

### MR. WELLS IN THE LAND OF UZ\*

THIS is the Book of Job in twentieth-century setting, with the essential problem unchanged by the accumulated knowledge of three thousand years. Mr. Wells even endeavors to provide a repetition of the arguments and characters of the original 'novel': the nagging wife, the three comfortless comforters, the interpellation of Elihu, the reply of God to his impeachment by the spirit of man. But the plot and dialogue are no more peculiar to the skeptic of Nineveh than to the skeptic of Norfolk. It is as old as the hills, and as simple and inscrutable: the reality which lies at the background of all man's feverish activities, which man, in his feverish activities, would fain forget. Misfortune — unexpected, paralyzing, seemingly undeserved — falls out of the blue sky upon one of the family of mankind. This misfortune is of so overwhelming a character that the temptation is strong to 'curse God and die.' The protagonist refuses to curse God and die. He is driven back by his pain and misery into consideration of all sentient pain and misery. He is driven by the senseless stupidity of his suffering to consider the senseless stupidity of all suffering. At the awful hour of disgrace and imminent death, with — more bitter than death — the knowledge that his life-work is about to be destroyed, he defies a like despair, acceptance, and the 'opium' of all false anodynes. He cleaves his way through mist and brambles to a faith partly based on reason, partly on a kind of mystical apprehension of the 'undying fire' in man. He is answered by God — in a vision out of the whirlwind — and that answer, though irrational, is a vindication. And the argu-

ment ends — in the West as in the East — with prosperity restored.

Job Huss has built up a school which is both good in itself and a living example to others of how good can be attained. Into this school he has thrown all the energy and sacrifice of a lifetime. Fever falls on it and kills two of his boys. A fire on the last day of term kills two others. At the same time all his fortune disappears with a defaulting solicitor. His only son is reported dead in the war. He is stricken down with a growth diagnosed as cancer. His three 'friends' arrive on the day of his operation, to break the news to him that he is expected to resign, and that the school is to be entrusted to one of them, an under-master, who teaches science as technical chemistry, rather than as a subject of liberal education. They tell him that his work is a failure, and at first the conversation is concerned with the familiar lines of Mr. Wells's impeachment of contemporary educational ideas. But it speedily passes to impeachment of contemporary religious ideas. Against the acceptance of reason directing the world, Mr. Wells, through the mouth of his spokesman, exhibits the gigantic irrationality of the evolutionary process, leading nowhither but to an ultimate frozen universe. Against the acceptance of goodness directing the world, he exhibits the gigantic misery of the evolutionary process, the agony and bloody sweat which lie behind even the seeming outward serenity of all visible and beautiful things. He tosses angrily aside the age-long arguments — that he has brought his misery upon himself, that the natural world exhibits order, beneficence, and design, that another life will compensate for the sufferings of this one, and reveal the goodness and intelligence of it all. He will have nothing to do with the

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so-called 'penetration of the barrier,' and the grotesque reports of a grotesque existence beyond, as 'revealed' by the investigations of a Conan Doyle or an Oliver Lodge. Moreover, the desire for the only absolutely good thing that immortality might bring — the restoration of loved to lover — is for him, as for so many throughout the centuries — inseparably bound up with the body. He has no use for a reunion of disembodied shades in the vasty halls of death: and in his rejection of light or hope in such a shadow world he is back again with the author of the Book of Job. The only immortality he can see worth having is the 'resurrection of the flesh': and that he finds a thing incredible. 'Dearly and bitterly did I love my son, and what is it that my heart most craves for now? His virtues? No! His ambitions? No! none of these things. But for a certain queer flush among his freckles, for a kind of high crack in his voice . . . a certain absurd hopefulness in his talk — the sound of his footsteps, a little halt there was in the rhythm of them.' 'There is no personality in hope and honor and righteousness and truth,' he declares in an echo of the philosopher of *Rasselas*. 'My son has gone. He has gone forevermore. The pain may some day go.' Man the universal, not the individual, alone lives: 'a tragic rebel in this same world and in no other.'

Doctor Elihu Barrack, accepting all his destructive criticism, urges him to surrender and contentment. The world process goes on; irrational, cruel man must adjust himself to the world process, find out its rules, conform to or dodge those rules to attain happiness, and avoid pain in his bleak and difficult days. It is the old argument of conformity, addressed now not to the iron, irrational, or capricious will of God, but to the iron, irrational, or capricious

process of a meaningless universe. But Mr. Wells refuses to accept this acquiescence as fiercely as he refuses false theories and remedies. He repeats in passionate and poetic form the impeachment and defense of 'natural evolution' by the spirit of man in Huxley's famous Romanes lecture. In the strength of that 'undying fire' which is in man, which is, indeed, God working in man, he will not only condemn that process in thought. He will work to overthrow it in action. He will work to bend and conquer and subdue it by man's (or God's) unconquerable mind. In the fiery resolution of that mind ignorance shall be destroyed by knowledge, fear by courage, forecast of inevitable death in a dying universe by resolve that the God in man shall be enlarged and that God shall live forever. The blind, brutal gods of chance and necessity shall be overthrown. The Son of Man, in the consummation of all things, shall be set upon the throne of his Father.

This spirit that comes into life — it is more like a person than a thing, and so I call it He. And He is not a feature, nor an aspect of things, but a selection among things. . . . He seizes upon and brings out and confirms all that is generous in the natural impulses of the mind. He condemns cruelty and all evil. . . . I will not pretend to explain what I cannot explain. It may be that God is as yet only foreshadowed in life. . . . To me it seems that the creative desire that burns in me is a thing different in its nature from the blind process of matter, is a force running contrariwise to the power of confusion. . . . But this I do know, that once it is lit in a man, then his mind is a light henceforth. It rules his conscience with compelling power. It summons him to live the residue of his days working and fighting for the unity and release and triumph of mankind. He may be mean still, and cowardly and vile still, but he will know himself for what he is. . . . Some ancient phrases live marvelously. Within my heart, *I know that my Redeemer liveth.*

Here, then, in most attractive form is Mr. Wells's 'Apologia' for his faith, allusions to which are scattered through half-a-dozen of his latest volumes and essays. No one, after reading this, could say that the writer does not face the realities. Indeed the negative arguments are recounted in sombre and powerful rhetoric. That faith is compounded in part of reason, in part from a defiant act of will, in part again from a mystical apprehension which gives to its assertion something of the warmth and color associated with the older creeds. It is interesting to note that the answer to Job Huss in this vision of God is exactly the opposite to that of God from the whirlwind to 'this that darkeneth counsel with words without knowledge' in the Eastern parable. There the assertion is of man's ignorance and God's incomprehensible ways, 'Where wast thou when I laid the foundation of the earth?': how can you judge the power that makes strange sea monsters to wallow unheeded on the ocean floor, and sets the wild ass free and makes his house in the wilderness, and causes the ostrich to forget that the wild beast will break her eggs, and sendeth rain on to the desert 'where no man is'? But Mr. Wells's God reveals the delight and laughter of the world, the nobleness and effort in the struggle of man toward intelligence, the little lovely things of life which are still his conquest and treasure: the freshness of the summer morning: the embrace of the lover: joy in honor and a son clean and straight: the play of happy children: the 'first mouthful of roast, red beef on the frosty day and the deep draught of good ale.'

Criticism would not challenge Mr. Wells's sincerity, which is transparent, nor his logic, which is irrefutable. It might rather question his enormous faith in increase of knowledge as a

remedy for the ills of humanity. 'Salvation through teaching of history' is Mr. Job Huss's watchword: to which he adds philosophy and the biological sciences. But teach all men history and philosophy and the biological sciences (and heaven knows the need of such a reform is grave enough): you have no guaranty that such knowledge will insure a high ethical standard or retrieve the vast failure that man has made of his world. Mr. Huss, after his recovery, finds health restored, his fortune repaid, his son alive again, his school returned to him. He sits down to day-dream still further the improvement of his school. He plans a schoolhouse with a map corridor to join the picture gallery and the concert hall with maps to show the growth and succession of Empire; and ethnological exhibits with displays of models of primitive and developing peoples. This view of a sublimated Imperial Institute to teach the history of men might sound almost ironical if Mr. Wells was not so deadly in earnest. Knowledge, though an end in itself, is not conduct: and although a stimulus to the imagination, is not necessarily a guide to right action. Men are not made unselfish, modest, and sincere by the use of globes. Nor can any reason or any acquaintance with past or present affairs enchain 'those giants — the passion and the pride of man.' In part this is recognized by the letter at the conclusion, addressed to the schoolmaster by one of his old pupils from the war. 'There are some of us here who feel almost as though they were your sons: if you don't and can't give us that sort of love, it does n't alter the fact that there are men out here who think of you as they'd like to think of their fathers. . . . You've taught hundreds of us to stick it, and now you owe it to us to stick it yourself.' 'I have had dull boys, and intractable

boys,' says Mr. Huss, 'but nearly all have gone into the world gentlemen, broad-minded, good-mannered, understanding and unselfish masters of self.' But these affections and determinations are not necessarily generated by teaching that mankind is 'in one living story with the reindeer men and the Egyptian priests, with the soldiers of Cæsar and the alchemists of Spain.' Mr. Wells is coming perilously near that 'training of character,' upon which he has poured such wrath in previous utterances. Ignorance is bad in itself and must be fought and conquered. But bad also are the deadly sins — anger, envy, sloth, avarice, pride, cruelty, concupiscence; and knowledge itself possesses no secret which can subdue these scourges which are responsible for most of the misery which can afflict mankind. Mr. Huss in his vision of the future sees man shaking off the shackles which bind him to this planet, and voyaging from star to star. But such voyaging can carry with it but little tranquillity if he takes from one planet to another the lust and cholera and greed which torment and render futile his little space of days. Will Mr. Wells's undying fire in man make for their destruction as much as for the mastery over matter,

the removal of disease, the creation of a whole renovated nature which his hero sees in his prophetic vision? Mr. Wells — nothing if not definitely honest — has tried the solution in his pilgrimage through thought to his present religion. At one time it was to be accomplished by the overthrow of the old superstitions. At another by free libraries and the irrigation of the world with cheap literature. In *Mankind in the Making* a race of Samurai, ascetic, devoted, sinking self in the common good as did once the Jesuits, were to carry on the higher government of humanity. In the *Passionate Friends* the ideal was to be promoted by a vast scheme of international publications, in which each nation of the world was to know all about the others. Now he has turned from the old to the young: from the stagnant present to a future still alive. 'Education' is to form the key to open that door which has remained so stubbornly bolted. Let him continue in his search. All his record of it is stimulating, suggestive, and sincere. It is a search in which he is engaged with all the best of his generation, in the effort to rebuild amid the ruins of a world. But not by knowledge alone shall that world be saved.

The Nation

# THE MIGHT-HAVE-BEEN

BY WALTER DE LA MARE

PARCHED were my lips with drought of  
noon,

Broken my feet, in broken shoon,  
The sun shone fierce and leonine  
On the salt, salt sea.

But fell at length cool eventide  
On barren wave, spread waste and  
wide,

On spike-grassed, whispering dunes of  
sand,

And soft-ebbed twilight on that land —  
The land of Might-have-been.

Chill sighed the wind on cheek and  
hair,

A region bare and bleak, yet fair,  
Fair with its sparse-strewn, dry-root  
flowers,

Its siren-singing haunted bowers,  
The silence of those long, long hours  
That stuff no mortal year.

Of silver and untroubled sheen  
Hung in the West's crystalline green  
A planet ne'er by mortal seen,  
Named 'Never,' sweet and clear.

A thin brook gushed o'er stones  
hard by,

'Forsaken' it babbled; lone was I;  
Night's oriental canopy  
Tented the eastern sky.

Shade that I was in dream waylaid,  
Benighted, and yet unafraid,  
I sate me there, all sorrows fled,  
And whispered to the sea

The New Statesman

The thousand songs I had hoped to  
sing

When I in earth was wandering,  
Whereof, alas! poor words could bring  
Naught but a deadened echoing  
Of 'Benedicite!'

Sweeter than any note men hear  
When, latticed in by moonbeams clear,  
The bird of the darkness to its fere  
Tells out love's mystery,  
Rose in my throat and poured its  
dew —

That hymn of praise — my being  
through;

Gave peace to a heart that never knew  
Peace until then, I ween.

No listener mine, mayhap; but ne'er  
Trolled happier wight in heaven fair  
To a lyre of golden string.

Naught but a soundless voice was I  
Beneath that deep, unvoyaged sky,  
Silence and silence telling o'er  
What makes the stars to sing.

O vanity of age to mourn  
What youth in folly left forlorn!  
Doth not earth's strange and lovely  
mean

Only, 'Come, see, O son of man,  
All that you hoped, the naught you  
can —

The glory that might have been.'