

be said to have been steeped in mediæval lore,\* and whose delight seemed to be in a beautifully imagined world of romance peopled with heroic figures, should yet be able to turn from that dream-world with a clear and penetrating gaze upon the movements of his own time, and to have thrown himself with all the strength of his nature into the seething social and industrial battle of modern England; that the 'idle singer of an empty day' should voice the claims and hopes of labour, stand up for the rights of free speech in Trafalgar Square, and speak from a wagon in Hyde Park, may have surprised those who only knew him upon one side; but to those who fully apprehended the reality, ardour, and sincerity of his nature, such action was but its logical outcome and complement, and assuredly it redounds to the honour of the artist, the scholar, and the poet whose loss we mourn to-day, that he was also a man.

\* At the same time it must be remembered that his knowledge of mediæval life—the craft guilds and the condition of the labourer in England in the 15th century—helped him in his economic studies and his Socialist propaganda.

## THE WELL AT THE WORLD'S END

1896

### 79. H. G. Wells, review, *Saturday Review*

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Wells (1866-1946) was at the beginning of his career as a novelist and ideologue; he clearly saw himself as scientific in his social outlook, unlike the Utopian Morris.

The present reviewer last saw William Morris nearly ten years ago. He drifted, as most students in London in those days drifted sooner or later, to that little conventicle in the outhouse beside Kelmescott House, at Hammersmith, and enlisted with something of the emotion of a volunteer. In those days economic reform was in the air, and Socialism was a possible force in politics. And this present reviewer, impecunious and adolescent, imagined that here he was to meet the resolute nucleus, the little leaven of clear-headed men, that was presently to dominate the country—such as himself shouting and shoving in the yeasty tumult. And assuredly had the huge mass of feeling that social stresses had then evolved, and Henry George and Bellamy contributed to shape, found for itself a directing mind, a great Socialist party might to-day have sat in Westminster with Radicalism under its wing. But happily for the permanence of the existing social order, it found no directing mind. Intelligent and emotional adolescence sitting shy but earnest in the back seats slowly forgot its idea of a council of war, and by the end of the meeting was being vastly entertained by a comedy of picturesque personalities. The more prominent seats were full indeed of personalities signifying the same to the most casual eye, even in their dress. And the discussion was earnest and quaint and original, and for the most part, as it seemed, irrelevant. Art was for ever straying into the talk and

denunciations of the *bourgeois*. The Chicago Anarchists, too, were inextricably interwoven with the business. There was also a disposition to restore the Thirteenth Century well in evidence. But as to a sane enterprise towards expropriating landlords . . . ! And earnest adolescence, being above all things impatient, presently gave up attending these meetings.

Most of the personalities of these gatherings have somehow got more or less entirely effaced from the present reviewer's memory. He recalls fragments: a blue serge jacket, for instance, a flannel collar, an inordinate orange tie, and a lank neck with vast Adam's apple passing upward into mist. The head, the voice of that personality have left no trace whatever. And another faceless figure of black and gold, like a banker. And a wonderful girl, designed, it seems, by Mr. Walter Crane. And a miscellany of hair ends, and ties, and voices. There was ever a cheerful cackle among these intimates before the meeting began. But above the confusion of these memories two figures remain distinct. Mr. Bernard Shaw, physically individualized with extraordinary decision, a frequent speaker, and always explicit and careful to make himself misunderstood; and the grand head, the rough voice, the sturdy figure, sedulously plain speech, and lovable bearing of William Morris.

This present volume comes to remind one of those absurd younger days, when one seriously imagined we were to be led anywhere but backward by this fine old scholar. As soon might one have taken a Herrick as a leader! His dreamland was no futurity, but an illuminated past. For him the appointed task was to restore the fragments that Rabelais and Cervantes scattered long ago, and show how beautiful that old romantic land had been. And never did he do it so sweetly and well as in this present story. *Ci-devant* adolescence, robbed of many of its downy illusions and most of its impatience, may now follow him cheerfully enough, with something of the relief of bathing after a hot and dusty road, into that land of the ancient glamour.

It is Malory, enriched and chastened by the thought and learning of six centuries, this story of Ralph and his Quest of the Well at the World's End. It is Malory, with the glow of the dawn of the Twentieth Century warming his tapestries and beaten metal. It is Malory, but instead of the mystic Grail, the search for long life and the beauty of strength. And women as well as men go a questing. Tennyson, too, gave us Malory, but with the Grail—as remote and attenuated indeed as the creed of a Broad Churchman, but the Grail still, and for the simple souls of the future and the past, all the involved gentilities of the

middle Victorian years. Morris is altogether more ancient and more modern.

Save that its spirit is living, the story does not seem to be coherently symbolical. Such analysis as a transient reviewer may give discovers no clue to a coherent construction. Life is too short for many admirable things—for chess, and the unravelling of the *Faerie Queen* and of such riddles as this. Ever and again the tale is certainly shot and enriched with allegory. But as we try to follow these glittering strands, they spread, twist, vanish, one after the other, in the texture of some purely decorative incident. In the tale of the upbringing of the girl, for instance, in the little house of the Crofts, there are the strangest parallelisms with some of the deepest facts of life; and then, hither, thither leap the threads, and we are among sturdy knights, and splintering spears under the greenwood tree. 'I cannot tell,' said the lady, 'where I was born, nor of what lineage, nor of who . . . were my father and mother; for this I have known not of myself, nor has any told me. But when I first remember anything, I was playing about a garden, wherein was a little house . . . There was a woman at the door of the house, and she spinning, yet clad in glittering raiment, and with jewels on her neck and fingers. . . . Now the woman, who as I came to know was neither old nor young in those days, but of middle age, I called mother; but now I know that she was not my mother. She was hard and stern with me, but never beat me in those days, save to make me do what I would not have done unbeaten; and as to meat, I ate and drank what I could get, as she did, and indeed was well fed with simple meats, as thou mayest suppose from the aspect of me to-day. . . . She was never tender, or ever kissed or caressed me, for as little as I was. And I loved her naught, nor did it ever come into my mind that I should love her, though I loved a white goat of ours, and deemed it dear and lovely. . . .

'Further, as I grew up, the woman set me to do such work as I had strength for as needs was. . . . At last, one day of late summer, when I, now of some fifteen summers, was pasturing the goats not far from the house, the sky darkened, and there came up so great a storm of thunder and lightning and huge drift of rain that I was afraid; and, being so near to the house, I hastened thither, driving the goats, and when I had tethered them in the shed of the croft, I crept trembling up to the house, and when I was at the door, heard the clack of the loom in the weaving chamber, and deemed that the woman was weaving there, but when I looked, behold there was no one on the bench, though the shuttle was flying from side to side, and the shed opening and changing, and

the sley coming home in due order. Therewithal I heard a sound as of one singing a song in a low voice, but the words I could not understand; then terror seized on my heart, but I stepped over the threshold, and as the door of the chamber was open, I looked aside and saw therein the woman sitting stark naked with a great open book before her, and it was from her mouth that the sound was coming: grim she looked, and awful. . . . I ran back into the storm, though it was now wilder than ever, and ran and hid myself in the wood, half-dead with fear, and wondering what would become of me. But finding that no one followed after me, I grew calmer. . . . and when dusk came, stole back again to the house, though my legs would scarce bear me over the threshold into the chamber. . . . Images of dreadful things, and miseries that I may not tell thee of, mingled in my sleep for long.'

The next morning the woman bids her 'go fetch the white goat and come back to me therewith,' and leads her 'through the wood into a lawn. . . . round which was a wall, as it were, of great yew trees, and amidst, a table of stone, made of four uprights and a great stone plank on the top of them; and this was the only thing in all the wood . . . which was of man's handiwork, save and except our house and the sheds and fences about it. . . .

'I durst do naught but obey her, and I held the poor beast, that licked my hands and bleated for love of me; and now since my terror and the fear of death was lessened at her words, I wept for my dear friend.

'But the woman drew a strong sharp knife from her girdle and cut the beast's throat, and dipped her fingers in the blood, and reddened both herself and me on the breast, and the hands, and the feet; and then she turned to the altar and smote blood upon the uprights, and the face of the stone plank. Then she bade me help her, and we laid the seven faggots on the altar, and laid the carcase of the goat upon them: and she made fire, but I saw not how, and set it to the wood, and when it began to blaze she stood before it with her arms outspread, and sang loud and hoarse to a strange tune; and though I knew not the words of her song, it filled me with dread, so that I cast myself down on the ground and hid my face in the grass.'

Symbolical, too, seems the Dry Tree and the Thirsty Desert across which the two seekers ride to the Well. And between the men of the Burgh and the Wheat Wearers is something dimly like our present discontents. But this that follows is apparently pure incident; at any rate, its weird effectiveness is its sufficient and only seeming justification.

'Now on the second day of their riding this ugly waste, as they came up over the brow of one of these stony ridges, Ralph, the far-sighted, cried out suddenly: "Hold! for I see a man weaponed."

"Where is he?" quoth Ursula, "and what is he about?" Said Ralph: "He is up yonder on the swell of the next ridge, and by seeming is asleep leaning against a rock."

'Then he bent the Turk bow and set an arrow on the string, and they went on warily. When they were down at the foot of the ridge Ralph hailed the man with a lusty-cry, but gat no answer of him; so they went on up the bent, till Ralph said: "Now I can see his face under his helm, and it is dark, and the eyes are hollow: I will off horse and go up to him afoot, but do thou, beloved, sit still in thy saddle."

'But when he had come nigher, he turned and cried out to her: "The man is dead, come anigh." So she went up to him and dismounted, and they both together stood over the man, who was lying up against a big stone, like one at rest. How long he had lain there none knows but God; for in the saltness of the dry desert the flesh had dried on his bones without corrupting, and was as hardened leather. He was in full armour of a strange and ancient fashion, and his sword was girt to his side, neither was there any sign of a wound about him. Under a crag anigh him they found his horse, dead and dry like to himself.'

And free of all symbolic trammels is the naked beauty of the last three chapters in Book III.; chapters whose very headings are a cry of delight. 'They came to the Ocean Sea,' 'Now they Drink of the Well at the World's End,' and 'Now have they Drunk and are Glad.'

The book is to be read, not simply for pleasure. To those who write its pages will be a purification, it is full of clean strong sentences and sweet old words. 'Quean' and 'carle,' 'eme,' 'good sooth,' 'yeasay' and 'naysay,' we may never return to, nor ever again 'seek to' a man, but 'fain' and 'lief' and 'loth' and 'sunder,' and the like good honest words, will come all the readier after this reading.

And all the workmanship of the book is stout oaken stuff that must needs endure and preserve the memory of one of the stoutest, cleanest lives that has been lived in these latter days.