

“MICHAEL WOOD”: A STUDY IN MYSTICISM.

BY VINCENT STARRETT.

“If in this world there is one misery having no relief, it is the pressure on the heart from the Incommunicable. And if another Sphinx should arise to propose another enigma to man—saying, what burden is that which only is insupportable by human fortitude? I should answer at once: It is the burden of the Incommunicable.”—De Quincey, *Confessions*.

SOME years ago, at a clearance sale of books, chiefly, I believe, of books that would not sell, I purchased for the American equivalent of a “song of sixpence,” a duodecimo volume entitled *The Willow Weaver and Seven Other Tales*, by Michael Wood. Something about the appearance of the volume, the style of the writer (as suggested by a hasty perusal of occasional paragraphs), and the curious allure of the story-titles, drew me to it. I had never heard of Michael Wood, and did not then know, as now, that the name should be written in quotation marks. I read the book.

Then, after a lapse of months, I read nine other books by that author in rapid succession. The lapse was occasioned by the fact that no one else, apparently, had heard of Michael Wood, and that I was a long time in bringing together the other volumes signed with that name. When they came, they came together, and from London.

If, by this, I have managed to suggest that the first collection of tales pleased me, and that the rest of Michael Wood’s work, when it arrived, continued to please me, I confess that has been my intention. Indeed, I was fascinated.

It is a pity that one may not stop at that; that, having testified to one’s extreme liking for a writer, one must explain why, and point out the excellences, and find public explanations for the symbols, in that writer’s pages. If it were possible to say, merely, “These are works of extraordinary merit,” and then retire, with

the assurance that one had said enough to excite public curiosity, the business of literary criticism would be much simplified. Unfortunately, one's lone word is insufficient; it is challenged by the casual reader, and by the critic's own colleagues of the craft. One must give reasons, and, in the case of Michael Wood, that is just what it is difficult to do, for while the surface reasons are sufficiently obvious, there are deeper reasons which have to do with what De Quincey called the "Incommunicable."

Michael Wood is a woman. She is one of the few women I have read who is a perfect artist, but who is not, by the same token, hard, brilliant, and possessed of an opal for a heart. Behind the artist there is the woman, and behind the woman there is—well, it is only fair to say at the outset that Michael Wood is a *religieuse*, and allow opportunity for those canny readers to run, who object to the word God. For Michael Wood is a mystic of mystics, a High Church mystic, I think, although once I thought her a theosophist, and, more than once, a Roman Catholic. Indeed, she is something of all three; and there is an occult beauty about some of her passages, which, ordinarily and easily, we speak of as pagan. It is dangerous too closely to connect an author and his work, and one hesitates to suggest that the extraordinary experiences recited in Michael Wood's stories have been her own; but for the fact that they are founded on experience we have her own assurance. Almost without exception, they are studies of the conflicting powers of good and evil, visible and invisible, as they affect the lives of her various characters; and they offer a solution to certain obstinate questionings which, try as we may, refuse to be stilled.

The sense of the invisible, the intimate understanding of what Arthur Machen calls, simply, "the other things," are here for those who have what the French describe as the "seeing ear and the hearing eye," and to those who understand the appeal is diverse but unmistakable; in the delicate descriptions of nature's most intimate charms, in the color of sound and the sound of color, and in the secret light of a far radiance—evidences of a mysticism that the most pronounced materialist cannot ignore. The characters through whose moods her revelations are vouchsafed, through whose "strangenesses" the arresting quality of her work is made possible, are specimens at whom doctors might elevate their brows (save perhaps Irish doctors, not too far gone with science): they are children with the gift of clairvoyance, possessed of "the sight"; men described as having "the look of eternal childhood on their faces, and the fairy fire in their eyes"; men and women conscious

of a measureless Power working in and through them, "fused and remade in a crucible of the Spirit, a cup of the Holy Graal." Such folk, indeed, as often we call "halfwits," or, more charitably, "innocents," whose eyes have the appearance of looking upon things invisible to us, and who hold converse, after darkness has fallen, with the "little people" of hill and plain.

Those are only some of Michael Wood's characters, however. Too, there are many quite "human" persons in her pages. Neither the man, *March*, nor the boy, *Perry*, in a tale called "The Bending of the Twig" (one of the "seven other tales"), was able to see the curious things the child, *Dennis*, saw; both were entirely normal and "human." Yet the man March flogged the child for lying, while the boy Perry, sympathizing, dimly understanding, groped for solution, and ultimately was the cause of the man's shamefaced "half-surrender." The attitudes of March and Perry are typical of the intolerance, and the finer tolerance, of many thousands of persons, whose lives are touched by manifestations beyond their ability to credit, and while the moral is obviously that furnished Horatio by the Prince of Denmark, it is an excellent one, and the story is admirably done. Other eminently "human" personages enter the tales, although for the most part they serve as foils for more remarkable characters whose prescience goes beyond ordinary experience. *David Alison*, a lovable individual, a naturalist and author, who occurs in several of the novels, lingers happily in memory as hovering intellectually somewhere between the known and the unknown lands. Certainly, *Alison* had flung open strange shutters and looked upon secret things, but he was far from "mad"—unless it be madness to loathe commercialism and the city, and to love nature and the fields. And *Father Anthony Standish* of the *House of Peace*, a very remarkable character indeed, and Michael Wood's chief creation, is one of the most human and humane figures in recent fiction. Father Standish, in his simple wisdom, knew a great deal better than to believe anybody mad, whatever he might say or do.

This Father Standish is an extraordinary person. He occurs in more than half of Michael Wood's tales; and it is, in part, this trick of the author, constantly to reintroduce her familiars in successive stories, that makes for her unusual plausibility in difficult circumstances. Father Standish, Alison, and half a dozen others, weave through her various books like a hidden cipher, connecting the volumes by a thread of association, the cumulative effect of which, after six or seven appearances, carries a conviction of reality that banishes fiction from the mind. Father Standish, as Warden

of the House of Peace, a sort of Quietist retreat, and an asylum for persons weary of the agony of living, is the main influence for good in the narratives he enters; and his rule of intercessory and contemplative prayer is shown by the author to act as a real and active force of singular potency. To his friendly sanctuary come dreamers of strange dreams, and broken, tired men, fleeing from themselves and from the world. In *The Penitent of Brent*, it is *Jesse Cameron* who seeks refuge, while beyond the walls he is called a "murderer"; in *The House of Peace* (which should be read first), comes *Gereth Fenton*, seeking *Truth*; in *The Mystery of Gabriel*, it is *Gabriel Forraner*, possessed of a strange devil, and seeking he knows not what until he finds it; and in *The White Island* (the latest volume, chronologically), it is *Réné Clinton*, whom, for a certainty, physicians would call a halfwit, but whom Father Standish calls "an instrument of God." Come, too, sometimes, the Playwright and the Doctor, to discuss metaphysics with the wise priest, and others from the outer world, on various missions, but all in search of something incapable of discovery by familiar paths, and incapable of solution by standards known to the material world. Through these lives and these stories moves Father Anthony Standish, the ideal friend, the ideal priest, with no hint about him of the evangelist and little of the preacher: at home in the drawing-room and upon his knees, seeing no visions himself, but accepting without cavil, and with entire belief and sympathy, the strange reports of others.

There is nothing particularly eerie about any of these tales, occult as is their background; rather, one reads in a sort of wonder, like a child occupied with a fairy tale. Neither (and this is important) is there much sermonizing. In a sense, every page is a sermon in little, and many of the conventional words appear, which, used by a less skilful artist, might make of the production an intolerable piece of "goody-good"; but Michael Wood is concerned with incredible secrets, only half revealed. . . . suggested by the green fire of Spring, the bubbling note of a thrush, the rush of rain, the color and contour of a cloud, and all the mystery of star-set space and pulsing earth; suggested also by the strange effect of these phenomena upon certain of Nature's favored children, more sensitive than most to the evidences of the ancient enigma and its solution. In contrast to these high lights, there are quaint, subtle, often ironical, etchings in shadow of the humbler life of communities, and of the activities of little *Milors* and *Miladies*. It is all

quite admirably done, with few false touches, and few words to spare.

Recently, a young critic, reviewing *The White Island*, thought the author's powers of invention not very pronounced, and the book, as a novel, almost to lack a *raison d'être*. He could not find much "story," and so, for him, the book failed. He was an unhappy choice to review a book as suffused with mysticism as is this one. René Clinton, pursued by his ineffable vision of a "white island," is, for our critic, less of an "invention" than, perhaps, Rider Haggard's "She." It is, of course, needless to point out that the movement of the *story* is not the most important part of *The White Island*. One feels sorry for a reader who demands a carefully involved and ingenious plot, in which the characters melodramatically vanish and reappear, and the chapters end on exclamation points; and who fancies that sort of thing the highest form of novel-writing.

In spite of the excellence of her novels, however, I am inclined to like best the short stories of Michael Wood, as found in *The Willow Weaver*, *The Saint and the Outlaw*, and *The King Predestinate*. Here, her precise and delicate characterization is seen to best advantage—in little. "The Mystery of the Son of Man," in the first of the volumes mentioned, is one of the finest short tales I have read in any language, a piece of medieval "remembering" with the flavor and authenticity of a Franciscan legend. Other extraordinary stories are "The Excellent Versatility of the Minor Poet," perhaps the most ironic of them all; "Lox," a powerful and moving dog story; "The Prince and the Water Gates," "The Teller of Drolls," and "The Tumultuous Shadows." Those titles alone should be sufficient to send a discerning reader after the books. The last four mentioned occur in *The Saint and the Outlaw*.

Occasionally, it should be said, Michael Wood offends artistically by her use of a hackneyed situation. Thus, in her novel, *The Double Road*, there is a young man falsely accused of theft, but accepting the stigma to shield the actual thief, a girl. Stated baldly, that way, it sound pretty sentimental and conventional, and, I confess, I like it least of her stories. Still, the author's fine sense of beauty, and her love of nature and humanity, pervade it. . . . and prospective readers may be glad to know that the young man does *not* marry the girl.

Michael Wood's style is a very simple and beautiful thing, and, casting about for its inspiration, one finds it, without surprise, in the Bible. Many fine artists have gone to the Bible, and where the

experiment has been successful, usually it has been noteworthy. But Michael Wood is a quite conscious artist, selecting and arranging her words and phrases with meticulous care. I shall quote two passages purely at random. The first from an allegorical tale, with a natural biblical fervor to it. Thus:

"Now the other traveller passed into profound musing, till his outer senses were locked as though in sleep: and he saw the place in which he was after the following manner and semblance. He saw the girdle of trees as the wall of a great temple, wherein there were three courts, and at the center a shrine. In the first court was the image of a woman bearing a child in her arms: about her were lights burning and the smell of incense, and the song of human praise: priests in rich vestments celebrated solemn rites, and worshippers, both male and female, old and young, bowed down before this mother and child. In the second court there was a dimness as of a starlit night: there was no incense save the smell of earth and flowers, no song but the song of birds, and of streams, and the boom of waves like the tones of an organ: no lights but strange fires that gleamed and flickered through the night, no worshippers save dim forms of the gracious 'hidden peoples,' the gods of wood and orchard, plain and tilth. . . ."

And here is a description of a storm:

"At last he slept: and he woke to a wild rush of rain. The wood was full of pale cool light: the pine-needles dripped: he heard the gurgle of a hurry of water in the ditch beyond the gate. He got up: the livid greenish-purple clouds were rushing across the sky: the island was veiled in a white mist of rain: the forest ponies galloped for some scant shelter: some of the herd turned disconsolate noses from the rush of waters: some squealed and kicked and bit at each other: others endured in meekness. A big ants' nest near the gate was flooded: pools stood in the heather: and a heap of cream-white foam swirled on the brown water in the ditch. Light wisps of cloud fled across the background of livid green-purple. He stood under shelter of the trees and watched the storm.

"It passed: the clouds flew seawards: the sky grew pale even grey: then a cool, soft wind began to blow. The east grew faint pink, then yellow-grey: then a long line of light quivered over the heather. The new day had come. The birds were stirring and singing: the rabbits hopped out to feed: a stoat darted across the track: and the clang of a cow-bell echoed across the moor."

All that, I submit, is of its kind quite perfect, and, as I have deliberately chosen at random, I have not chanced upon any of the

author's more occult descriptions of nature, in which, often, there is a remote radiance of the "light that never was on land or sea."

In this sophisticated day, it is almost literary heresy to find praise for a writer on religious subjects. "Art for art's sake," an excellent doctrine when understood, has become the cheapest of cant, a catchphrase of the opportunist followers of fantastic "movements." But in Michael Wood, even the most violent "Art for art's-saker" may find much to admire, while followers of an older fashion will find some refuge from a ruined physical world, and not a little mental retirement.

One feels indeed, that Father Standish's House of Peace would be a pleasant institution to have located not too far from one's own dwelling.