Mr. Britling Sees Spooks

GOD, THE INVISIBLE KING. By H. G. Wells. (Macmillan Co.; $1.25.)

The killing and the bloody anguish, the destruction of lovely and valuable things, the horror and sorrow in the hearts of those who remain are disasters immeasurable; but the greatest disaster of all is spiritual, intellectual; it is the stupefied brain, the soul that has been bludgeoned and stunned. It is not to be wondered at that English men of letters have lost their inspiration, that war has smashed the lips of poetry and that philosophy has fled from her seat. Perhaps the greater wonder is that in the midst of conflict men have courage to write at all. Of the English writers to whom we were once accustomed to look, if not for ultimate wisdom, at least for helpful correlations of current thought, few have kept their wits undeafened by the din, unblinded by the smoke. The most notable are Bernard Shaw, Bertrand Russell, and H. N. Brailsford. On the other hand, such capable commentators on the human being as Rudyard Kipling and Arnold Bennett give us second-rate journalism. Mr. Chesterton, standing on his head, announces every week that no German is standing on his feet. And the saddest case of mental degeneration is that of H. G. Wells.

The direction of Mr. Wells's decadence is a normal result of war. When men lose control of their lives and fortunes and the whole world seems to be plunging to hell, they take refuge in mysticism and superstitious consolations. An earthquake sends them screaming to the skirts of the gods. On a sinking ship men fall upon their knees who have never learned or have long

forgotten how to pray. Bewildered Britlings cease to trust themselves and society; their old philosophies and sciences crumble; they cast about for something they can trust and turn to religion. It is more than likely that after this war, no matter how impotent the churches seem to be, there will be a recrudescence of religion, a period of mysticism, of reactionary thinking which will last until people recover self-confidence and stability. Wells's belated discovery of religion is normal and natural; the only abnormal thing about it is that he seemed not to be the sort of man who would lose his grip on reality and find satisfaction in religious commonplace.

And yet Wells has always shown a fundamental weakness of which his latest book is one expression. He is an incurable romantic, and his imagination is muddled. For all the brilliancy of his thought and his electric lucidity of phrase, he seldom keeps his ideas pure. He adulterates studies of society, novels, with sociological theory, and he corrupts his discussions of social and political problems with sheer fiction. He mixes stories of contemporaneous life with what he calls fantastic and imaginative romance. "In the Days of the Comet" is spoiled by a love story which is lugged in by the heels—or the heart; without it that interesting book would have succeeded even with a love-loving public. "Tono Bungay," which should have been an excellent story of modern life, is damaged by an unnecessary expedition to Africa in search of "quap," a mysterious metal which does not exist and which ought not to be invented in that kind of book. In the phrase of the day, Wells gets his wires crossed.

In "God, The Invisible King," the crossing of wires produces irritating crackles, occasional flashes of light, but no steady flame. Wells discusses vast uncertainties in a tone of cocksure certitude. He writes of God as he once wrote of flying machines. Bill Nye, of genial memory, said that he had been reading an interesting book by the Reverend Joseph Cook, of Boston, called "A Bird's-eye View of God." Wells in his airplane sweeps over the universe at terrific speed, cutting figure eights and looping the loop just to show off and enjoy the power of his wings, surveys the Almighty, drops bombs into the camp of the orthodox believer and into the camp of the atheist, sees at a glance that neither can shoot straight, and comes back with a triumphant flourish of discovery to tell us all about it. To be sure he does not pretend to invention or discovery; he disclaims it. "I have been but scribe to the spirit of my generation." God only knows, his God only knows, who gave him his credentials as authentic scribe to the spirit of a generation which is a confusion of many spirits and which is so diversified, such a contest of physical and spiritual forces, that no man can see it whole even from an airplane. He says that he has "at most assembled and put together things and thoughts" that he has come upon, and "transferred the statements of 'science' into religious terminology." (That transference is a perfect example of crossed wires.)

Wells has put together with a good deal of skill the things and thoughts that he has come upon; he has arranged them in his habitually neat chapters and sections; he has ticketed and pigeonholed aspects of the True God and the false gods, or, since pigeonholes are not tolerated in modern business, he has filed his thoughts and things in a steel filing-cabinet; and this in spite of his own adjuration "that you try to set no nets about God." "Chapter the Second: Heresies; or the Things That Are Not God. (1) Heresies Are Misconceptions of God. . . (3) God Is Not Magic." And so on, all in clear, compact literary method. There is much admirable phrasing, now and again a vivid metaphor. But I wish to the Lord (I believe that prayer is allowed by the Wellsian theology) I knew what the old-fashioned Almighty thinks about Wells's Finite God and what Wells's Finite God makes out of Wells's presentation of him.

Not having the advantage of that intimacy with God which Mr. Wells seems to be favored with, I must confine myself to things and thoughts that are human and mundane and capable of some sort of verification. Not only does Wells fail to content me with his report of the thoughts and things of my generation, but he seems to be ignorant of thoughts that were commonplace a generation ago. Oddly enough, he is not in the forefront of thought but is behind the times. Much that he has to say was stale (not old, for the age of a thought does not damage it, but stale) before Matthew Arnold wrote his once lively and perturbing heresies. We got all that long ago, accepted it, took it for granted, and stopped worrying about it. We could have got most of it at about the same time or a little earlier from Renan, and much of it a long, long time ago from Voltaire. It is as if Wells had come upon an airplane of ten years ago, had mended it himself, and learned to navigate with skill and daring, but was all the time sublimely unconscious that that type and many later improvements had been sent to the scrap-heap. He seems not even to have understood William James, whom he calls his friend and master; certainly he has missed James's spirit and fine manners. For when James developed the idea of a finite God and laid before us the consoling

idea that there may be forces in the universe more or less on our side, he said, "may be," not, "absolutely are, and if you don't believe it you're wrong." James wooed the idea of God; Wells violates it. James was magnificently hospitable to other people's gods and no-gods. The central theme of "Varieties of Religious Experience" is the reality of the other man's experience; let us try to understand what other people have been through, accept their testimony about something they know better than we do, before we attempt to assess the value of that testimony and assemble conclusions from the statements of many witnesses. If you do not accept Wells's God, you not only miss heaven but are wiped off the earth, ruled out of its warm living human contacts. Listen to this egregious intolerance:

> The benevolent atheist stands alone upon his own good will, without a reference, without a standard, trusting to his own impulse to goodness, relying upon his own moral strength. A certain immodesty. a certain self-righteousness, hangs like a precipice above him. . . He has no one to whom he can give himself. . . His exaltation is self-centered, is priggishness. . . He has no source of strength beyond his own amiable sentiments, his conscience speaks with an unsupported voice, and no one watches while he sleeps. He cannot pray; he can but ejaculate. He has no real and living link with other men of good will.

As an atheist, I hope a benevolent one, I can assure Mr. Wells that the foregoing propositions are the cheekiest buncombe that I have read since I read a report of a sermon by the Reverend Billy Sunday. The old theologians consigned us to hell fire, a problematic punishment which is still in the future for those of us who are left on the earth. The Reverend Mr. Wells denies our humanity and falsifies psychology. If I had time I should lay him out, Chapter the First, Section 1. But it is not worth while. I will only suggest that he is the last man in the world to charge other men with immodesty, that there are other modes of expression besides prayer and ejaculation, and that the links that we have with other men of good will (and of ill will) are as real and living as anything in the human breast. And one thing more: Mr. Wells wishes to impress his ideas upon the world, to make converts. If so, he goes at the task in exactly the wrong way. His facile dethronement of the old gods will not disturb their votaries. His insolent attitude toward the godless, whom he might win to a new and living conception of God,—if he had one,—alienates them, arouses their intellectual contempt (if he likes, their pride and priggishness), incites them to say over again the line from the "Hymn to Proserpine":

> I kneel not, neither adore you, but standing, look to the end.

JOHN MACY.