Direck had prepared quite a number of pleasant and attractive openings, and now he felt was the moment for some one of these various simple, memorable utterances. But in none of these forecasts had he reckoned with either the spontaneous activities of Mr. Britling or with the station-master of Matching's Easy. Oblivious of any conversational necessities between Mr. Direck and Mr. Britling, this official now took charge of Mr. Direck's grip-sack, and, falling into line with the two gentlemen as they walked towards the exit gate, resumed what was evidently an interrupted discourse upon sweet peas, originally addressed to Mr. Britling.

He was a small, elderly man with a determined-looking face and a sea voice, and it was clear he overestimated the distance of his hearers.

"Mr. Darling what's head gardener up at Claverings, 'e can't get sweet peas like that, try 'ow 'e will. Tried everything 'e 'as. Sand ballast, 'e's tried. Seeds same as me. 'E came along 'ere only the other day, 'e did, and 'e says to me, 'e says, 'darned 'f I can see why a station-master should beat a professional gardener at 'is own game,' 'e says, 'but you do. And in your orf time, too, so's to speak,' 'e says. 'I've tried sile,' 'e says——"

"Your first visit to England?" asked Mr. Britling of his guest.

"Absolutely," said Mr. Direck.

"I says to 'im, 'there's one thing you 'aven't tried,' I says," the station-master continued, raising his voice by a Herculean feat still higher.

"I've got a little car outside here," said Mr. Britling. "I'm a couple of miles from the station."

"I says to 'im, I says, 'ave you tried the vibritation of

the trains?' I says. 'That's what you 'aven't tried, Mr. Darling. That's what you *can't* try,' I says. 'But you rest assured that that's the secret of my sweet peas,' I says, 'nothing less and nothing more than the vibration of the trains.'"

Mr. Direck's mind was a little confused by the double nature of the conversation and by the fact that Mr. Britling spoke of a car when he meant an automobile. He handed his ticket mechanically to the station-master, who continued to repeat and endorse his anecdote at the top of his voice as Mr. Britling disposed himself and his guest in the automobile.

"You know you 'aven't 'urt that mud-guard, sir, not the slightest bit that matters," shouted the station-master. "I've been a looking at it — er. It's my fence that's suffered most. And that's only strained the post a lil' bit. Shall I put your bag in behind, sir?"

Mr. Direck assented, and then, after a momentary hesitation, rewarded the station-master's services.

"Ready?" asked Mr. Britling.

"That's all right sir," the station-master reverberated.

With a rather wide curve Mr. Britling steered his way out of the station into the highroad.

§ 4

And now it seemed was the time for Mr. Direck to make his meditated speeches. But an unexpected complication was to defeat this intention. Mr. Direck perceived almost at once that Mr. Britling was probably driving an automobile for the first or second or at the extremest the third time in his life.

The thing became evident when he struggled to get into the high gear — an attempt that stopped the engine, and it was even more startlingly so when Mr. Britling narrowly missed a collision with a baker's cart at a corner. "I pressed the accelerator," he explained afterwards, "in-

stead of the brake. One does at first. I missed him by less than a foot." The estimate was a generous one. And after that Mr. Direck became too anxious not to distract his host's thoughts to persist with his conversational openings. An attentive silence came upon both gentlemen that was broken presently by a sudden outcry from Mr. Britling and a great noise of tormented gears. "Damn!" cried Mr. Britling, and "How the *devil*?"

Mr. Direck perceived that his host was trying to turn the car into a very beautiful gateway, with gate-houses on either side. Then it was manifest that Mr. Britling had abandoned this idea, and then they came to a stop a dozen yards or so along the main road. "Missed it," said Mr. Britling, and took his hands off the steering wheel and blew stormily, and then whistled some bars of a fretful air, and became still.

"Do we go through these ancient gates?" asked Mr. Direck.

Mr. Britling looked over his right shoulder and considered problems of curvature and distance. "I think," he said, "I will go round outside the park. It will take us a little longer, but it will be simpler than backing and manœuvring here now. . . . These electric starters are remarkably convenient things. Otherwise now I should have to get down and wind up the engine."

After that came a corner, the rounding of which seemed to present few difficulties until suddenly Mr. Britling cried out, "Eh! *eh!* ЕН! Oh, *damn!*"

Then the two gentlemen were sitting side by side in a rather sloping car that had ascended the bank and buried its nose in a hedge of dog-rose and honeysuckle, from which two missel thrushes, a blackbird and a number of sparrows had made a hurried escape. . . .

§ 5

"Perhaps," said Mr. Britling without assurance, and after a little peaceful pause, "I can reverse out of this."

He seemed to feel some explanation was due to Mr. Direck. "You see, at first — it's perfectly simple — one steers *round* a corner and then one doesn't put the wheels straight again, and so one keeps on going round — more than one meant to. It's the bicycle habit; the bicycle rights itself. One expects a car to do the same thing. It was my fault. The book explains all this question clearly, but just at the moment I forgot."

He reflected and experimented in a way that made the engine scold and fuss. . . .

"You see, she won't budge for the reverse. . . . She's — embedded. . . . Do you mind getting out and turning the wheel back? Then if I reverse, perhaps we'll get a move on. . . ."

Mr. Direck descended, and there were considerable efforts.

"If you'd just grip the spokes. Yes, so. . . . One, Two, Three! . . . No! Well, let's just sit here until somebody comes along to help us. Oh! Somebody will come all right. Won't you get up again?"

And after a reflective moment Mr. Direck resumed his seat beside Mr. Britling. . . .

§ 6

The two gentlemen smiled at each other to dispel any suspicion of discontent.

"My driving leaves something to be desired," said Mr. Britling with an air of frank impartiality. "But I have only just got this car for myself — after some years of hired cars — the sort of lazy arrangement where people supply car, driver, petrol, tyres, insurance and everything at so much a month. It bored me abominably. I can't imagine now how I stood it for so long. They sent me down a succession of compact, scornful boys who used to go fast when I wanted to go slow, and slow when I wanted to go fast, and who used to take every corner on the wrong