

# THE NEW BOOKS

## Joan and Peter

**H. G. WELLS** puts forth a new theology and a new social program in each successive book. But as he writes more volumes than there are different kinds of religion and politics he sometimes has to revert to a former scheme. When he wrote "God the Invisible King" the critics were not slow to point out the inconsistency of the adoption of kingship as the symbol of deity by a man who detests kings and wants to do away with them all. So stung by these criticisms or more likely because his agile mind has moved on to another viewpoint he has, in his new novel, *Joan and Peter*, run to the opposite extreme and presents a conception of a most democratic and modern God, in fact a visible business man instead of an invisible king. Peter, who is smashed up by the fall of his airplane, dreams in delirium that he visits the office of God whom he finds behind a most untidy desk, cluttered up with

grubby test tubes and bottles at which the Lord God had apparently been trying over a new element. The windows had not been cleaned for ages. They were dark with spiders' webs, they crawled with a buzzing nightmare of horrible and unmeaning life. It was a most unbusiness-like office.

Peter from his pallet criticizes the Lord for his mismanagement of the universe in the plainest language:

"Here was I, sir, and millions like me, with a clear promise of life and freedom! And what are we now? Bruises, red bones, dead bodies! This German Kaiser fellow—an ass, sir, a perfect ass, gnawing a great hole in my shoulder! He and his son, stuffing themselves with a Blut-Wurst made out of all our lives and happiness! What does it mean, sir? Has it gone entirely out of your control? Look at this room, consider it—as a general manager's room. No decency. No order. Everywhere the dust of ages, muck indescribable, bacterial. . . . Look at that beastly spider in the corner! Why do you suffer all these cruel and unclean things?"

"You don't like it?" said the Lord God, without any sign either of apology or explanation.

"No," said Peter.

"Then change it," said the Lord God, nodding his head as one who should say "got you there."

"But how are we to change it?"

"If you have no will to change it, you have no right to criticize it," said the Lord God, leaning back with the weariness of one who has had to argue with each generation from Job onward, precisely the same objections and precisely the same arguments.

"After all," said the Lord God, giving Peter no time to speak further; "after all, you are three-and-twenty, Mr. Peter Stubland, and you've been pretty busy complaining of me and everything between me and you, your masters, pastors, teachers, and so forth, for the last half-dozen years. Meanwhile, is your own record good? Positive achievements, forgive me, are still to seek. You've been nearly drunk several times, you've soiled yourself with a lot of very cheap and greedy love-making—I gave you something beautiful there anyhow, and you knew that while you spoilt it—you've been a vigorous member of the consuming class, and really, you've got nothing clear and planned, nothing at all. You complain of lack of order; where's the order in your own mind? If I was the hot-tempered old autocrat some of you people pretend I am, I should have been tickling you up with a thunderbolt long ago. But I happen to have this democratic fad as badly as any one—Free Will is what they used to call it—and so I leave you to work out your own salvation. And if I leave you alone then I have to leave that other—that other Mr. Toad at Potsdam alone. He tries me, I admit, almost to the miracle pitch at times with the tone of his everlasting prepaid telegrams—but one has to be fair. What is sauce for the goose is sauce for the Kaiser. I've got to leave you all alone if I leave one alone. Don't you see that? In spite of the mess you are in. So don't blame me. Don't blame me. There isn't a thing in the whole of this concern of mine that Man can't control if only he chooses to control it. It's arranged like that. There's a lot more system here than you suspect, only it's too ingenious for you to see. It's yours to com-

mand. If you want a card index for the world—well, get a card index, I won't prevent you. If you don't like my spiders, kill my spiders. I'm not conceited about them. If you don't like the Kaiser, hang him, assassinate him. Why don't you abolish Kings. You could. But it was your sort, with your cheap and quick efficiency schemes, who set up Saul—in spite of my protests—ages ago. . . . Humanity either makes or breeds or tolerates all its own afflictions, great and small. Not my doing. Take Kings and Courts. Take dungheaps and flies. It's astonishing you people haven't killed off all the flies in the world long ago. They do no end of mischief, and it would be perfectly easy to do. They're purely educa-



French Official, from Paul Thompson

H. G. Wells (right), author of "Joan and Peter," in a trench somewhere in France

tional. Purely. Even as you lie in hospital, there they are buzzing within an inch of your nose and landing on your poor forehead to remind you of what a properly organized humanity could do for its own comfort. But there's men in this world who want me to act as a fly-paper, simply because they are too lazy to get one for themselves. My dear Mr. Peter! If people haven't taught you properly, teach yourself. If they don't know enough, find out. It's all here."

This fantastic passage gives the theme of the volume which is the need of a new type of education. The disappointments and reverses of the war have done what nothing less was able to do, shaken the confidence of the English in their traditional form of education and they are now, in the midst of the conflict, engaged in reconstructing their schools of all grades to make them equal in efficiency those of America and Germany. *Joan and Peter* is hardly more of a novel than Xenophon's "Cyropaedia" or Rousseau's "Emile." It is a tract for the times. To be sure it contains all the customary ingredients of Wells's later and larger novels, travel, imperial politics, illicit love, satirical sketches of contemporaries and bits of autobiography but these are subordinated to the purpose of the book, the criticism of British schools and suggestions for their improvement. It is not written with the emotional power of "Mr. Britling," but contains some of the author's best pages both in the way of characterization and of analysis. He gives descriptions of schools that will match Dickens's "Dotheboys Hall."

The plan of the book—it could not be called a plot—is this: a colonial adminis-

trator, Oswald, comes back from his work in Africa full of zeal for the mission of the British Empire as an agent of civilization and eager for the training of men competent to meet such responsibilities. He finds himself made the guardian of an orphan boy and girl and sets out to find schools and colleges for them in accordance with his ideas of what education is needed by the modern world. But he can find none in all England. The old schools are snobbish and conservative, the new schools are faddish and pretentious.

Much of his criticism will apply as well to America, for while our schools have been superior to the English in the adoption of modern methods and equipment they have also failed to provide the younger generation with a working knowledge of foreign countries and of America's relation to the world at large. The war has shown us this defect and we are now doing some hasty cramming to make up for it. But we must undertake the reconstruction of our educational system to meet the needs of America as a world power. *Joan and Peter* will help to rouse the American people to a realization of what must be done. Mr. Wells used to be regarded as merely a fantastic romancer. He is now beginning to be recognized as one of the most original thinkers of our times.

*Joan and Peter*, by H. G. Wells. Macmillan Co. \$1.75.