

EDITORIAL NOTES

Mr. H. G. Wells on the Leakage

IN *The World of William Clissold* Mr. H. G. Wells warns his readers against attributing to the author the views of his characters. It is as if Mr. Wells should say: 'Don't, please, blame me for what William Clissold says or believes or does. I am not Mr. Clissold: I am his creator. You don't blame the Creator for the deeds, misdeeds, beliefs and misbeliefs of his creatures: therefore, don't hold me responsible for the antics and opinions of the creatures of my imagination.' Mr. Wells's actual words are: 'His (Clissold's) views run very close at times—but not always—to the views his author has in his own person expressed; nevertheless, is it too much to ask that they should be treated here as his own?'

This ingenious method of gagging the critics will be taken no more seriously than Mr. Wells either expects or deserves. When, for instance, his Mr. Clissold utters libels and blasphemies against the Church and paints sordid pictures of Catholic priests, is not Mr. Wells asking too much if he expects us to say: 'Oh: that's Clissold, you know, not Wells; and their views only run close at times—not always'? If a showman at the fair were to change the ordinary use of one of his 'Aunt Sallys,' and were to use it as an offensive weapon with which to hit the heads of his fellow citizens, it is not at all improbable that the wrath of the citizens would be aroused and directed principally (as the Scholastics would say) against the showman and only secondarily against the Aunt Sally.

In the same way, when Mr. Wells makes offensive use of his puppets, we feel that we cannot altogether eliminate Mr. Wells.

However, among much of the hatred and scorn of the Catholic Church that is fathered upon the Wellsian Clissold, he is made responsible for a testimony to the Church for which we are grateful.

‘I do not know how Protestantism will end,’ writes William Clissold in his diary. ‘But I think it will end. I think it will come to perfectly plain speaking, and if it comes to perfectly plain speaking it will cease to be Christianity. There is now little left of the Orthodox Church except as a method of partisanship in the Balkans. The League of Nations may some day supersede that, and then the only Christianity remaining upon earth will be the trained and safeguarded Roman Catholic Church. That is less penetrable, a world within a world, it shields scores of millions securely throughout their lives from the least glimpse of our modern vision.’

Mr. Wells (I’m sorry: I mean Mr. William Clissold) has hit upon a very hard fact, and he thereby shows that, far from being an unobservant fool, he has remarkable discernment. It does not please him that this impenetrable kingdom should endure in this way. It takes very little official notice of Mr. Wells and Mr. Clissold, and neither of them can make much impression upon it. Yet Mr. Clissold has discovered why it persists. It is the priests who keep it going: and ‘were someone,’ he says, ‘to discover some interesting well-paid employment for ex-priests, I do not know what would happen to the Roman Catholic Church. I believe it would collapse like a pricked sawdust doll. Its personnel would come pouring out.’ (Was it an instinct of self-respect that prompted Mr. Wells to remind us that he is not always at one with Mr. Clissold? We would gladly dissociate a writer of Mr. Wells’s intelligence from lunacy of this kind.)

But if this belief of Mr. Clissold's about the sawdust doll is meant to be something more serious than a madman's wanderings, the astounding view might be put to practical test. Mr. Clissold says he does not know what the market price of an unfrocked priest can be, though he fears that, unless he has what is called a 'gift,' he must be among the cheapest of homeless men. But he might try. The average ability of Catholic priests (not-yet-unfrocked) must be high, if on the Clissold theory it is only the priests who keep the Church going. If they have the brains, intelligence, cunning and what not to keep this kingdom alive and secure against such enormous odds, and for so long a time, surely there is nothing they could not put their hands to. They could do anything in the way of organizing big business or running a Wellsian Utopia.

Mr. Wells heartily hates the Catholic Church. If then he believes it could be so easily destroyed, he has only to set up his "ex-priests' Employment Bureau." According to his own statements, the priests have ability; therefore, there would be no difficulty in getting them posts, and his Bureau would be even financially a 'going concern.' It is a pity to miss the chance of proving a theory by a practical test, especially when the result of the experiment would be the overthrow of a hated institution. But, then, does Mr. Wells ever deal in anything but theories? He has given us more fascinating theories, though perhaps none so fantastic as this belief of Mr. Clissold's symbolised by the sawdust doll.