

THE FANTASTIC FICTION; OR, "THE INVISIBLE MAN."*

I am very glad to see that there is now a chance of Mr. H. G. Wells acquiring the popular vogue and celebrity to which he is entitled. He has for some time been known as a remarkable and ingenious artist, and there were great things in his cycling story, *The Wheels of Chance*. But his effects have not been palpable and violent enough to win for him a great constituency of readers. In *The Invisible Man*, and still more in *The War of the Worlds*, now being published in the *Cosmopolitan*, he has written books which should be read eagerly and generally. My one fear for him is that he is going to write too much. There are by far too many paragraphs in the literary papers about forthcoming stories of his. Let me beseech him to hold his hand, to write few books, to write them as well as he can, and not to make them too short.

Such a kind of literature as that of which *The Invisible Man* is a specimen is inevitable. We are living in an age of inventions. The conditions of life are being more or less modified by these. It is very natural to imagine the development of invention; very natural also to ask whether the world will be any happier for it. Mr. Wells has remarkable literary abilities. He has also had a good scientific training, and he is saved alike by his sense and knowledge from the insanity which might easily wreck such attempts as these. *The Invisible Man* is not so good a book as it might have been and ought to have been, but it is decidedly striking and original, and what is rare in such books, it is also provocative of thought. The story is of a man who by following up certain scientific principles, which are carefully and plausibly explained, found that he could make himself invisible. He saw, not unnaturally, great possi-

bilities in the discovery, possibilities of wealth beyond the dreams of avarice, and a power even greater than the power which goes with wealth. But he found when his goal was reached that it was not a paradise. In the first place, although invisible, he was not intangible. In the second place, although his body was invisible, his clothes were not. Consequently, in order to enjoy the full privileges of his invisibility, he had to go naked, which is uncomfortable in this non-Edenic climate. He found, further, that if he took food he was visible until it was assimilated, and of course the dishes on which it was contained were seen mounting to the unseen mouth. Mr. Wells has thoroughly worked out his plan in his own mind, and the result is decidedly amusing. It follows from the facts that the invisible man had to provide himself with a false face. He might, by dint of huge overcoats, disguise the absence of a visible body, but something had got to be done with his head. He develops, like all monsters, a cruel and murderous tendency, and is ultimately run to death after doing a great deal of mischief. The story is slight, and might be passed as a curiosity, but it suggests something of the limits of invention.

We are always reading about the great things Mr. Edison is to do. He has done nothing, so far as I can make out, for a long time. He is said to be continually experimenting and inciting hopes that at last he will begin. The fact is the limits of invention are apparently marked. We have inventions given us sufficient to maintain our social life amid growingly complex conditions. We could not live with the contrivances which served our grandfathers. The population of the world has increased so enormously that we have to make more haste, or to find means which will accelerate our work, and so we have railways, telegraphs, phonographs, telephones, and the like. But will anybody say that life has been made any easier by these inventions? Have they done more than keep pace with our steadily increasing needs? Is it easier for the average man to earn his living now than it was eighty years ago? I doubt it very much. Furthermore, has the happiness of life been materially increased by these inventions? Here again I doubt. We can travel much further and at a cheaper rate than our fathers,

* *The Invisible Man*. By H. G. Wells. New York: Edward Arnold. \$1.25.

but do we get out of our journeys the intense relish and enjoyment they did out of theirs? We have postal cards, and alas! that it should be said, people who are willing to use letter-cards, and the penny post, of course, but have we more pleasure from our correspondence than those who wrote more rarely, but who filled their letters with news and kindness? I am not certain. We seem always to be on the verge of some invention that will really alter the moods and complexions of human life, but an invisible hand seems to stay us, and we remain in the old circle of experiences.

Is it difficult to see the reason for this? There are certain inventions and discoveries which, if attained by man, would totally destroy the moral basis of life. Suppose, for example, that the secret of invisibility was discovered. Suppose it was discovered in a way not exempt from the limitations of Mr. Wells. Suppose whatever we were doing some one could come in through the closed doors, invisible, intangible, the witness of all we did, would not our whole moral life be overthrown? As I write these words, I know what is in my room. But suppose I wrote them with the haunting consciousness that the room might be peopled, what then? Would not the reason reel? Would not the supports of an ordinary life be suddenly struck away? There are strange approximations, like that of the Roentgen rays; but, after all, what do the Roentgen rays come to? They give some amusement at first, rather ghastly and short-lived amusement. They may possibly help doctors a little, though I now hear not much about that. But if it had been made possible to see the soul, how different would all things have been then! We have gone, as some think, dangerously far in the direction of hypnotism, but think how it might have been if one human will could totally subjugate and dominate another. The moral personality would be annihilated; in fact, every idea belonging to morality and religion would be gone, but "the abysmal secret of personality" has been kept, and will still be kept.

Happily there are no invisible men, and never will be any invisible men. But we are not ill-pleased that there is a Mr. H. G. Wells to beguile us by his ingenious fancies of what might be.

Claudius Clear.