The Saddest Story

“This is the saddest story I have ever heard.” So begins Ford Madox Ford’s 1915 novel *The Good Soldier: A Tale of Passion.* The narrator, John Dowell, and his wife Florence were rich Americans, living in Europe. They spent their summers at the spa town of Bad Nauheim, Germany, where Florence underwent therapy for her heart condition. In 1904, the Dowells had met an English couple, Edward and Leonora Ashburnham, at the spa. In the following summers, the two couples continued to meet there:

> 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 (p. 11).

The narrator immediately triggers our interest. He also alerts us that he may not completely understand the story he is about to tell us. Why is it the saddest story he has ever heard? Who told it to him? We shall quickly find out that he was one of the main characters in the story. He directly experienced most of its events, but was apparently quite unaware of their causes. His understanding was pieced together later from what others told him, and may not be correct. We may have to figure out what happened for ourselves.

This posting considers the story and its context. It describes the complex relationship between two couples in Europe in the years leading up to the outbreak of World War I. It shows a way of life that was falling apart, and a world wherein one was no longer governed by any general morality, but simply sought what one desired.

Outline

A brief summary of the plot of *The Good Soldier,* arranged chronologically rather than in the order of John Dowell's narration, follows. This outline is far simpler than the actual plot, but it will provide some hooks on which to hang my comments.

1892: Edward Ashburnham, a landed English gentleman, marries Leonora Powys, an Irish Catholic. Their marriage turns out to be unhappy, and Edward, according to Leonora, has affairs with other women, some involving much loss of money. In order to improve their financial situation, the Ashburnhams rent out the family home, and go to India where Edward takes up a commission with the British Army.

1900: John Dowell, a rich American, marries Florence Hurlbird, and takes her to Europe for their honeymoon. During the voyage across the Atlantic, Florence suffers a crisis of the heart during a violent storm. Her physicians forbid any further sea voyage and any sexual relations with her husband. The Dowells wander through Europe, spending their summers at Bad Nauheim, where Florence is treated for her heart condition. The following is a postcard from Bad Nauheim from around 1914:

1904: Edward's affairs have continued, the most recent of

which has involved Maisie Maidan, a young woman with a heart problem, and the wife of one of Edward's fellow-officers. The Ashburnhams come to Bad Nauheim for treatment of Edward's "heart" disease, and bring Maisie with them. The Dowells and the Ashburnhams meet at the spa. Soon after their meeting they visit the nearby town of Marburg which has significant associations to Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation. During the visit Florence flirts with Edward, and upsets Leonora by insulting the Irish Catholics. On their return to Bad Nauheim, they find that Maisie has died of a heart attack. .

Summer 1913: The two couples have been meeting in Bad Nauheim each summer for 9 years. This year Nancy Rufford, the 21-year old ward of the Ashburnhams, has joined them. Edward appears to be falling in love with Nancy and accompanies her to an evening concert in the spa grounds. Florence later goes to join them. She returns very upset, goes to her room, and dies, apparently of a heart attack.

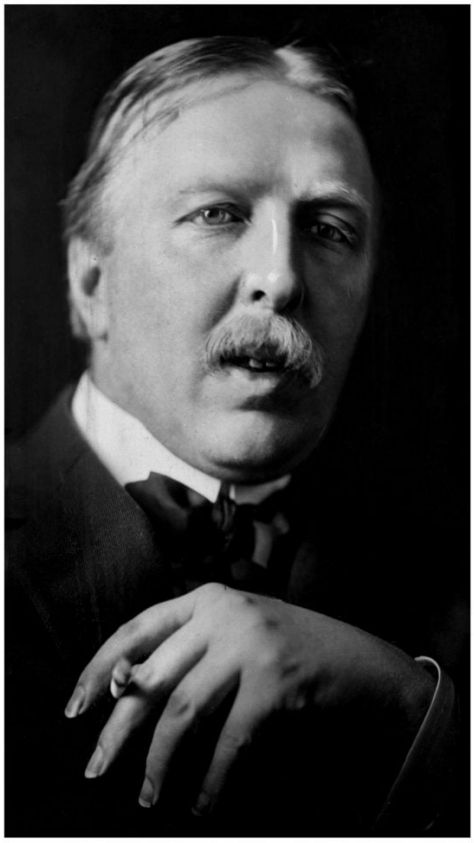
Autumn 1913: John Dowell inherits a great deal of money from the Hurlbird family. He is invited to visit the Ashburnhams in England. Leonora informs him that Florence's death was a suicide. For years she had been carrying on an affair with Edward without John being aware. On the night of her death, unobserved by Edward or Nancy, Florence had heard Edward tell Nancy that she was the person he cared most for in the world. She was devastated to realize that her affair with Edward was over.

End of 1913: Edward has become unhappily and madly in love with Nancy. He is starting to behave irrationally. Leonora decides that Nancy should sleep with her husband to save his sanity. Nancy comes to Edward's bedroom but he rejects her. He decides to send Nancy away to India to be with her father, but hopes that she will remain in love with him. Edward bids farewell to Nancy at the train station without betraying any emotion. A few days later, Nancy sends a telegram from

Brindisi in Italy, where she is about to board the steamer to India, saying that she is having a wonderful time. Edward believes that she no longer loves him and commits suicide. Nancy hears of his suicide and goes mad.

1914: Leonora marries again. John Dowell buys the Ashburnham home. He goes to India and brings Nancy back. She remains insane.

The Passionate Author



Photograph of Ford Madox Hueffer by E. O. Hoppe, 1912

The story of the novel is complexly intertwined with the life of its author (Saunders, 1996). Ford was born in 1873 as Ford Hueffer. His maternal grandfather was the Pre-Raphaelite painter Ford Madox Brown. After his father, the German-born music critic for the London *Times*, died in 1889, Ford left

school without going on to university and became a writer. One of his early books was a biography of his grandfather. Ford collaborated with Joseph Conrad, wrote reviews and published many novels, the most popular of which were the three books about Catherine Howard and Henry VIII, *The Fifth Queen*.

Ford had eloped with Elsie Martindale, a school classmate, in 1894. After several years, their marriage became unhappy, and Ford apparently began to have affairs with other women. One of his affairs in the early years of the new century may have been with Elsie's younger sister, Mary, who was far more vivacious than his serious wife. Succumbing to these family tensions, Ford went to Germany for treatment at various spas for depression, anxiety and agoraphobia. He later recalled

> The illness was purely imaginary; that made it none the better. It was enhanced by wickedly unskilful doctoring. … But the memory of those years is of one uninterrupted mental agony (Ford, 1932, p. 261).

In 1908 Ford founded the *English Review*, a literary journal which published work by various established authors with whom he had become acquainted – Hardy, Conrad, Galsworthy, James – and supported the early careers of Joyce, Pound, and Lawrence. His colleague in this endeavor was Arthur Marwood. The finances of the review were precarious, and Ford was forced to sell it in 1909. In addition to the monetary problems, Marwood had apparently made improper advances to Elsie, and Ford could no longer trust him.

In 1908 Ford began an overt affair with the novelist Violet Hunt, which lasted until the war. Elsie refused to give him a divorce. In 1910 Ford went to Germany to obtain German citizenship on the basis of his father's birth, and then to arrange a German divorce. Although this plan did not work out, Ford returned to England and introduced Violet as Mrs. Hueffer. Elsie sued and Ford was briefly imprisoned in 1911 for bigamy.

Ford published *The Good Soldier* in 1915. He subsequently served in the British army in France, an experience which later led to the *Parade's End* sequence of novels (1924-1928). After the war, Ford became involved with the artist Stella Bowen. He changed his name to Ford Maddox Ford in 1919. One reason was that he disliked the German name. Another was perhaps that he could live together with Stella under the new name. A new edition of *The Good Soldier* published in 1927 was dedicated to Stella Ford.

Ford was a man who easily became passionately involved with women. In *The Good Soldier*, John Dowell remarks

> … the real fierceness of desire, the real heat of a passion long continued and withering up the soul of a man is the craving for identity with the woman that he loves. He desires to see with the same eyes, to touch with the same sense of touch, to hear with the same ears, to lose his identity, to be enveloped, to be supported. For, whatever may be said of the relation of the sexes, there is no man who loves a woman that does not desire to come to her for the renewal of his courage, for the cutting asunder of his difficulties. And that will be the mainspring of his desire for her. We are all so afraid, we are all so alone, we all so need from the outside the assurance of our own worthiness to exist.
> So, for a time, if such a passion come to fruition, the man will get what he wants. He will get the moral support, the encouragement, the relief from the sense of loneliness, the assurance of his own worth. But these things pass away; inevitably they pass away as the shadows pass across sundials. It is sad, but it is so. (pp.92-93)

An Unreliable Narrator

John Dowell's telling of the story is like that of someone recalling the past, often digressing to explain the background of some person or event, often going back over what he has

already described but from a different perspective. It is remarkably similar to the way in which Ford wrote *Return to Yesterday*, his 1932 set of autobiographical essays. His essay on *Some Cures* begins with the different therapies he underwent for his agoraphobia, but soon digresses to recall breakfasts with John Galsworthy, the humane way to slaughter pigs, and an anecdote about Émile Zola in London.

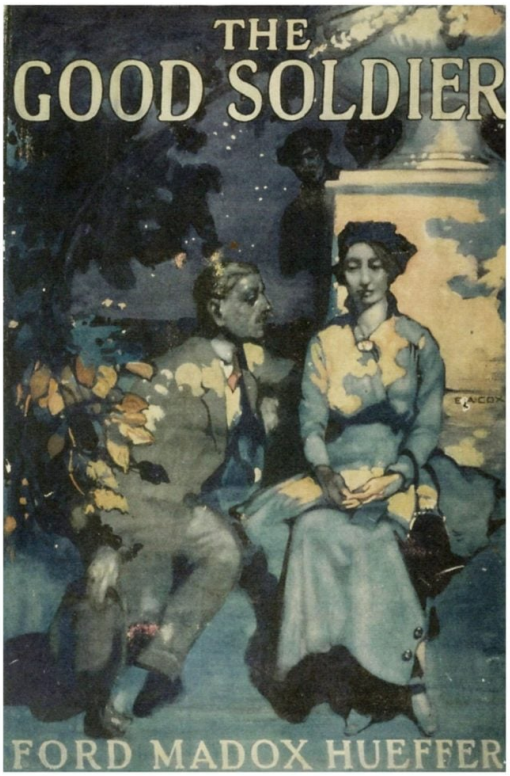
Ford called his approach to a story-telling "Impressionism," describing the technique in two issues of *Poetry and Drama*, published in 1914 (and reprinted in the 2010 Oxford edition of the *The Good Soldier*). The idea was to intrigue the reader:

> For the first business of Impressionism is to produce an impression, and the only way in literature to produce an impression is to awaken interest. And, in a sustained argument, you can only keep interest awakened by keeping alive, by whatever means you may have at your disposal, the surprise of your reader. You must state your argument; you must illustrate it, and then you must stick in something that appears to have nothing whatever to do with either subject or illustration, so that the reader will exclaim: 'What the devil is the fellow driving at?' And then you must go on in the same way – arguing, illustrating and startling and arguing, startling and illustrating – until at the very end your contentions will appear like a ravelled skein. And then, in the last few lines, you will draw towards you the master string of that seeming confusion, and the whole pattern of the carpet, the whole design of the net-work will be apparent. (p. 208)

Though Ford called his technique "Impressionism," the only thing it really shares with painterly Impressionism is the idea that "A picture should come out of its frame and seize the spectator." Ford's approach is essentially Modernist and is more related to Cubism, which was developing at that time in the visual arts. This technique fits very well with cinematic adaptation, where flashbacks, rapid cuts, and

shifting perspectives are natural (Harris, 2015). The BBC adaptation of the novel (Billington, 1981) is surprisingly effective.

However, John Dowell's digressive approach to the story is not his most striking aspect as a narrator. Much of what his tells us is second-hand, pieced together from what others told him. He, himself, is remarkably lacking in perception. We have very right therefore to doubt his interpretation of the events. He is an "unreliable narrator" (Booth, 1961, pp. 155-159). Such a narrator considers the story from a perspective that differs from that of the actual author. Unreliable narrators come in all sorts: some are simply unaware, others are deceptive (Kermode, 1974; Segal, 2015). The reader is left with uncertainty: we must make up our own minds about what happened and why, and we shall never know for sure. The unreliable narrator emphasizes our epistemological uncertainty (Hynes, 1961). Even though we may be fairly confident about the external world, we can never know what is going on in the mind of another. "I don't know" recurs like a refrain throughout the book.



The central event of the book is the death of Florence, who had gone to bring Edward and Nancy back from the concert in the park. According to her husband, she was upset to hear that Edward considered Nancy, and not herself, the person that he loved most in the world. The cover of the first edition of the book illustrated this episode (right). John Dowell's description is

> Anyhow, there you have the picture, the immensely tall trees, elms most of them, towering and feathering away up into the black mistiness that trees seem to gather about them at night; the silhouettes of those two upon the seat; the beams of light coming from the Casino, the woman all in black peeping with fear behind the tree-trunk. It is melodrama; but I can't help it. (pp. 89-90)

Yet John Dowell was not there. He only heard about what Edward told Nancy several months later from Edward. He did not know what happened. He only heard several months later from Leonora that Florence had been carrying on an affair with Edward for the preceding nine years. He initially had another explanation for why Florence was upset: that she saw her husband with a man named "Bagshawe," who was telling him about Florence's other sexual affairs with a person known as "Jimmy."

John concluded that Florence's intense anxiety brought on a heart attack. She was found dead in her room with a bottle of amyl nitrate heart medication in her hand. Later he came to believe that she did not have a heart problem, and supposes that she actually took prussic acid. This poison was known to Ford. His father-in-law, William Martindale, had committed suicide in this manner. During the dark years of his depression, Ford himself carried around a bottle of prussic acid. Supposedly his affair with Violet Hunt began in 1908 when she took away his bottle and suggested that he try "the old traditional way of comfort" (Saunders, 1996, p. 285; Abdalla, 2015).

However, we may question John's account of Florence's death. Florence's uncle had recently died and left her a large amount of money. This was likely why she was dressed in mourning, and therefore unobserved by either Nancy or Edward on the night of the concert. After Florence's death, Florence's personal money and the inheritance from her uncle all came to John. John's description of these bequests (pp. 152-4) comes long after the description of his wife's death. Florence's uncle wished that a significant part of his money be used to found an institute for patients with heart disorders. John describes the legal confusion about this part of the will. Despite his claim that he does not need the money, it seems clear that none of it will ever go to any such institute.

Was the death of Florence something other than suicide? Was it murder? There was motive enough – John stood to gain immensely from her death. Poole (1990) has interpreted the story of *The Good Soldier* along these lines. Nothing is for sure. In an interesting aside John Dowell remarks

> I have, I am aware, told this story in a very rambling way so that it may be difficult for anyone to find their path through what may be a sort of maze. I cannot help it. I have stuck to my idea of being in a country cottage with a silent listener, hearing between the gusts of the wind and amidst the noises of the distant sea, the story as it comes. And, when one discusses an affair – a long, sad affair – one goes back, one goes forward. One remembers points that one has forgotten and one explains them all the more minutely since one recognizes that one has forgotten to mention them in their proper places and that one may have given, by omitting them, a false impression. I console myself with thinking that this is a real story and that, after all, real stories are probably told best in the way a person telling a story would tell them. They will then seem most real. (p. 154)

Here John Dowell is using the techniques of literary Impressionism. Perhaps he is lapsing into the persona of the

novel’s author Ford Madox Ford. Or perhaps what he is telling us is actually a work of fiction, a story to excuse and cover up what actually happened.

Life at the Spa

At the turn of the 20th century it was fashionable for the rich to spend time in the spa towns of Europe, undergoing various kinds of therapy for various ailments, both real and imaginary. Water therapy has a long history (Mihina & Anderson, 2010; van Tubergen & van der Linden, 2002). In Europe many towns with access to natural springs developed spas, the term coming from the town of Spa in Belgium, which had been famous for its curative waters as far back as the Middle Ages.

Much of the story of The *Good Soldier* takes place at the spa town of Bad Nauheim. Ford stayed there with Violet Hunt in August 1910. The spa in Bad Nauheim underwent a striking Jugendstil renovation between 1901 and 1911. The following photographs are from a recent album.

The actual therapeutic effectiveness of spa therapy is controversial. Although it can improve a patient’s feeling of wellbeing, spa therapy likely does not change the underlying disease process (e.g. Verhagen et al., 2015). The spa may be a source of rest and relaxation, but it is not a place for cure or care.

Spas are perhaps symptomatic of a decadent society, wherein the rich waste their time in pampered luxury. Times have changed. Unfortunately, we still have the idle rich and we still have spas.

Something evil in the day.

Soon after they meet, the Dowells and the Ashburnhams go on a day-trip to Marburg, a small town not far from Bad Nauheim. The town's picturesque castle is illustrated in the following postcard from 1909:

Marburg Castle was the site of a 1529 meeting between Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli. The purpose was to develop a unified set of principles for the new Protestant belief. Unfortunately they could not agree on the nature of the Eucharist. They both disagreed with the Roman Catholics position that the bread and wine served during the celebration of the Holy Supper actually became the body and blood of Christ: the outer attributes remained the same but the inner substances changed – "transubstantiation." However, they could not agree on a new beleif. Zwingli and the Calvinists believed that the Eucharist was symbolic and that the bread and wine did not change. Luther believed in "consubstantiation" – that the consecrated bread and wine were both bread and wine and body and blood of Christ. Documents at Marburg Castle describe this major disagreement at the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. .

The term "Protestant" comes from another document. After the

1521 *Edict of Worms* had condemned Luther's ideas as heretical (as covered in my previous posting *Here I Stand*), another congress published the *First Edict of Speyer* in 1526, which granted the member states of the Holy Roman Empire some freedom in their choice of belief. A *Second Edict of Speyer* revoked this freedom in 1529. Various princes and leaders in the Empire quickly issued the *Protest at Speyer* objecting to this second edict. This Protest maintained the right of the princes and their subjects to determine the way in which they practised their religion, and asserted that Christian belief should derive solely from the scriptures. This all sounds very idealistic, but the protest goes on to affirm the edict's condemnation of Anabaptists as heretical and urges that they be brought to trial and executed.

The *Protest at Speyer* may have led to the name "Protestant," but it does not really establish the core beliefs of Protestantism. For Lutherans, these were enshrined in the *Augsburg Confession* of 1530. Over succeeding years, other Protestant factions each wrote their own Articles of Belief.

If anything, the Colloquy of Marburg demonstrated clearly that there was to be no unity in belief. The legacy of the Reformation was one of strife. Against the Roman Church and ultimately among themselves.

During the visit to Marburg Castle, Florence Dowell is acting as tour guide. She gets her history wrong but she is enthusiastic. She points to a documents from the Colloquy of Marburg:

> She continued, looking up into Captain Ashburnham's eyes: "It's because of that piece of paper that you're honest, sober, industrious, provident, and clean-lived. If it weren't for that piece of paper you'd be like the Irish or the Italians or the Poles, but particularly the Irish. . . ."
> And she laid one finger upon Captain Ashburnham' s wrist.

> I was aware of something treacherous, something frightful, something evil in the day. I can't define it and can't find a simile for it. It wasn't as if a snake had looked out of a hole. No, it was as if my heart had missed a beat. It was as if we were going to run and cry out; all four of us in separate directions, averting our heads. In Ashburnham's face I know that there was absolute panic. I was horribly frightened and then I discovered that the pain in my left wrist was caused by Leonora's clutching it. (p 40).

What was the evil? Leonora runs out of the castle with John. She asks him why he does not see what is going on. Later John would understand that this was the beginning of Florence's affair with Edward, but at the time he was completely unaware. Leonora realizes John's naiveté, and claims that she felt insulted because she is Irish-Catholic. John is relieved – this can easily be solved by an apology.

Perhaps, the evil that John sensed was the complete breakdown of society's codes of sexual morality. Green (1981) says that *The Good Soldier* portrays "a bitter, nostalgic vision of a world in which a sense of responsibility has been whittled down to a façade of respectability" (p 94), "a world whose only certainty is its lack of moral architecture' (p 102). John wonders

> 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. (pp 16-17).

But surely this was not the evil that was felt on that

afternoon in Marburg? The reader senses some deeper moral horror, something worse than the shocking sexual goings-on, worse even than murder, if that was indeed the cause of the deaths of Maisie on that very day, and of Florence nine years later.

Protestantism may have played a role in this meaninglessness. Perhaps the Protestant Reformation had fostered individual ambition at the expense of the general good. Ford enjoyed the easy Catholicism of Southern Germany, and hated the striving Protestantism of the Prussian North (Preece, 2015). A year after the Marburg visit, the authoritarian Prussians would precipitate the First World War.

This then is perhaps the real evil that we sense. This is why everything seems to happen on August 4th: Florence's birthday, her elopement with John Dowell, the meeting between the Dowells and the Ashburnhams, and the visit to Nauheim. Great Britain declared war on Germany on August 4, 1914, when Germany rejected an ultimatum to remove its troops from Belgium.

World War I was the horror lurking under what happened at Bad Nauheim and Marburg. Society danced its way through sexual desire and monetary greed. It focused on its own imaginary ailments and paid no attention to what was happening in the world. Society was oblivious: death was in the air and no one noticed. Within five years 18 million people would be killed.

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