THE GOOD SOLDIER

A Tale of Passion by

FORD MADOX FORD

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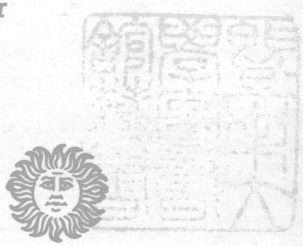
A TALE OF PASSION

"Beati Immaculati"

WITH AN INTERPRETATION BY

Mark Schorer



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THE GOOD SOLDIER

AN INTERPRETATION

LEARNING to read novels, we slowly learn to read ourselves. A few years ago, writing of Ford Madox Ford, Herbert Gorman said: "If he enlarged upon himself he was quite justified in doing so and it seems to me that the time has come now for somebody to enlarge upon him." I translate this remark to mean that the good novelist sees himself as the source of a subject that, when it has taken its form in his work, we may profitably examine because our analysis will bring it back to ourselves, perhaps to kiss us, more likely to slap us in the face—either way, to tell us where *we* are. These are the fruits of criticism.

The time had indeed come, and today we are hearing again about Ford Madox Ford in a way that we have not heard of him for twenty years—for until recently he has had to survive as best he could in the person of Conrad's collaborator and of that brilliant editor who said to the young D. H. Lawrence that his

first novel had "every fault that the English novel can have" and that his second was "a rotten work of genius." The always present friend of all the great, the abettor of all the promising young, Ford was great in his own right, and now Time indeed seems ready at last, as Herbert Gorman predicted that it would, to "weed out his own accomplishments."

He began work on *The Good Soldier* on his fortieth birthday—the 17th of December in 1913—and he himself thought that it was his first really serious effort in the novel. "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*." This was to be the real thing, and it was; many years later he remarked of it that it was his "best book technically, unless you read the Tietjens books as one novel, in which case the whole design appears. But I think the Tietjens books will probably 'date' a good deal, whereas the other may—and indeed need—not." It need not have; it did not.

As in most great works of comic irony, the mechanical structure of *The Good Soldier* is controlled to a degree nothing less than taut, while the structure of meaning is almost blandly open, capable of limitless refractions. One may go further, perhaps, and say that the novel renews a major lesson of all classic art: from the very delimitation of form arises the exfoliation of theme. This, at any rate, is the fact about *The Good Soldier* that gives point to John Rodker's quip that "it

is the finest French novel in the English language," which is to say that it has perfect clarity of surface and nearly mathematical poise, and—as an admirer would wish to extend the remark—a substance at once exact and richly enigmatic. As a novel, *The Good Soldier* is like a hall of mirrors, so constructed that, while one is always looking straight ahead at a perfectly solid surface, one is made to contemplate not the bright surface itself, but the bewildering maze of past circumstances and future consequence that—somewhat falsely—it contains. Or it is like some structure all of glass and brilliantly illuminated, from which one looks out upon a sable jungle and ragged darkness.

The Good Soldier carries the subtitle "A Tale of Passion," and the book's controlling irony lies in the fact that passionate situations are related by a narrator who is himself incapable of passion, sexual and moral alike. His is the true *accidia*, and so, from his opening absurdity: "This is the saddest story I have ever heard," on to the end and at every point, we are forced to ask: "How can we believe *him*? His must be exactly the *wrong* view." The fracture between the character of the event as we feel it to be and the character of the narrator as he reports the event to us is the essential irony, yet it is not in any way a simple one; for the narrator's view, as we soon discover, is not so much the wrong view as merely *a* view, although a special one. No simple inversion of statement can yield up the truth, for the truth is the maze, and, as we learn from what is perhaps the major theme of the book, appearances have their reality.

First of all, this novel is about the difference between convention and fact. The story consists of the narrator's attempt to adjust his reason to the shattering discovery that, in his most intimate relationships, he has, for nine years, mistaken the conventions of social behavior for the actual human fact. That he did not want it otherwise, that the deception was in effect self-induced, that he could not have lived at all with the actuality, is, for the moment, beside our point, although ultimately, for the attitude and the architecture of the novel, it is the whole point.

The narrator and his wife, Florence, are wealthy Americans; the friends with whom they are intimately concerned, Edward and Leonora Ashburnham, are wealthy English people. Together, these four seem to be the very bloom of international society; they are all, as the narrator repeatedly tells us, "good people," and the Ashburnhams are even that special kind of good people, "good county people." Florence is a little pathetic, because she suffers from heart trouble and must be protected against every shock and exposure. Leonora is perhaps a little strong-willed in the management of her domestic affairs, but these have been very trying and in their cause she has been altogether splendid and self-sacrificing, a noblewoman. Edward is nearly flawless: "the fine soldier, the excellent landlord, the extraordinarily kind, careful, and industrious magistrate, the upright, honest, fair-dealing, fair-thinking, public character . . . the model of humanity, the hero, the athlete, the father of his country, the lawgiver." For nine years these four have enjoyed an ap-

parently placid and civilized friendship, visiting back and forth, meeting annually at Nauheim, where they take the seasonal hypochondriac baths, sharing in one another's interests and affairs. Then comes the tremendous, the stunning reversal: when illness proves to be a lusterless debauchery; domestic competence the maniacal will of the tigress, the egoistic composure of the serpent; heroic masculinity the most sentimental libertinism. And the narrator, charged at the end with the responsibility of caring for a little mad girl, Edward's last love, is left to relate his new knowledge of an exposed reality to his long untroubled faith in its appearance. Which he is not able to do, of course; as which of us could?

But are not these "realities," in effect, "appearances"? Are not the "facts" that the narrator discovers in themselves "conventions" of a sort? We are forced, at every point, to look back at this narrator, to scan his beguiling surprise, to measure the angle of refraction at which that veiled glance penetrates experience. He himself suggests that we are looking at events here as one looks at the image of a mirror in a mirror, at the box within the box within the box, the arch beyond the arch beyond the arch. All on one page we find these reversals: "Upon my word, yes, our intimacy was like a minuet. . . . No, by God, it is false! It wasn't a minuet that we stepped; it was a prison—a prison full of screaming hysterics. . . . And yet I swear by the sacred name of my creator that it was true. It was true sunshine; the true music; the true plash of the fountains from the mouths 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?" The appearance had its reality. How, then, does the "reality" suggest that it is something less—or more?

Why is Florence always "poor Florence" or "that poor wretch" or "that poor cuckoo"? Why the persistent denigration of tone? Why can Florence not be charged with something less trivial and vulgar than "making eyes at Edward"? The narrator has something to gain in Florence's loss, and that is a fragment of self-esteem. If Florence is a harlot, she is so, in part, because of her husband's fantastic failure, but if we can be persuaded of her calculated vice and of her nearly monstrous malice, her husband appears before us as the pathetic victim of life's ironic circumstance. What, again, is the meaning of the narrator's nearly phobic concern with Catholicism, or of the way in which his slurs at Leonora are justified by her attachment to that persuasion? This is a mind not quite in balance. And again, Leonora's loss is Edward's gain, and Edward's gain at last is the narrator's gain. For why are Florence's indiscretions crimes, and Edward's, with Florence, follies at worst, and at best true goodnesses of heart? Why, after his degradation, is Edward still "a fine fellow"? In every case, the "fact" is somewhere between the mere social convention and that different order of convention which the distorted understanding of the narrator imposes upon them.

Yet the good novelist does not let us rest here. These distortions are further revelations. Mirror illuminates

mirror, each arch marks farther distances. Ford tells us that he suggested the title, *The Good Soldier*, "in hasty irony," when the publisher's objections to *The Saddest Story* became imperative; and while, under the circumstances of 1915, the new title must have seemed, for this novel and for this real soldier, Ford, peculiarly inappropriate, certainly uncongenial enough to cause the author understandable "horror," it is nevertheless very useful to readers today, so accustomed to war that the word "soldier" no longer carries its special force. The novel designates Edward as the good soldier, as Edward has seen Imperial service in India. For Edward the narrator has the strongest affection and his only forgiveness. Of him, he says: "I guess that I myself, in my fainter way, come into the category of the passionate, of the headstrong, and the too-truthful. [This is his weirdest absurdity, the final, total blindness of infatuation, and self-infatuation.] For I can't conceal from myself the fact that I loved Edward Ashburnham—and that I love him because he was just myself. If I had had the courage and the virility and possibly also the physique of Edward Ashburnham I should, I fancy, have done much what he did. He seems to me like a large elder brother who took me out on several excursions and did many dashing things whilst I just watched him robbing the orchards, from a distance. And, you see, I am just as much of a sentimentalist as he was. . . ." Niggardly, niggardly half-truth!—for observe the impossible exceptions: courage, virility, physique! What sane man could except them? The narrator aspires to be "the good soldier," the con-

ventionally fine fellow, yet has no expectation of ever being in the least like him in any but his most passive features, and these working not at the level of sexuality, as with Edward, but of malformed friendship. To understand the exact significance here, we must turn, perhaps, to another book.

In his dedicatory epistle in the 1927 edition Ford says that he hoped *The Good Soldier* would do in English something of the sort that Maupassant's *Fort comme la mort* did in French. The remark is suggestive in the structural terms that Ford must have had in mind; I wish, however, to call attention to what may be the most accidental connection of theme. Of one of his characters Maupassant says: "He was an old intellectual who might have been, perhaps, a good soldier, and who could never console himself for what he had not been."

The vicious consolations of failure form our narrator. "Men," said D. H. Lawrence, "men can suck the heady juice of exalted self-importance from the bitter weed of failure—failures are usually the most conceited of men." Thus at the end of the novel we have forgotten the named good soldier, and we look instead at the nominated one, the narrator himself. His consolations are small: attendance upon the ill, "seeing them through"—for twelve years his wife, for the rest of his life the mad girl whom he fancies he might have loved; yet they give him a function, at least. This is the bitter, paltry destiny that, he thinks, life has forced upon him; thus he need never see himself as bitter or as paltry—or, indeed, as even telling a story.

And thus we come to the final circles of meaning, and these, like ripples round a stone tossed into a pool, never stop. For, finally, *The Good Soldier* describes a world that is without moral point, a narrator who suffers from the madness of moral inertia. "You ask how it feels to be a deceived husband. Just heavens, I do not know. It feels just nothing at all. It is not hell, certainly it is not necessarily heaven. So I suppose it is the intermediate stage. What do they call it? Limbo." *Accidia!* It is the dull hysteria of sloth that besets him, the sluggish insanity of defective love. "And, yes, from that day forward she always treated me and not Florence as if I were the invalid." "Why, even to me she had the air of being submissive—to me that not the youngest child will ever pay heed to. Yes, this is the saddest story. . . ." The saddest story? One may say this another way, and say the same thing. *The Good Soldier* is a comedy of humor, and the humor is phlegm.

It is in the comedy that Ford displays his great art. Irony, which makes no absolute commitments and can thus enjoy the advantage of many ambiguities of meaning and endless complexities of situation, is at the same time an evaluative mood, and, in a master, a sharp one. Perhaps the most astonishing achievement in this astonishing novel is the manner in which the author, while speaking through his simple, infatuated character, lets us know how to take his simplicity and his infatuation. This is comic genius. It shows, for example, in the characteristic figures, the rather simple-minded and, at the same time, grotesquely comic metaphors: a girl in a white dress in the dark is

"like a phosphorescent fish in a cupboard"; Leonora glances at the narrator, and he feels "as if for a moment a lighthouse had looked at me"; Leonora, boxing the ears of one of Edward's little mistresses, "was just striking the face of an intolerable universe." Figures such as these, and they occur in abundance, are the main ingredient in Ford's tone, and they are the subtle supports of such broader statements as this: "I should marry Nancy if her reason were ever sufficiently restored to let her appreciate the meaning of the Anglican marriage service. But it is probable that her reason will never be sufficiently restored to let her appreciate the meaning of the Anglican marriage service. Therefore I cannot marry her, according to the law of the land." This is a mode of comic revelation and evaluation less difficult, perhaps, than that which is evident in Ford's figures of speech, but to sustain it as he does, with never a rupture of intent, is the highest art.

Then there are the wonderfully comic events—little Mrs. Maidan dead in a trunk with her feet sticking out, as though a crocodile had caught her in its giant jaws, or the poor little mad girl saying to the narrator after weeks of silence: "Shuttlecocks!" There are the frequent moments when the author leads his characters to the most absurd anticlimaxes (as when, at the end of the fourth chapter, Leonora, in a frenzy of self-important drama, demands: "Don't you know that I'm an Irish Catholic?"), and then, with superb composure, Ford leads his *work* away from the pit of bathos into which his people have fallen. There is the incessant wit, of style and statement, the wittier for its

deceptive clothing of pathos. And, most important in this catalogue of comic devices, there is the covering symbolism of illness: characters who fancy that they suffer from "hearts," who do suffer defective hearts not, as they would have us believe, in the physiological but in the moral sense, and who are told about by a character who has no heart at all, and hence no mind. "I never," he tells us with his habitually comic solemnity, "I never was a patient anywhere." To which we may add: only always, in the madhouse of the world.

Is *The Good Soldier*, perhaps, a novelist's novel? Ford thought that it was his best work, and his judgment was always the judgment of the craftsman. Certainly it can tell us more about the nature of the novel than most novels or books about them: the material under perfect control, the control resulting in the maximum meaning, the style precisely evaluating that meaning. But if it is a kind of archetype of the processes of fiction, if, that is to say, it can demonstrate his craft to the craftsman, then it can also help all of us to read. And is it not true that, once we learn how to read, even if then we do not live more wisely, we can at least begin to be aware of why we have not? *The Good Soldier*, like all great works, has the gift and power of remorse.

Berkeley, California MARK SCHORER

NOTE. The first version of this essay appeared in an issue of *The Princeton University Library Chronicle* (April 1948) devoted to Ford Madox Ford. In a slightly altered form, it appeared again in *Horizon* (August 1949). This third version, of 1951, differs from the others chiefly in that today one need no longer make the kind of appeal for readers of Ford that was necessary only three years ago.

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 race-horse 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